

Calvinism & Arminianism: reconciling moral free will - part 1

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This paper (part 1 of a series) is purely formal while subsequent papers will address specific historical texts. It will be argued in subsequent papers that what appears as a recherche theological point has profound practical consequences when appropriately resolved. Put differently, the answers may be of more interest than the question.

Paradoxes

There is a standard procedure to produce a paradox: take a principle, apply it radically and mechanically and it will inevitably come into conflict with some other well established principle. For example, if we take the principle of infinite divisibility we can prove *mirabile dictu*, that Achilles cannot overtake the tortoise. If the distance between Achilles and the tortoise can be infinitely divided (first divide it in half and then continue indefinitely..) then the time taken to traverse the distance will be an infinite time lapse .

Some have argued that if God is

1. all powerful
2. All knowing

Then he must

- a) have ordered all evil events
- b) have knowledge of all future events.

All knowing:

A first challenge to this is to focus on the misuse of words: To what extent is the word 'knowing' being used in the same sense at each stage? To know that X implies that X might not have been and that one might not have known it. We shall call this 'sense 1'. If I claim to know that America is west of Europe I imply both that I might not have known it and that America might not have been west of Europe. It is normal to use the word 'understand' for those matters that could be otherwise. I understand that $2+2 = 4$. What conventionally is called an analytic truth is usually interpreted as a matter of understanding not knowledge as in acquired information.

To claim that Y knows something, P, implies that she might not have done so and that P might not have been the case. It is not possible to claim that Y knows everything as a matter of necessity as the claim to knowledge implies that it might not have been so.

Equally to claim that Y can make S happen implies that S might not happen. To claim that Y makes all things happen of necessity and that it must happen in a certain way is to use 'make happen' in a completely different sense. She cannot be said to 'make something happen' (sense 1) that could not happen otherwise.

Further if one takes 'all knowing' in sense 1, that she knows all that will happen at the beginning of time and that all that will happen is fore ordained this will now imply that from that moment on she is no longer 'all powerful', for if she is all powerful she cannot be constrained by her own fore knowledge and lose her ability to intervene.

If she is all powerful she can always affect events. If she is all knowing then at the point she 'knows' she no longer can affect events and has ceased to be all powerful.

To what extent in sense 1 can she say she knows that America is west of Europe if it is in her power to move America somewhere else. If I say that I know that the election will be on such a date I at least imply that I alone cannot change it. It would be unusual to say that I know that I will be at a meeting tomorrow. It is clearly in my power not to be there so we would normally say I intend to be there.

To claim foreknowledge is incompatible with a claim to all powerfulness. If she were to claim to know the result of a football game taking place tomorrow it would imply that from the moment of knowledge it will not change. But if it will not change it is not compatible with her having the power to change it.

To be all powerful in sense 1 is incompatible with being all knowing in sense 1.

It is not possible to use the words 'knowing' and 'making happen' in respect of 'everything'. To have a concept of beauty implies a concept of ugliness, a concept of power implies a concept of powerlessness or impotence. We have taken the 'grammar' of a word out of context just as one might argue that if one knows what it is to be 3 pm on earth then one knows what it is to be 3pm on the moon.

Moral free will

A consequent argument from the 'all powerful' principle is that if there is an all powerful being then individuals cannot have free will to disobey the all powerful being because if they could the all powerful being would no longer be all powerful and also no longer be all knowing.

Let us consider this further. We shall separate moral free will (type 1) from free will of incidents (type 2) as a first step. Free will in respect of moral choices only requires that I have a moral choice. I could freely choose to help a sick person or not - it does not relate to the physical

consequences of my choice. Free will of incidents (type 2) implies that I have a choice as to how the world will be, my choices affect physical outcomes e.g. I can choose to attend a meeting or not.

But it is possible to construct moral free will (type 1) without incident free will (type 2). I can choose to help a sick man in the street. Whether I choose to help him he may die or live. Consider if I chose to help him and he lives apparently because of my help. This would appear to imply my free will had an effect. But if I chose not to help him perhaps another person would choose to help him and he would still live.

Formally, given a situation R I have a moral choice T or S. If I choose T then events a,b,c will happen which lead to event M. If I choose S then events d,e,f, will happen which will lead to event M. Either of my choices will generate the same incident response M, but in either case I have moral free choice. I cannot distinguish series a,b,c leading to M from series d,e,f leading M, particularly as I cannot rerun events. It is possible therefore to have a world where the future is known while individuals still have moral choices because the world is designed in such a way that for each moral choice there will be a countervailing action (Newton's alchemical equal and opposite) that generates the pre ordained event in the real world.

Conclusions:

Conflicts of principles are not rare in human experience and usually the question is which principle is considered to have priority. This similarly happens with contradictions. If two principles generate a contradiction at least one needs to be abandoned or amended. So the question arises as to why some people would rather hold on to a particular interpretation of principles and abandon others. They need to account for themselves. Why would they prefer to abandon opposing principles of free will, personal responsibility and divine love and uphold determinism if the two came into apparent conflict. Many have argued that they have no choice and seek to refer to scripture but this is not credible as they clearly argue their case polemically rather than reluctantly from scripture. Put differently, they embrace their position positively. When faced with contradictions we always have a choice.