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Free Will and Eternal Security

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The intention of the article is to affirm that one could believe in the security of the believer and in free will by adhering to the compatibilist view. The compatibilist view must be defended against the libertarian view.

This article will discuss three views of eternal security and three views of free will. It will then argue that it is possible to affirm a certain type of free will and at the same time hold to belief in eternal security. Finally, I will provide biblical support for perseverance of the saints. This will not be an exhaustive defense of perseverance of the saints. I am not a professional philosopher or theologian and have a minimal familiarity with the philosophical literature pertaining to free will. The views presented here ought to be weighed accordingly.

The issue of eternal security is more complicated than simply whether or not Christians are eternally secure. It also has to do with what kind of eternal security a Christian is claimed to have. There are three positions on eternal security. The first view, called Arminianism, teaches that Christians do not have any form of eternal security. On this view, a genuine Christian who is filled with the Holy Spirit may lose salvation and be cut off from Christ if he later denies the faith or lives very sinfully. The other two positions are Perseverance of the Saints (Calvinism) and Free Grace. Both of these views agree that a truly regenerated Christian cannot lose salvation. But they differ in response to the question of what happens to people who at one time sincerely profess belief in Christ but go on to deny the faith or to live a sinful life (so-called carnal Christians). Those who hold to Perseverance of the Saints argue that such a person will

not be saved. It is not that a Calvinist believes that the carnal Christian lost salvation that he once had, but rather that the person never was a genuine Christian in the first place. By contrast, those who hold to a Free Grace view of eternal security believe that everyone who sincerely believes in Jesus at any point in their life will be saved at the final judgment no matter what the person does later. This view is sometimes characterized by its opponents as “easy believism” or “cheap grace.”

Figure 1. Theories of eternal security

Position	Eternal security	Possibility of carnal Christians
Arminianism	-	-
Perseverance of the Saints	+	-
Free Grace	+	+

All Christians believe in free will. The differences arise out of what kind of free will it is. I will discuss two types of human freedom described in the philosophical literature: libertarian freedom and semicompatibilist freedom. Libertarian free will is what people most commonly think of when they talk about free will. It involves two aspects. First, to have libertarian freedom a person must be able to choose a course of action other than what he in fact will choose. This is called the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP). For example, suppose I choose to eat cereal this morning for breakfast. In order to be free in the libertarian sense, it must have been possible for me to eat (say) a bagel instead. But there is more to our common intuition of free will than simply the possibility that I might have chosen otherwise. Suppose a neuron in my brain fired, causing me to eat cereal, but the firing of the neuron was not itself caused by anything else. In this case, the ultimate cause of the decision is not determined and it would certainly be possible that the neuron did not fire. But it would seem strange to call this decision “free” because I was not in control of it. The second requirement for libertarian freedom is that the agent herself causes the decision. The ultimate cause of the act originates in the agent’s will itself, not in chance or in some other event. This condition is known as agent causation. Under the libertarian view of free will, God cannot cause men to make

decisions—he can only influence them. This is because, if God predestines (or causes) a man to eat breakfast, the man does not have the ability to refrain from eating. To be free, the person himself must be the ultimate cause of his own actions—God cannot cause the person to choose to eat breakfast or not, or else the action would not be free. In sum, the two requirements for libertarian freedom are PAP and agent causation.

It will be useful to discuss three theories of how freedom and causal determinism fit together before I define what is meant by “semicompatibilist” freedom. These three philosophical positions can be distinguished by what they affirm about libertarian free will and causal determinism. Causal determinism is the view that every event in the universe is caused by some other event (e.g. a rock falls because it is pushed or John chooses Christ because God caused him to do so). Libertarianism (also called incompatibilism) is the view that libertarian freedom is not compatible with determinism. Most people have a strong intuition that if every event is determined by something else, it does not seem possible that a person would have the ability to choose otherwise. Incompatibilism accepts libertarian free will and denies determinism. There are two camps among those who deny incompatibilism, but the differences between these groups have only recently been made explicit. Compatibilism agrees with incompatibilism that human freedom is of the libertarian sort. However, it makes the bold claim that libertarian freedom is compatible (hence the name) with determinism. That is to say, compatibilists claim that it is somehow possible for a person to choose other than he in fact did for any given choice, even if every event in the universe is causally determined. Others have espoused what has been called “semicompatibilism.”¹ This position affirms determinism but denies that we have libertarian free will. It is called a form of compatibilism because its adherents tend to claim that determinism is compatible with “free will,” but they mean some kind of free will that is not libertarian. Because the distinction between compatibilism and semicompatibilism has been proposed only

¹ John Martin Fischer, “Recent Work on Moral Responsibility,” *Ethics* 110 (1999): 93-139.

recently, some philosophers² and theologians³ use the term “compatibilism” to describe what I am calling semicompatibilism.⁴

Figure 2. Positions on the compatibility of free will and determinism

Position	Libertarian free will	Causal determinism
Libertarianism	+	-
Compatibilism	+	+
Semicompatibilism	-	+

It is now appropriate to return to the distinction between two types of freedom discussed above. A semicompatibilist denies that we have libertarian freedom. But he would still claim that human beings are free in some sense. So the burden is on the semicompatibilist to explain what kind of freedom we have. For an action to be free in a semicompatibilist sense it must meet several conditions. The immediate cause of the action must be a desire internal to the agent. In contrast to libertarian freedom, it is not necessary that the agent’s desire be the *ultimate* cause of the action. Nevertheless, there is some sense in which the agent must be in control of the action. If an evil scientist places an electrode in a person’s brain that causes her to commit a sin, most semicompatibilists would say the victim’s action was not free because she was not in control “in the relevant sense.” The exact criteria defining the relevant sense of control required to confer semicompatibilist freedom is not precise, but it is not necessary—or so the semicompatibilist would argue—to explicate a precise definition. Second, there must be no external circumstances that compel the agent to perform the action against her wishes. So, for example, if someone is putting a gun to a person’s head or physically moving his limbs around like a puppet, then that person is not free. Unlike libertarian freedom, semicompatibilist freedom does not entail the possibility of the agent doing otherwise. However, the semicompatibilist allows that the possibility that under causal

² J. P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 268-9.

³ D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

⁴ I am grateful to Ashton Wilkins for pointing this out to me.

conditions which are only slightly different than those of the real world, the agent might desire to do the opposite of what she in fact does. In sum, a semicompatibilist says that we are free if we can choose according to our strongest desire, even if our desires are ultimately caused by something else.

This seems counterintuitive, so many people consider the semicompatibilist notion of freedom to be less compelling than libertarian notion. It does not *seem* right to say a person is free if his choices are ultimately caused by something other than himself. However, a closer inspection reveals that human metaphysical intuitions may not be fine-tuned enough to tell whether we have libertarian and semicompatibilist freedom. I cannot rule out semicompatibilism simply because I *feel* free (in a libertarian sense). The question is what causes my desires, and I may feel as though I am causing my own desire even though there is actually something else causing it. For example, suppose I am induced to eat ravenously by a brain tumor but I am unaware of the tumor. It is likely that the desire of intense hunger I feel in that case would be indistinguishable from the desire I feel at other times when I am very hungry. Our metaphysical senses may not be precise enough to determine whether our desires are caused by ourselves or by something else.

Furthermore, libertarian free will may be in the same boat as semicompatibilist free will. Just as it seems counterintuitive to say that free will is compatible with determinism, it is similarly counterintuitive to say that free will is compatible with divine foreknowledge. This is because God's foreknowledge also seems to rule out PAP. Suppose Mr. Jones is deciding whether not to mow his lawn today. Suppose God knew yesterday that he would choose not to mow his lawn. This constrains Mr. Jones' choice. He cannot choose to mow his lawn, because this would prove God's foreknowledge to be false. In other words, if God knows what a person is going to do prior to the choice, then that person cannot possibly choose an alternative possibility. This denies PAP and thus rules out libertarian freedom. Positing God to be timeless does not solve the problem for libertarianism, since timeless knowledge cannot change, and thus whatever God knew timelessly that Jones would do is what he necessarily must do. The second aspect of libertarian freedom remains an open question, i.e. whether the agent himself caused the choice or

if it was determined by something else. It may be that a person has the power to determine God's belief by making a choice, but once God creates the world, he knows what the person will actually choose and from that point on it is impossible to choose otherwise. It might also be objected that knowledge alone cannot cause a choice. But the claim here is not that God's foreknowledge *causes* the agent's choice, but only that it *entails* that the agent makes a certain choice.

Now that the concepts have been defined we can turn to the Bible to determine which kind of eternal security believers have and which kind of freedom humans enjoy. I will start with the type of human freedom that is suggested by the Bible's teachings. But first it is important to note that the Bible is not a philosophy textbook. It does not address technical questions or explicitly define free will. There may be more than one type of free will alluded to in the Bible because its authors were ambiguous with respect to our question. For this reason, the conclusion of this paper will be a bit tentative.

There are passages which seem to assume the semicompatibilist notion of free will. The first example of semicompatibilist free will is found in a letter from King Artaxerxes to Ezra. The king writes to Ezra, "You are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have *freely* given to the God of Israel" (Ezra 7:15). This gift was given of the king's free will. And yet Ezra credits God with the act: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of our fathers, *who has put it into the king's heart* to bring honor to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem in this way" (Ezra 7:27). This implies that an act can be caused by God and still considered "free" in the sense that the person was not forced and really wanted to do it. God causes an action by putting a desire in the king's heart. This passage describes a free act in exactly the way a semicompatibilist would.

The authors of the Bible did not talk very much about free will itself. The passage discussed in the previous paragraph is the only one I know of that directly addresses our question. But there is another way to see what kind of free will they believed in. The biblical writers commonly talk about human responsibility. It is often assumed that if a person is not free, then she cannot be held responsible for an act. In other words, being responsible entails being free. Therefore, I will now examine some of the passages that pertain to causal determinism

and human responsibility in order to illuminate the relationship between causal determinism and free will.

There are many passages which assume that an act is both causally determined and the person performing the act is held morally responsible for it. If the person is responsible, then he must be free. Therefore these passages show that an act can be considered free despite the fact that it has been causally determined. This rules out libertarianism, but does not distinguish between compatibilism and semicompatibilism. Let us now turn to some examples. God holds the Israelites responsible not to plot evil against their neighbor in Zechariah 8:17. However, in verse 10 we learn that God had caused the Israelites to plot evil against their neighbors: “No one could go about his business safely because of his enemy, for I had turned every man against his neighbor.” God holds the Israelites responsible for something that he causes them to do. Similarly, Judas was responsible for betraying Christ despite the fact that it was foreordained for him to do it. Everything that happened, including Judas’s betrayal and Pilate’s apathy, which led up to Calvary was not only in God’s plan, but was ordained by God to happen the way it did. These events are described with the words of the early church in this way:

For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to *do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur* (Acts 4:27-28, NASB).

They did what God decided should happen. But all of these individuals, including Judas, were held responsible. In John 17:12, Jesus refers to Judas as the one “doomed to destruction” (cf. also Luke 22:22; Matthew 26:24). There are other examples. God use the Assyrians to punish the Israelites, but then holds the Assyrians responsible for doing so (Isaiah 10:5-7). What is particularly interesting in this case is the reason God cites for punishing the Assyrians. It is because their *desires* and *intentions* were evil, i.e. different than God’s (v. 7). This is consistent with the semicompatibilists’ emphasis on desires as the basis of free will. Paul explicitly states that human beings are morally responsible even though they cannot resist God’s will (Romans 9:14-21). These passages strongly support a semicompatibilist notion of free will

because they show that a person can be morally responsible for something that God causes her to do.

I have argued that the biblical authors present (roughly) a semicompatibilist conception of freedom and responsibility. But what if I am wrong about this? Can a person affirm both libertarian free will *and* eternal security? This would be possible if one adopts the Free Grace position, because the Free Grace position does not require that a Christian persevere in the faith in order to be saved. On this view, a person is definitively granted salvation once he freely believes and it does not matter what choices he makes in the future, so his free will cannot affect his salvation. In one sense, the Free Grace position seems attractive because it offers both libertarian free will and eternal security. However, it is contradicted in many places in Scripture. The following scriptures demonstrate the necessity of perseverance in the faith in order to be saved.

Colossians 1:21-23, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. *But now* he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation-- *if you continue in your faith, established and firm*, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.”

1 Corinthians 15:1-2, “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. *Otherwise, you have believed in vain.*”

Hebrews 3:14, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.”

Hebrews 12:14, “Make every effort. . . to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

Matthew 24:12-13, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.”

Hebrews 6:11-12, “We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, *in order to make your hope sure*. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”

Romans 2:7, “*To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.*”

There are also passages of the Bible opposing the Free Grace position because they deny the possibility of a person being a “carnal Christian.”

1 Corinthians 6:9-10, “Do you not know that *the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God*? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

Galatians 5:19-21, “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that *those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*”

Thus, the Free Grace position is ruled out on biblical grounds. What about Calvinism? Those who adhere to the Perseverance of the Saints typically deny libertarian free will. This is because the grace of God is necessary for Christians to persevere in the faith. If left to our own power, humans will always fall short. The Bible is clear that God has the ability to keep people from sinning. In Genesis 20:6, God says to Abimelech, “I have kept you from sinning against me.” Similarly, David claims that “[God] has kept his servant from doing wrong” (1 Sam. 25:39). “The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation” (2 Pt 2:9). But some have objected to the Perseverance of the Saints, pointing out that God does not give irresistible grace to Christians to overcome every sin. If God will not keep us from every sin, then we cannot be sure he will keep us from committing enough sin to fall away.⁵ But in fact, God has promised the latter, although not the former. Jude says that Christ “is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy” (v. 24 NASB). Or Paul says, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. *The one who calls you is faithful and he will do*

⁵ Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992), 222.

it” (1 Thess 5:23-24). On this basis Calvinists claim that God causes Christians to persevere and, as a result, they must deny libertarian free will. Instead, they affirm free will of a semicompatibilist sort.