

## Comments on Jack Cottrell's Classical Arminian View

Once a certain picture of God captures our imagination and we learn to put biblical ideas together in a certain way—or once we begin operating from a given theological paradigm, if you will—we almost naturally assume that we are reading the Bible just as it is, whereas our opponents are ignoring important parts of its clear message. According to Bruce Ware, for example, Arminians teach “only part of what the Bible says without accepting other teachings which do not easily fit with what already has been accepted.”<sup>1</sup> And, of course, we non-Calvinists would say the same thing about the Calvinists. In defense of the Arminian view, for example, Jack Cottrell writes: “Contrary to Calvinism, ...the Bible itself clearly shows that God's purposive (efficacious) will does not include all things. ...This is seen in the fact that sometimes the...words that speak of God's determinative purpose are used to represent God's *desire* for certain things to happen which in fact do not happen.”<sup>2</sup> So the Calvinists, Cottrell argues, are ignoring important parts of the total biblical message. Similarly, I hold that both the Calvinists (or Augustinians, as I prefer to call them) and the Arminians reject some of the clear teaching in Romans 5, Romans 11, and I Corinthians 15 and do so because this teaching does not fit with “what has already been accepted” about divine judgment. And my four colleagues in this discussion no doubt believe the same sort of thing about me: As they no doubt see it (and will no doubt argue in their criticism of my chapter), I reject some of the clear teaching in Matthew 25:46, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, and Revelation 20 because it does not fit with my understanding of Paul's universalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Ware Manuscript, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Cottrell manuscript, p. 39. In a similar vein, Clark Pinnock writes: “Although Calvin's view claims to be based on the Bible, it is not. In teaching that grace is given only to a limited group and that God passes over the rest of mankind, it is at odds with Scripture. It fails to do justice to the teachings of the Bible in which God's will for the salvation of mankind is expressed” (Pinnock manuscript, p.48).

Still, it continues to bewilder me that the Augustinians and the Arminians should both accept a doctrine of everlasting separation, without even questioning it, and do so in a context where one party limits the extent of God's redemptive love and the other limits the scope of his ultimate victory over sin and death; it bewilders me that so many should reject Paul's clear, systematic, and all-pervasive teaching concerning the extent and triumph of God's redemptive love even as they insist upon a dubious interpretation of texts lifted from contexts of parable, hyperbole, and great symbolism.

### **Determinism and the Bible**

In any event, Cottrell and the Arminians are surely right about this: If God wills or desires for many "things to happen which in fact do not happen," then the best explanation for this is that God chooses not to exercise direct causal control over all events and, in particular, chooses not to exercise such control over all human choices. So Cottrell is also right to emphasize the reality of libertarian freedom, as it is sometimes called, and the power of contrary choice. In his own words, "a will is significantly free only if the choices it makes are not caused or determined, either directly or indirectly, by an outside force."<sup>3</sup> And though the exact meaning of "outside force" is by no means easy to specify in the present context, conditions that lie either in the distant past before the choosing agent is born or in eternity itself surely are external to that agent; hence, no free choice can be causally determined by such conditions as these.

Now against Cottrell's understanding of significant free will, Ware argues that "both reason and Scripture demonstrate that the so-called power of contrary choice is an illusion and does not really exist...."<sup>4</sup> But Ware's argument from Scripture is astonishingly weak. The Bible no more raises the philosophical question of whether a power of contrary choice exists than it raises

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<sup>3</sup> Cottrell manuscript, p. 42. Strictly speaking, however, the will does not make choices; we make choices.

<sup>4</sup> Ware manuscript, p. 53.

the scientific question of whether hydrogen gas exists. So how could the Bible “demonstrate” the non-existence of something that it provides no conceptual framework even to discuss? The only text that Ware cites, moreover, is Isaiah 10:5ff, where we read, first, that God employed Assyria and her military might as an instrument of his wrath and judgment against Israel, and second, that God will nonetheless “punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride.” How this is even relevant to the power of contrary choice Ware does not explain, nor does anything in the text (not even the idea that God *commissioned* the Assyrian army to punish Israel) imply that God causally determined the king’s haughty pride. To the contrary, God merely used the king’s lust for power, his intention to destroy as many of the surrounding nations as he could (v. 7), as a means of punishing Israel. Similarly, if perchance God should have used Nazi Germany and her military might as a means of punishing France and England during World War II, this would carry no implication that God himself causally determined Hitler’s own arrogance and lust for power.

A point to bear in mind here is that ordinary causal language, particularly when applied in certain personal and historical contexts, rarely excludes all causal contingency. Neither the expression, “The coach *molded* a group of individuals into a winning team,” nor the expression, “The father *raised up* his son in the fear the Lord,” carries any implication of a rigorous overarching determinism. Or consider Exodus 9:16, where the Lord declared to Pharaoh: “But this is why I *have let you live*: to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth” (my emphasis). In Romans 9:17, Paul actually quoted Exodus 9:16, replacing the words “this is why I have let you live” with the words “I have raised you up,” as if the two expressions were virtually synonymous. When Paul said that God raised Pharaoh up for a given purpose, in other words, he simply meant that God created Pharaoh and permitted him to live and to achieve

power for a given purpose. Not even the idea of a predestined or foreordained end carries any implication of a rigorous determinism. For God did not have to exercise direct causal control over individual human choices, not even someone's decision to experiment with fire, in order to foreordain that the human race would eventually discover the power of fire to burn and to cause pain. And neither does a grandmaster in chess need to exercise direct causal control over, or even to predict, the choices of a novice in order to guarantee victory over the novice.

In fact—and this is the really important point—we can know in advance that no one can validly deduce a rigorous determinism from the teachings of the Bible. All we need to know in this regard is that the Bible employs very ordinary causal verbs, not the technical language of sufficient cause. When ordinary people speak of a cause, they rarely have in mind either a *sufficient* causal condition or even a *necessary* causal condition (concepts that many could not even explain); instead, they have in mind something very different, namely, the most significant part of an explanation, given a particular set of interests. **From the perspective of one set of interests, for example, a meteorologist might correctly state that a drought and heat wave caused three forest fires. But from the perspective of another set of interests, a forest ranger might point out, no less correctly, that a lighted cigarette tossed from a car caused one of the fires. In a perfectly familiar sense, therefore, it can be true both (a) that a drought and heat wave caused three forest fires and (b) that, had a driver not (as a contingent matter) freely chosen to toss a lighted cigarette from a car, the drought and heat wave would have caused only two fires, not three.** Because the Bible is not a systematic philosophical treatise, moreover, and does not even try to provide the conceptual apparatus necessary for a precise statement of determinism, we can be utterly confident that, though the Calvinists may read determinism *into* the text, they cannot validly deduce a rigorous determinism from any teaching in the text.

## The Power of Contrary Choice

But if Cottrell's understanding of freewill is safe from Ware's argument from Scripture, what should we say about Ware's so-called argument from reason? The latter argument at least has the virtue of appealing to a true premise. For if, as Ware points out, I make a choice in a situation where I could have chosen otherwise, then "there is *no choice specific reason* (or set of reasons)" that determines my choice [his italics].<sup>5</sup> And we can illustrate the point in the following way. Suppose that I have a reason to do A (it seems like a thrilling or pleasant thing to do) and a reason to refrain from A (I believe that doing A would be morally wrong). If I have the power of contrary choice in this situation, then the weight of the reasons will not determine my choice for me; to the contrary, in making up my mind and finally arriving at a decision, I will thereby *determine* the weight of the reasons. Part of choosing freely, in other words, is choosing which reason will be decisive and deciding (not *discovering* but *deciding*) what it is that I most want to do. But where does the argument go from there? How does anything said so far demonstrate that such free choices do not exist? **The only further help we get from Ware is the familiar claim that such freedom reduces "to arbitrariness"—which is true, however, only if by "arbitrariness" he means nothing more than that the weight of the reasons does not determine our free choices for us. If the weight of the reasons does not determine our free choices for us, then such choices are indeed "arbitrary" in the trivial sense that the weight of the reasons does not determine them for us. But why even bother to assert a tautology such as that? And why suppose that "arbitrariness" *in this sense* is incompatible with moral responsibility rather than the very thing that moral responsibility requires? And finally, what grounds has Ware given for his assumption that such "arbitrariness" does not exist in human decision-making? The answer to the last question, at any rate, is, "None whatsoever."**

Still, the arbitrariness objection is not entirely misplaced if expressed this way: Indeterminism of any kind in the process of deliberating and choosing, however essential it may be for moral freedom in the end, does introduce a degree of randomness, even irrationality, into it. Even libertarians recognize, after all, that not just any uncaused event, or just any agent caused choice, or just any randomly generated selection between alternatives will qualify as a *free* choice for which one is morally responsible. At the very least, moral freedom also requires a minimal degree of rationality on the part of the choosing agent, including an ability to learn from experience, an ability to discern reasons for acting, and a capacity for moral improvement. With good reason, therefore, do we exclude small children, the severely brain damaged, paranoid schizophrenics, and even dogs from the class of free moral agents. For however causally undetermined some of their behavior might be, they all lack some part of the rationality required to qualify as free moral agents.

Now it is important not to misconstrue the issue here in the way that Ware does. Cottrell and the Arminians are unquestionably right that morally significant freedom could not exist in a fully deterministic universe. For without indeterminism *at some point* in our history, we would be mere extensions of our environment and ultimately of God; indeed, without indeterminism only one agent would exist, namely God, as Spinoza insisted. But the issue here is whether freedom and moral responsibility are incompatible not only with determinism, but with a degree of indeterminism as well. If, as some philosophers have argued, they are incompatible with both, then we must draw the unpalatable inference that the very concepts of freedom and moral responsibility are deeply incoherent. Can we avoid that unpalatable inference? I think we can, as I

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<sup>5</sup> Ware manuscript, p. 50.

have tried to show elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> But the point I would here stress is that an utterly irrational choice, whether it be causally determined or not, could never qualify as a free choice of the relevant kind. So if someone does something without any intelligible motive for doing it and in the presence of the strongest possible motive for not doing it, then this person, whether acting compulsively or simply irrationally, has not acted *freely*. As an illustration, we might suppose that a young boy should irrationally and inexplicably thrust his hand into a fire and hold it there, all the while screaming his lungs out. Would we regard such an irrational and inexplicable act as free? Clearly not. The rationality condition thus limits the range of *possible* free choice, and this reveals, I believe, a fatal flaw in Arminian theology, which in the case of the damned, at least, places a burden on human freedom that it could not possibly bear.

Consider first the following curiosity. Like many Christians, Cottrell speaks of our *deciding* to believe and also tends to identify faith with this decision to believe. He thus writes: “In the NT both calling and justifying are linked to the decision to believe: God’s call must be answered by faith, and justification is given only to faith.”<sup>7</sup> But in fact belief and faith are never a *direct* product of will or decision at all. Who among us ever *decided* to believe that fire can burn and cause terrible pain? We may have decided to walk near a fire, or to place a hand on a hot coal, or to experiment with fire in some other way, and such decisions no doubt played an important role in our *discovering* the true nature of fire. But once the experiments were performed, the resulting beliefs were not themselves the product of our exercising some power of contrary choice directly with respect to the beliefs themselves. When religious people speak of a decision to believe in God, of course, they typically have in mind a lot more than a decision to give *intel-*

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<sup>6</sup> The way to avoid this unpalatable inference, I believe, is to distinguish carefully between the role that indeterminism plays in our *emergence* as free moral agents and the role it continues to play *after* we have already emerged as free moral agents and continue making choices. For an explanation of the point, see my entry on universalism in Jerry Walls, *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

*lectual assent* to a proposition; they often have in mind a supposed decision to *trust* God or even to *love* him. So are trust and love any more the product of decision or will than ordinary belief? I doubt it. I learned at a very early age to trust my mother implicitly—not because I *decided* to trust her, but because I *discovered* her to be altogether trustworthy. I also learned to love her—not because I decided to love her, but because she first loved me and demonstrated her love in thousands of ways. I have no doubt that my uncaused free choices, if you will, were an important part of the process whereby I discovered my mother’s true character. For I was just as disobedient and snotty at times as any other child and just as rebellious during my teen years as many others are. But the free choices I made, both the good ones and the bad ones, merely provided my parents with additional opportunities to demonstrate their true character, and at no time in my life could I have freely chosen, so I believe, not to love them and at no time could I have freely chosen to separate myself from them altogether. There was simply never any motive to spurn the love of someone who *always* put my own interests first. And similarly for God, our supremely perfect Mother and Father: We learn to love him because he first loved us and will continue to demonstrate throughout all eternity, if necessary, his faithfulness in meeting our true spiritual needs and in satisfying our heart’s desire in the end. Accordingly, our free moral choices, whichever way they go, merely provide God with additional opportunities to demonstrate his true character and the true nature of his love for us.

The Arminians, then, have misconstrued, I believe, the essential role that freewill plays in the process whereby God reconciles sinners to himself. We no more manufacture for ourselves belief or trust or faith in God (or in Christ) than we manufacture for ourselves true beliefs about the nature of fire; instead, our free choices enable us to make discoveries of various kinds, to learn the lessons we need to learn, and to experience the consequences of acting upon false be-

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<sup>7</sup> Cottrell manuscript, p. 22.

liefs and various illusions where such exist. Suppose, by way of a simple illustration, that I should hold, for whatever reason, the false belief that fire does not burn, but instead produces highly pleasant sensations; suppose further that I should act upon this false belief by thrusting my hand into a fire; and suppose finally that neither God nor anything else should protect me from the consequences of such an action. In that case, one of the following would be true: Either (a) I would learn from experience and my experience would shatter my illusions about fire, or (b), like the boy in our example above, I would lack the rationality required to qualify as a free moral agent. Only someone rational enough to be correctable, in other words, could possibly qualify as a free moral agent.

Nor is the case of our relationship with God, whatever the additional complexities, essentially different from this. For if, as Christians have traditionally believed, separation from God can bring only greater and greater misery into our lives and union with him is the only thing that can satisfy our deepest yearnings and desires—or if, as C.S. Lewis once put it, separation from the divine nature is an objective horror and union with it eternal bliss—then anyone who understands all of this would have the strongest possible motive to unite with God and no intelligible motive whatsoever to reject him. So if such a person should reject God nonetheless, choosing an objective horror over eternal bliss, then this person's choice would simply be too irrational to qualify as a free choice for which the person is morally responsible. In this life, of course, we rarely, if ever, choose in a context of full clarity. We all emerge and start making choices in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and illusion, where God remains at least partly hidden from us. But that merely makes matters worse for Arminian theology, not better. For insofar as God remains hidden from us and we do not fully understand the true nature of God or the consequences of separating ourselves from him, we are in no position to reject the true God at all. We may re-

ject a caricature of God, as frequently happens in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and misperception, but we are in no position to reject the *true* God until our ignorance has been removed and our misjudgments have been corrected.

So freewill could not possibly play the role in deciding an eternal destiny that Arminian theology says it does. For either those sinners who separate themselves from God retain enough rationality to qualify as free moral agents, or they do not. If they do not, then in no way are they morally responsible for their actions; and if they do, then in no way can they resist God's grace forever. Indeed, even God faces a dilemma at this point concerning human freedom. When sinners try to separate themselves from him as far as they can, God knows that at some point libertarian freedom will no longer be possible. For God can either permit sinners to follow their chosen path or prevent them from following it and from separating themselves altogether from the Source of every possible good. If God prevents them from following their chosen path, then he has already interfered with their freedom in this matter; and if he chooses not to interfere with their freedom in this matter, but instead allows them to experience their chosen condition of absolute separation—in the outer darkness, perhaps—then the resulting horror will at last shatter any illusion that some good is achievable apart from God; it will finally illicit, furthermore, a cry for help of the kind that, however faint, is just what God needs in order to begin and eventually to complete the process of reconciliation.<sup>8</sup>

So Paul was right. Because it is not within our power to manufacture belief, trust, or even love within ourselves, these are all gifts from the God whose grace is irresistible in the end. Our salvation in Christ thus depends upon God's faithfulness, not our own; and it also depends, as Romans 9:16 explicitly states, on God's mercy (or compassion), not human will or exertion.

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<sup>8</sup> For a further elaboration and defense of this point, see my comments on Clark Pinnock.