

FROM THE BOOK SUFFERING AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD by John Piper and Justin Taylor

Philosophers talk about and discuss free will. Christian theology tries to cast light on the subject. Christians wonder if God being fully responsible for anything that exists means that God is the one choosing sin when you choose to sin. They wonder if the doctrine free will implies there is no God and respects God and if the faculty of free will is real and if it is, is it a gift from God?

We will look at some quotes from John Piper and Justin Taylor, top Christian theologians, for this discussion. My comments follow the relevant quotations.

"With some careful thinking, we can see why there can be no such thing as freedom of the will at the most fundamental level of human being. Ultimately, even though we should be motivated to make our choices in terms of God's law, our actual motivation to make a choice between any two possibilities—let's designate them possibility A and possibility B—is that either A or B is more consistent with our primary inclination. (If by God's regenerating grace my primary inclination is to righteousness, then I will in fact be motivated by what should motivate me.) Consequently, if we were to have no primary inclination, then we would not be moved to make any choices. Moreover, it is impossible to choose our primary inclination because we have nothing more primary than it to motivate that choice."

And,

Freewill libertarianism involves a claim about what must be true if human beings are to be truly free and thus capable of genuine responsibility. For free-will libertarians, true freedom involves more than just my doing whatever I choose to do. Such freedom of choice, Robert Kane argues, is just "surface freedom," because someone could manipulate me so that I always chose to do what that person wanted me to do. True freedom, Kane and other free-will libertarians hold, requires that a person not only is able to make specific choices but also was able at the time she chose to choose differently than she actually did. So I have only freely chosen to eat chocolate ice cream if, as I chose it over rum raisin ice cream, I could actually have chosen rum raisin instead. Again, you are only free in choosing to remain sitting right now if you can also choose to stand up. But if something would stop you from standing up (let's say that someone is with you who would hold you down if you tried to stand up), then even if (rather than fight that person) you choose to remain sitting, you are not really free. For Kane and other free-will libertarians, all of this means that we must possess what they call freedom of the will—that is, freedom to decide what we will want and thus to determine for ourselves who we will be and thus what we will choose—in addition to freedom of choice.

Comment: Notice we are told free will can be understood as the power to choose x but if you had the moment over again you could choose y. The power to go after something different is not enough to indicate free will. Why? You could be controlled by a randomiser. Just because it could be x or y does not mean that you are not compelled. Free will is a pure assumption. We feel that if we could go back in time we could choose differently but that feeling is lying for it is telling you what it cannot tell you. A feeling that you can change your past choice if you got it again is no more valid than a feeling that Jesus ate chicken.

The idea of surface free will is interesting. It is shallow - it is not the real thing. If you want to believe in free will then and believe firmly then you have to get rid of any notion of magic or gods or demons or God that may be manipulating the person more than they realise. You can be manipulated by a lover and never see it. Imagine then how much easier it is for a magical being to do it and get away with it. Your ideas coming from that being feel like your own! If being a free agent is what makes us human persons then clearly the supernatural has to go.

The idea of surface free will makes us ask when we are free and if we were free at all this week. A person then who has a mental disorder and acts criminally cannot be held responsible to any important or meaningful extent.

Animals according to Suffering and the Sovereignty of God

As Harry Frankfurt has pointed out, even animals possess some freedom of choice because "an animal may be

free to run in whatever direction it wants” (“Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” in Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 20).

Comment: Animals certainly feel as free as we do though nobody thinks they have "free" will equal to ours.

Question can we be free if our choices are programmed or triggered by causes or do we just choose them regardless of what causes are at large?

Now here is the crucial point: for free-will libertarians, we cannot be held responsible for what we are and do if our wills aren't free in this libertarian sense. If the ultimate explanation for my choosing as I do lies outside me, then I am not really free and I cannot be held responsible for how I choose. And if I cannot be held responsible, then I cannot justly be praised or blamed or rewarded or punished for how I choose.

On the level of everyday life, this seems to make sense. We know that virtually all serial killers were sexually abused as children, and so it seems proper to place part of the blame for whom they have become on their abusers and not just on the killers themselves. This is what makes it seem necessary to free-will libertarians that we must have freedom of the will if God is to be just in holding us responsible for what we do. And surely we should grant that in Scripture God does hold us responsible for what we do—just read, for example, Romans 1:18–3:20. So free-will libertarians conclude that we must possess freedom of the will, which means that God cannot foreordain what we do. For open theists, there is an additional rub, given what they think are the requirements for our possessing libertarian freedom.

As Kane puts it, freedom of choice is valuable because it allows us to satisfy our desires. When we have freedom of choice, we can choose to get what we want. But free will runs deeper than these ordinary freedoms. To see how, suppose we had maximal freedom to make choices of the kinds just noted to satisfy our desires, yet the choices we actually made were in fact manipulated by others, by the powers that be. In such a world we would have a great deal of everyday freedom to do whatever we wanted, yet our freedom of will would be severely limited. We would be free to act or to choose what we willed, but we would not have the ultimate power over what it is that we willed.

For free-will libertarians like Kane, we are only truly free if our wants and desires—the things we choose either to satisfy or not to satisfy—are “up to us,” where the ultimate “sources or origins of our actions would . . . be ‘in us’ [and not] in something else (such as the decrees of fate, the foreordaining acts of God, or antecedent causes and laws of nature) outside us and beyond our control”.

[See Kane's Contemporary Introduction, 4f. For a fuller account of a real-life case where it seems that part of the blame for how a person has turned out needs to be placed on others, see Gary Watson's retelling of the story of Robert Harris in *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility*, ed. John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza (Ithaca and London: Cornell, 1993), 131-37.]

Comment: We only want free will and to believe in it because it satisfies our desires. That is what we are told. If we could feel free and enjoy satisfied desires without free will we would not want it. Many in fact claim to be having a good life without free will or belief in it. They point to animals who do not have the kind of will we have.

When we can be punished for the sins others commit

Only God knows the human heart, and so he alone can fairly assess how much blame each of us deserves for what we have done. Blame will always rest primarily on the actual perpetrators of a specific evil—in other words, serial killers are primarily responsible for their crimes—and therefore the actual perpetrators are primarily blameable and punishable for their own acts (see Deut. 24:16; 2 Kings 14:1-6; Isa. 3:11; Jer. 31:30; Gal. 6:7). This is not to say, however, that the sins of others cannot have a negative effect on us (see Ex. 20:5; Num. 14:18). Indeed, the acts and omissions of others, insofar as they contribute to someone's sin, can make them blameable and punishable, too (see Ezek. 3:16-21; Matt. 18:6f.).

Comment: If there is no God, then bad people hurt others for it is not possible for the bad person to suffer alone. Others face the direct and indirect consequences of his actions. That is not punishment. There is something

avoidable about many of those consequences so are they really consequences? If I am hated for abusing my cats it is the condemners who are hating and I didn't ask them to do it nor did my action. The consequences talk is really about sneaking in punishment and hate in the back door. It blames you for being hated so that is how hateful it is! If there is a God who plans to punish sin or sets sin up to punish itself then it is his doing. To be truly helpful instead of being judgemental we need to stop risking saying people may be punished when in fact they are not being punished. We need to drop God. We cannot say, "God loves you. You suffer so much. We know it is not punishment." That is glib and who are you to speak for God? Only a fool would be comforted by you or a desperate person.

CONCLUSIONS: Free will as in when I chose to drive the car I could have walked instead is beyond proof for you cannot rewind time to test it. Nobody knows if you will drive every time you are put back even if it is for all eternity. If you do that would indicate that you feel free but are in fact programmed to feel free and to do what you do. Free will then is incapable of scientific proof or any kind of proof. It means science cannot reason - "free will gives us the power to be bigger than what is around us so we can find its secrets." It reasons, "Its just mechanical investigation and that is why free will is irrelevant." The doctrine of free will leads to passive aggression where you are blamed for your punishment and the consequences of your actions. If we want free will so we can use it to go after our desires then even when you sacrifice for another you are making it about you. You use choice as a tool to fulfil your desire to act and the desire for the specific kind of act is a different matter. You get the reward of fulfilling your desire to act (the desire for a specific act is a different matter) and so you are not and will never be altruistic or selfless.