



CHAPTER 1

Orientation

Some people understand compatibilism, the view that we possess free will in the sense that the will is caused by the mind, or the intellect, as being integral to the RO or to ‘Calvinism’, though we need to bear in mind that RO is a theological tradition that is the product of other minds than John Calvin’s. By contrast there have been Calvinists who hold that Calvinism is consistent with indeterminism or libertarianism. A number of the Calvinists, students of Calvin and of Reformed theology, that we shall refer to, hold such a view. But we need to remember that even Calvinistic compatibilists will recognize that, if God works miracles, then these events have no creaturely cause.

Further, Calvinism is not only creaturely, it embraces divine freedom as well as human freedom, the Creator as well as the creature. God in the Westminster Confession is said to be ‘most free’. I take it that this is a reference to God’s sovereignty, and His aseity. God is differently situated from His creatures. He is not in any way the product of His circumstances, of causal factors that originate outside or earlier than Himself. He has aseity, independence and self-sufficiency. Hence the ‘most’ in ‘most free’. There are questions that when asked of God make no sense of the creature, such as how old God is, or how many parts He is constructed out of. As the Apostle Paul said, ‘From him and through him and to him are all things’ (Rom. 11:36). So strictly speaking, one might think that the question of determinism and compatibilism should embrace every will, non-divine and divine, but it cannot do so.

‘Rabbi’ John Duncan

In his *Colloquia Peripatetica* Duncan asserts,

I dissent from Jonathan Edwards's doctrine, because he hazards a speculation, on will *qua* will, and therefore in reference to all will, divine and human. It is fatal to establish a necessary chain throughout every will in the universe. The divine acts are free. They are necessary, I maintain, *qua* moral, though free *qua* will. But I am a determinist as much as Edwards.¹

I dare to say that 'Rabbi' Duncan has here not got things quite right on Edwards. Edwards was a classical theist, stressing divine fullness and perfection. He wrote in correspondence to a Scottish friend after his ejection from his Northampton pulpit that he could subscribe to the Westminster Confession. Although Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) was a compatibilist regarding the changeable creation, he was in fact able to distinguish the conditions of the Creator from those of His creatures, and did so. In Part IV of his *Freedom of the Will* Edwards has a Section 7, entitled 'Concerning the Necessity of the Divine Will'. His point is that though God's perfections could not be other than they are, nevertheless God is worthy of our worship and admiration, of praise and thanksgiving. God cannot create or change or modify His perfections. The Supreme Being is the source of all other beings. He spoke and it was done. Those creatures that are external to Him do not determine God's actions; He acts according to His untold power and wisdom.

As though there were some disadvantage, meanness, and subjection, in such a necessity; a thing by which will was confined, kept under, and held in servitude by something, which, as it were, maintained a strong and invincible power and dominion over it, by bonds that held him fast, and that he could by no means deliver himself from . . . 'Tis no disadvantage or dishonor to a being, necessarily to act in the most excellent and happy manner, from the necessary perfection of his own nature. This argues no imperfection, inferiority or dependence, nor any want of dignity, privilege or ascendancy.'²

The reason why it is not to have a diminished freedom, to be necessarily *most* holy, is because holiness in itself is an excellent and honor-

1. *Colloquia Peripatetica*, John Duncan, Collected by William Knight, Sixth Edition (Edinburgh, Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1907), p. 29.

2. Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* ed. Paul Ramsey. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Volume I* (New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 1957), p. 377.

able state. For the same reason, it is no dishonor to be *most* wise, and in every case to act most wisely, or do the thing which is the wisest of all; for wisdom is also in itself excellent and honorable. And so on. God is most necessary and free by being Himself. What I venture to say is that what ‘Rabbi’ Duncan has missed is the conditions between Creator and the creature, in supposing the idea of determinism would have a parallel effect on both the Creator and the creature if determinism is granted on either. The human creature is a product of the creation, it depends on it and is constrained by it, and has freedom as the power and choice that he or she is gifted with. The Creator is by definition radically other than this. He is not created, but is possessed of aseity, *aseitas*, independence, (Not that He has created Himself! For He was not created, full stop.) When He acts directly, making a change in so doing, that change is determined, but God is never determined by a change.

The Creator cannot be determined. Hence He cannot have a determiner. Hence determinism cannot touch Him. His actions are expressions of power and wisdom of which the grandest of creatures have no real understanding, though we all have some. (Rom. 1:18-20). So if the creature is determined *ad extra* in everything he does, and so is determined, the Creator cannot be determined. So the question of whether God is acted upon does not arise.

But though Edwards holds that God had no reason to change whatever is in His plan, this emphasis on the nature of divine freedom does not mean for Edwards that God cannot be thought of making possible such a deviation from what He had done. For he says that God could do what He has not in fact done. The Bible refers to matters that could have happened but have not occurred nor never will occur. Christ refers to the stones that could have been turned into children of Abraham. ‘And do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father”, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham’ (Matt. 3:9).

In Edwards’s case there are instances of him thinking what God could have done, or that he thinks that God could do. These are some of what we can call his ‘thought experiments’. These are experiments in language, part of the stock in trade of philosophers. They have a long history, but Locke gave them a new lease of life, and Edwards follows Locke. By such experiments we are intended to put pressure on

our intellectual intuitions. In his book on the freedom of the will he uses thought experiments sparingly. For example, he writes in Part IV S. 8, ‘Some Further Objections Against the Moral Necessity of God’s Volitions Considered’³ as follows – ‘Let us for clearness’ sake suppose, that God had at the beginning made two globes . . . perfectly alike in every respect, and placed them near one to another . . .’⁴

The details do not concern us. The fact is, here is a valid *supposition* on Edwards’s part which for all we know God never chose. The supposition is certainly not incoherent. The question is, given what Edwards allows regarding God’s necessity, is such a supposition allowable consistently? Everything that happens is an expression of the wisdom and power (and other perfections) of almighty God. Here is something that God has not done. For him ‘it is impossible but that God should be good’⁵ and this impossibility reaches down to each expression of that goodness, no matter how seemingly trivial, as it contributes to the goodness of the whole.

The Bondage of the Will

The news that this book is about free will may arouse the belief that it is an account of the bondage of the will to sin, which both Calvin and Luther wrote books about. But in fact this important revealed truth is hardly mentioned in what is to follow. Rather we are to be concerned with human choice, human agency as such, including what in earlier times was called ‘civic freedom’, and not with the nature of such agency when fallen, or as enjoying the Spirit’s work of regeneration. We shall pay most attention to human wills. The divine will is largely, but not wholly, excluded from our argument. What follows is therefore principally an exercise in anthropology, not in theology in the sense of the doctrine of God, but in human choice.

As we noted ‘compatibilism’ refers to a position that maintains the consistency or ‘compatibility’ with a determinism which, if it meets certain conditions, is in turn consistent or compatible with human responsibility, of blame for what a person ought not to have done, and

3. *ibid.*, p. 364f.

4. *ibid.*

5. *ibid.*, p. 480.

of praise for doing what he ought to have done. As we shall see, the RO and Edwards in their accounts of human freedom each had criteria for human responsibility, having to do with a person's moral ability or not, or of his being compelled to do what he does or not.

This Chapter's Purpose

This opening chapter is intended to familiarize the reader with the work of Antonie Vos and his group and their re-construction of the seventeenth century Reformed Orthodox theologians as emancipated from what Vos calls necessitarianism, which we shall say more about shortly. This is to be found in several papers of his, and in his books on the theology and philosophy of the scholastic Duns Scotus (1266–1308). These sources are chiefly concerned with human freedom, less so with historical theory, of how doctrine is constructed, or with the conditions in which Christian doctrine develops.

So we are concerned with a feature of human nature as such, not with soteriology.⁶ The aim is to show that the view of Jonathan Edwards on the freedom of the human will known as compatibilism, was held by representative RO theologians in the seventeenth century, and is consistent with the Westminster Confession of Faith. Together they all held that our actions are brought about by the activity of the human understanding and the will, from factors that affect us in our understanding that produces our choices. There were differences between them, of course, due to Edwards's dislike of scholasticism, whereas the RO were mostly dedicated scholastics, while at the same time Edwards made public his abiding admiration for the theology, but not for the scholasticism, of the central RO figures of Francis Turretin (1623-1687), and Petrus Van Mastricht (1630–1706).⁷ So the aim of the effect of arguments that follow is to narrow some of the differences between the RO and Edwards by showing that they were both compatibilists.

6. For background see Paul Helm, *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards* (Grand Rapids, Reformed Heritage Books, 2018).

7. Paul Helm, 'A Different Kind of Calvinism? Edwardsianism Compared with Older Forms of Reformed Thought', *After Jonathan Edwards*, edd. Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Sweeney (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012). The very positive references of Edwards to Francis Turretin and Petrus Van Mastricht, suggest that Edwards distinguished between scholasticism as a philosophical style, and its theological content.

The Vos Project

In the First Part of this chapter we shall set out and examine the claims of Antonie Vos and his group of Dutch colleagues. Vos holds that the tendency of Christian theology down the ages has been to succumb to necessitarianism which it has taken from surrounding philosophy.

Vos prefers to use the term ‘necessitarianism’ to ‘determinism’, but I have not come across a discussion of the term. But it is one that is intended to cover both divine and human action, and those of creatures and of changes in inanimate objects. It covers the character of alternativity of men and women and that of their Creator. To discuss the term ‘necessitarianism’ when it includes the action of God would take us into matters which are somewhat speculative.

Besides, Vos largely confines his view to the topics of the doctrine of God and of the human will. He and his group do not venture to the question of how such an approach can be consistent with the commitment to the sovereign grace of God in the Augustinianism of the Reformed tradition, or of effectual calling, say, or to the Reformed view of meticulous divine providence or to the fundamental place played by the divine decree (or decrees) in Reformed theology. Vos hardly ever refers to such features, and what follows is confined to his view of the freedom of God, and its consequences for mankind made in the image of God. However, later we shall address the claim (from Scotus) that God’s action is synchronously contingent.

Not all that is not God has synchronous agency, even if God’s freedom were synchronically contingent in this sense. The created world is in time and space. And while Vos thinks Anselm plays a key role in introducing a non-necessitarian Christian theology, others such as Katherin Rogers think Anselm’s doctrine of God is necessitarian but that His human creatures are libertarian.⁸ And Norman Kretzmann thinks similarly of Thomas Aquinas, that is, he offers a necessitarian account of what God creates but a non-necessitarian account of the human beings that He has created. God’s nature is essentially diffusive, and so not-creating is not an option for Him. But God has options over what He does in fact create.⁹

8. Rogers, *Anselm on Freedom*, pp. 18-19.

9. Norman, Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997), Chs. 7, 8.