

Theology Pub September 2019

Determinism vs. Free Will

Theological Determinism: God determines every event that occurs in the history of the world.

Free Will: Our actions are freely chosen.

1. The predominant view of God is that God is omnipotent and omniscient (i.e., all-powerful and all-knowing). If God is all-knowing, then God would be able to see into the future and know every event that will happen in our lives. But if God knows how every event will happen, doesn't that mean that all our future is predestined—that we have no choice but to do what God has seen will be done?
2. John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, was a Determinist. Calvin believed that God pre-determined who would go to heaven and who would go to hell. Consider the following quote:

“By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or to death.”¹

Is this problematic for your faith? How so?

3. In addition to potentially being doomed to damnation, determinism would also mean that every bad thing that has happened in your life was part of “God’s plan.” Another way of thinking about this is that God is responsible for evil. How do you feel about that?
4. In the New Testament, Jesus prophesized that Judas would betray him and that Peter would deny him three times. If Jesus is God (as Christians believe), doesn't this bolster the idea of omniscience and determinism? Can you think of other examples of determinism in the Bible?
5. What arguments can you think of to support the idea of free will, other than the fact that we *feel* like we are freely choosing our actions?
 - Should we deny that God has exhaustive knowledge of future events?
 - Could it be possible that there are a range of different paths/choices we might make, and God knows which choice we will make, but God lets us make the decision as to what choice? But if God knows this, does that solve the determinism problem?

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/predestination-ii/>

- Does God exist outside of time? Is God static, or is God evolving alongside us? Consider this passage from St. Paul in Romans: “From the beginning until now, the entire creation has been groaning, in a great act of giving birth.” (Romans 8:22).
- How good of a “relationship” could we have with God if we have no free will to choose?
- Without free will, do the concepts of guilt, repentance, and forgiveness have any meaning?

6. Is the answer to determinism vs. free will knowable? Should we humbly accept that we're in the middle of God's story and are not yet in a position to know the end of the story?