

A few thoughts on “free will”

Drew Costen

(First published: March 7, 2024/Last revised: May 2, 2024)

Just as a heads up, this Bible study is an edited excerpt from my (much longer) Bible study titled: *“What the Bible really says about heaven, hell, judgement, death, evil, sin, and salvation”* (and I’d highly recommend reading that one all the way through from beginning to end if you’re able to, in order to get the full picture of what the Bible is talking about when it comes to salvation; but for those who don’t have the time to read that one right now, please do read this Bible study carefully).

Many people are uncomfortable with the idea of predestination, and so they like to say things along the lines of, “God doesn’t want robots,” and teach that God gave us something called “free will.” These people don’t understand that “free will” is a complete impossibility from a purely logical and scientific perspective, however, and that it can’t actually exist in reality at all. You see, while everyone agrees that we can make choices, most people who teach the importance of “free will” also believe that the choices we make can’t be predetermined ahead of time in any way, meaning they aren’t subject to causality (although a choice is simply the act of selecting between two or more existing options, regardless of whether the selection that’s made was predetermined or not, which is why the ability to make choices can’t be the definition of “free will” in and of itself). This ignores reality, however, since every choice has to be predetermined, by our nurture and/or nature (meaning our life experiences and/or genetics), and/or by influences outside the sphere of the physical universe (such as¹ by God Himself²). You see, even though it might feel like our choices are independent of any cause, and even though the relatively few people who have actually taken the time to try to figure out what the term “free will” even means have concluded that it indeed refers to a choice

¹ A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps. — Proverbs 16:9

² In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: — Ephesians 1:11

which is independent of a cause (which it has to be, because if a choice one makes does have a cause, it means the choice was predetermined by that cause, since that's what it means to be subject to causality), if a choice truly was (or even could be) uncaused, it would mean the choice one made was actually completely random (which I doubt any Christian would think is better than being predetermined). The bottom line is, because an event has to either have a cause or not have a cause, there's no way for any event (even an event such as selecting a specific option or options) to be anything other than caused or uncaused, or at least nobody has ever been able to provide a third option that works within the limits of reality (although, if you disagree, please let me know what that third option is), which is why "free will" is really an entirely meaningless term altogether, unless one is simply using it as a synonym for "random chance." (And yes, I know that the term "freewill offering" is used in the KJV,³ but it isn't the same thing as the so-called "free will" we're discussing here, as it's simply a label for a certain kind of voluntary offering that wasn't required by God, and in fact *can't* mean the same thing unless you believe the performing of the *required* sacrifices and offerings *was* predetermined by God to be performed by those who chose to do so, meaning they had no ability to choose of their own "free will" to not perform *those* particular sacrifices and offerings, if "free will" actually existed.)

Even though those facts prove that the idea of "free will" makes no sense, some people still try to insist that a predetermined choice isn't actually a choice at all, based on the fact that it was predetermined. But as I already mentioned, and as everyone I've ever discussed this topic with in the past agreed is the case at the time I brought it up, "making a choice" can indeed be defined as the act of selecting between two or more existing options, and this completely refutes

³ Speak unto Aaron, and to his sons, and unto all the children of Israel, and say unto them, Whatsoever he be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers in Israel, that will offer his oblation for all his vows, and for all his freewill offerings, which they will offer unto the Lord for a burnt offering; — Leviticus 22:18

the idea that a predetermined choice can't be an actual choice. I mean, let's break it down logically. If you were walking down a road and came to a fork in the road in front of you, forcing you to select one of two options – in the sense that you have to decide which of those two paths to walk down if you want to continue moving forward – and you selected one of the two paths and walked down it (regardless of which one you selected), based on the definition of “making a choice” that we just covered (which was “selecting between two or more existing options”), you'd have to agree that an option was indeed selected because you're now walking down one of the two paths, and hence a choice was indeed made. And so, even if I then convinced you that the option you selected *was* predetermined in some manner ahead of time, you'd have to admit that an option was still selected (based on the fact that you're now partway down the selected path), which means that, by definition, a choice was still made. So even *without* “free will,” and *with* predestination (or determinism), choices are still choices. Simply put, choice and determinism (or choice and predestination) are not mutually exclusive, and hence the definition of “free will” is not “making a choice.” (Some people also go even further by insisting that love would be impossible without “free will,” but that's just as ridiculous a claim; for example, the feeling we call “love” would still be something we felt whether or not we were predetermined to experience that feeling, because we still feel it regardless of the cause, and for those who understand that “love” can also be an action, whatever loving actions one performs for those we perform them for would still have taken place regardless of the cause of said action as well, and so yes, love exists even though “free will” doesn't.)

When Christians talk about “free will,” however, what they're almost always really getting at is that they believe the fault for not choosing to believe and/or do the same things as them when it comes to matters of salvation lies entirely with the one making the choice, and that the choice couldn't possibly have

been predetermined in any way whatsoever (and this goes for their views on why one sins in the first place as well). There are other reasons too (such as self-righteousness and pride), but one of the big reasons Christians want to insist that “free will” exists is to make sure that God doesn’t receive any of the blame for a person’s refusal to choose to “get saved,” and to make sure it’s clear that the sinner in question is entirely to blame for whatever negative consequences this might result in (to put it simply, it’s largely because they want to make sure God is absolved of any responsibility for someone who doesn’t choose to “get saved” ending up suffering without end in the unscriptural version of the lake of fire they tend to believe in).

Since everything has to have a cause, however (because otherwise the thing happening would be uncaused, or random), the questions that really matter when discussing the topic of who deserves the credit or blame for a particular choice are:

- 1) “What is the cause of the choices that people make?”
- 2) “Taking all the variables that were present at the time a choice was made into account, could the person making that choice have actually made a choice other than the one they did; and, if so, how, as well as why would they have chosen differently if they did?”

In discussions with Christians on this topic, when asked those very questions, they’ll often deflect by saying things along the lines of, “Nothing causes the choice except for the chooser.” Of course, even if this tautological attempt at a non-answer were in any way meaningful, or even demonstrably true in and of itself (which it certainly isn’t; it’s really nothing more than a confused and nonsensical assumption with no foundation, but one which they’re forced to

believe—pun intended—in order to continue holding on to the idea of “free will”), it tells us absolutely nothing about what really matters, which is why a particular choice is made, and it also ignores the second question altogether. (On purpose, I’m fairly certain, even if just on a subconscious level, likely in order to avoid thinking about the topic from this perspective so that they couldn’t possibly end up discovering that they might be wrong about it.)

But even if we were to ignore all the passages in Scripture that tell us God is ultimately responsible for our salvation (including both everything we’ve already covered, as well as what we’ve yet to cover), and put the credit and blame for choices entirely on “the chooser” instead, we’d then have to ask, “What is a chooser?” Well, a “chooser” is simply a person whose brain selects between available options, and one’s brain is made up of (among other things) neural connections which are wired differently in each person by a combination of their life experiences and their genetics (our nurture and nature, in other words). The different layouts of the neural networks in each of our brains results in different choices made by each of us, and none of us gets to choose the way our brains are wired, because we didn’t get to choose the life experiences and genetics that caused our brains to be wired the way they are at the time an option is selected. This means that, at the end of the day (presuming God doesn’t interfere), it’s ultimately our life experiences and our genetics that determine what choices we make, which means our choices are, at the very least, predetermined by our nurture and nature. And so the answer to the question of whether, in a hypothetical duplicate parallel universe — with every particle and wave being in the exact same state as it was here when a specific choice was made, including the particles that the atoms which make up the wiring of the brain of the person making the choice consist of — they could have chosen something different has to be, “No, they couldn’t have.” But if you believe they could have, I’d like to know not only how they possibly could have,

but also why they would have (meaning, what would be different in this hypothetical parallel universe, which was identical to ours up until the point they selected the different option they did, that would result in them selecting a different option from the one they did in our universe).

Although there's no scriptural or logical reason to do so, at this point some will try to avoid these facts by claiming that our mind isn't actually generated by our brain, but instead somehow exists on a deeper, "spiritual" level (some will also get into pseudo-scientific talk about quantum realities as well, although I can guarantee you that few to none of them have any idea how quantum mechanics actually works). The problem is, aside from the fact that this is clearly both unscientific and unscriptural (as I covered in my *"What is death?"* Bible study, consciousness, or "soul," is generated by an unconscious spirit powering a biological brain, and can't exist separately from a living body, so please go read that study if this is a fact you aren't already familiar with), even if this idea were true, it couldn't actually help support their ideas so much as simply push the problem back a level. A supposedly "spiritual mind," whatever that's supposed to actually be, still has to be "made" out of something (out of whatever it is that spirit, or whatever it is they're claiming a mind comes from, consists of) and still has to make decisions or choices based on what its "neurological structure," so to speak, would then be made up of, and so the questions of why a particular option was selected over another, and whether another option could have actually been selected instead (and why it wasn't), are still the relevant questions that need to be answered, even if this were the case. Basically, to simply stop at the level of "the chooser" without finding out what "the chooser" consists of and why "the chooser" selects the particular options they do is essentially to say that a specific "chooser" is simply either naturally good or naturally bad (or perhaps naturally intelligent and/or wise, or naturally unintelligent and/or foolish).

In fact, along those lines, other Christians have said things like, “It isn’t about the ability to choose something else, but about the inner motives of the heart. Some people choose to not get saved because they are lovers of themselves and not of God. They don’t want let go of their way of life, and so they don’t want to believe and be saved. It’s a choice that reflects the inner motives of the person.” This assertion is actually very close to the truth because, yes, most people do prefer to love themselves over God, and don’t want to let go of their current way of life. These facts don’t help the common Christian arguments either, though, since it’s still getting down to a matter of the nature of “the chooser” while ignoring the question of why the nature of “the chooser” is what it is (basically, why “the chooser’s” biological brain, or even “spiritual mind,” if you prefer, is “wired” the way it is at the time an option is selected), with the ultimate blame (again, presuming God doesn’t interfere) being on that particular selfish and/or evil nature. And if it comes down to just that nature, it means they still couldn’t have ever made any other choices than the ones they did since that would go against their nature, which means the choice was ultimately predetermined by that preexisting selfish and/or evil nature which they had no say in being given to them, because said nature was generated by their life experiences and genetics.

I’ve also heard some Christians suggest that, while God doesn’t predetermine everything Himself by manipulating every particle in existence (including the particles that ultimately make up our brains) in order to control every detail of the universe that way, He still gets all of His will fulfilled because He’s smart enough to be able to manipulate events within the universe to ensure people do His will. How He’d do this without controlling the very particles that make up the physical universe, though, I’m not sure. Perhaps He only manipulates certain particles, to make sure certain things happen, but stops short of

controlling the particles that ultimately make up the human brain. But even if He isn't directly controlling the particles that ultimately make up the human brain, if He's controlling enough details in the rest of the universe to ensure His will is done, He'd still technically be manipulating the brain, even if only from the outside, and if His will ends up being done (as the people who suggest this idea believe happens), then He's still making sure that the brain of the person making the choice does end up making the choice He wants them to make (since otherwise His will wouldn't end up getting fulfilled). And so, at the end of the day, the end result of this idea is still predestination by God, and regardless of how the action that God wants completed ends up happening (whether it be via direct control of the brain or via manipulation based on events happening outside the brain), the action would still end up being predetermined by God.

This all means that there are two options and only two options, which are that either A) our choices are predetermined — by one's nurture and/or nature, and, perhaps, by outside influences such as God — or B) our choices are random. As I already said, nobody has ever been able to give me a third option, and until they do, those remain the only two options available for us to work with, which means that even though we do all have a will, our wills can not be said to be free (particularly before we're saved — can a slave to sin⁴ be said to be free?), and so it's time to recognize that "free will" is not only a completely illogical and unscientific concept, but that it's entirely unscriptural as well, which means that it's time to throw the idea away and accept that God is fully in control. And don't worry, this doesn't mean we're robots. Because, considering the fact that robots can do all sorts of neat things on their own (relatively speaking),

⁴ For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. — Romans 6:20

while the Bible refers to us as merely clay in God's hands,⁵ well, that would actually give us too much credit.

⁵ Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? — Romans 9:21