To God the Only Wise

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

To God the only wise,
Our Savior and our King,
Let all the saints below the skies
Their humble praises bring.

'Tis His almighty love,
His counsel and His care,
Preserves us safe from sin and death,
And ev'ry hurtful snare.

He will present our souls
Unblemished and complete,
Before the glory of His face,
With joys divinely great.

Then all the chosen seed
Shall meet around the throne,
Shall bless the conduct of His grace,
And make His wonders known.

To our Redeemer God
Wisdom and pow'r belongs,
Iimmortal crowns of majesty,
And everlasting songs.

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ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Freedom of the Will?

Kevin T. Bauder

Imagine a man who has, somewhere deep within his cranium, a pair of dice. Every time he has to make a decision, a spasm in his brain casts these dice. How the dice roll is what determines the choice. In other words, every decision is pure, random chance.

Would it make sense to say that such a person was free?

Let's put a label on those dice. Let's call them his *will*. This man's will is completely contingent. It is free from all interference from anything outside itself. Nothing can determine the will. The will is free, but the man is a slave. He is imprisoned by the caprice of arbitrary, random accident. His choices reflect nothing rational and nothing sensible, for however much rationality and sensibility may influence his will, neither is allowed to determine it. In fact, we probably shouldn't even talk about the will being influenced; that word is virtually meaningless as long as the will is fully free.

Under these circumstances, we cannot rightly speak of the *man* making a choice. The choice is being made for him, because his naked will is not *him*. The choosing will is itself nothing more than a random throw of the dice. The decision is made by this contingent will, unshaped and unsupported by either his thought or his feeling. Consequently, only the will is free. The man himself is just along for the ride.

It does not help to object that the decision must be his because the dice are *his* dice, i.e., the will is *his* will. By its very contingency the will has been cut off from everything that makes him *him*. His rationality—what he knows or thinks he knows—must be factored out of the equation. His sensibilities—what he loves and hates—must also be factored out of the equation. If his will is truly free, that is, if his will is genuinely contingent, then neither his knowledge nor his loves can ever be sufficient to determine the will. When everything else has been factored away, only the naked will remains, like dice being cast, choosing randomly for the man.

Nor does it help to object that the will is generating its own choices. These words, "generating its own choices," are merely a more verbose way of saying, "throwing the dice"—and the dice are still thrown by a mere spasm,

unreasoning and unfeeling. If there were more than this to the will generating its own choices, then the will would have to possess some reason or sensibility of its own, *separately from the reason and sensibility of the person for whom it is choosing*. In other words, the will would become a little, choosing person within the person for whom it chooses. It would become a daemon. Then we would discover that this daemon was making its choices when a spasm in *its* brain cast the dice.

The suggestion that the will somehow generates its own choices does not free the enslaved person. If the will is a daemon, choosing arbitrarily for the person whom it inhabits, then the person has no freedom. We would rightly consider such a person to be mad. If I were such a person, I would insist upon being locked up in an asylum for the protection of those whom I loved. After all, I could never know when my will might randomly determine that I was to commit some horror, some heinous act, contrary to all that I believed and treasured. I would be better off imprisoned externally as long as my daemonically free will already holds me prisoner internally.

There is no escaping an important conclusion. *Whenever the will is truly free* (that is, ultimately free to choose contrary to all knowledge and love), *then the person is a slave*. The will itself is utterly undetermined, but it utterly determines the actions of the person. Otherwise we end up with the contradiction of a man who chooses against his will; in other words, he chooses what he does not choose.

Whenever the will is truly free, then the person is a slave. On the other hand, for the person to be truly free, then the will itself must be subject to determination. Genuinely free persons choose (i.e., *will*) on the basis of some combination of what they know or think they know and what they love or hate. In other words, for free persons, some combination of rationality and sensibility must always determine the will—and if the will is determined, then it is not free.

Furthermore, only if the will is determined can we say that the *person* is making the choice. Persons are more than their wills. Personhood includes both rationality and sensibility. When wills make decisions contingently (without determination by rationality and sensibility), then they are choosing *for* persons. When rationality and sensibility determine wills, then the persons themselves are making the choices. In this case, the will is not a separate thing from the deciding persons; rather, the will is simply whatever choice the deciding persons make.

I do not intend here to trace the balance of rationality and sensibility in genuinely free choices. Rather, I simply wish to note that a person who chooses on the basis of rationality and sensibility is truly free, even though that person's will is determined. A person whose will is truly free (contingent or self-determining) is always enslaved.

In sum, freedom can be viewed in two ways: either as freedom of the will, or else as freedom of the person. Whichever definition of freedom you think is best, you are going to end up with some form of determinism. The freedom of the will results in the slavery of the person. The freedom of the person demands the determination of the will.

Finally, I wish to observe that there are accepted labels for each of these visions or theories of the will. On the one hand, the notion that wills choose contingently and that they generate their own choices is called *libertarianism*. As we have seen, if libertarian freedom is true, then the will is free but the person is a slave. On the other hand, the notion that persons choose on the basis of some combination of what they know or think they know and what they love or hate is called *compatibilism*. If compatibilism is true, then the genuine freedom of persons is fully compatible with determination of the will—indeed, for persons to be fully free, wills must be determined.

Each of us must choose one of these theories. The question is, how will we choose? Will we choose on the basis of what seems reasonable and sensible? Or will we insist that rationality and sensibility be factored out of the equation so that our wills are left naked to choose contingently for themselves?

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
