

What Is Free Will?

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This booklet deals solely with one point, viz., why God's foreknowledge does not prejudice the freedom of will with which man has been endowed.

DICK of the Bradley twins was completely puzzled. He stated his problem almost indignantly.

"This free will business —," he said, in broken sentences, "I don't get it. It doesn't make sense. How come?"

"He means," explained Sue, the other half of the twinship, "that everywhere you go people pop free will at you. And we don't know the answers."

"Maybe I'd know them," said Father Hall, filling his pipe, "if I knew the questions. What's wrong with free will?"

"Just everything" said Dick, now quite savage: "It just doesn't work out. There are these poor morons and these people brought up in the slums. Free will? For them? Bosh! And besides, God knows whether I'm going to heaven or to hell, doesn't He?"

"Certainly."

"That's let me out," said Dick, shrugging hopelessly. "He knows, and nothing that I do is going to alter that. He sees that some day I will be in heaven or hell. And all my efforts won't change my destination."

A PARALLEL.

Father Hall laughed, not patronisingly, but with a distinct gaiety. He delighted to hear the beloved twins become serious and excited over problems that had been hurled at them. He reached out and extracted a pad of paper and a pencil from the litter of things at his side.

"Rally round," he said, "while I draw you a picture."

They laughed too, for his sketching was never a thing of beauty.

"Let's start with a parallel. Well say that you and Sue and I are in New York."

"Giving ourselves a good time?"

"Well you may be, but I'm sitting home looking up schedules."

"Oh, then we'll stay with you," said Sue.

"Thanks. You see, Tom, Jane and Harry are coming to discuss some business with us."

"Lucky for Tom, Jane and Harry."

“Very. Tom wires us that he is coming down from Albany on the Hudson night boat and is leaving at eleven before midnight. Jane, who is full of such tricks, is flying from St. Louis and leaving at ten in the morning. Harry is taking the New York Central that leaves Chicago at three in the afternoon.”

“All friends, and all coming different ways?”

“Yes. Isn’t that life? Now you’ll notice that each forgot to tell us when he or she was to arrive. But we know the transportation lines and the hours of departure. So we get a New York Central Folder and a Trans-American Airways time-table, and we call up the Hudson line for the boat time-table. We learn that Tom will be at the pier by eight in the morning, that Harry will arrive at ten the same morning, that Jane will be at the air-port flying field at five-thirty. Let me sketch that out”

With rough strokes Father Hall drew a diagram showing the routes of the three travelers.

[The resultant diagram is very crude, but can be described in this way. It is a semi-circle on the right, representing New York, with three separate strokes coming into the circle from the west. The first is labeled ‘Tom’ and starts at ‘Albany’ and has ‘11 P.M.’ on its axis. The second is labeled ‘Harry’ and starts at ‘Chicago’ and has ‘3 P.M.’ on its axis. The third is labeled ‘Jane’ and starts at ‘St Louis’ and has ‘10 A.M.’ on its axis.]

“Well, as it turns out, we’re at the pier to welcome Tom as his boat arrives. We have a bite of breakfast and make the Grand Central in time to welcome Harry. And then later all of us ride out to the flying field to meet Jane, bright and smiling, who steps from the big cabin plane.”

“And don’t we make the nicest reception committee?” demanded Sue.

“Well?” demanded Dick.

“Well,” continued the priest, “the trio arrive at journey’s end, and we knew they would. In fact, we’re there to meet them when they arrive. Now just one question: Do they arrive because we know they are coming, or do we know of their coming because they planned to come and informed us about their arrival?”

“Again and slower,” demanded Dick for both of them.

“In a word: Does their arrival depend upon our knowledge of it, or does our knowledge of it depend upon their arrival?”

“Why that’s too simple. Once we had learned their schedules, we were certain that at a definite time and a definite spot —”

“Correct, of course. But who determined when they were going to arrive? We or they?”

“They.”

“And what about our knowledge of their arrival? Didn’t they come because we knew it?”

“Nonsense. We knew it because they were going to come.”

“Fine. Now their itinerary might be very complicated. They might, let’s say, be coming by a roundabout course from Japan — something, let’s say, like this.”

Father Hall drew another of his diagrams.

[This time the diagram looks more like a square or box with the label ‘New York’ inside it. Coming out of the box is a quasi-circular long line which terminates eventually in a label marked ‘Japan’. If

we follow the line from 'Japan' we will see that it crosses a box marked 'India', then a box, to its right a long way off, marked 'Italy', then a box marked 'Dublin', until it finally reaches the central box, 'New York'.]

"Complication has nothing to do with it," said Dick, after he had examined the diagram.

"If we knew their schedule, we'd be there to meet them when arrived."

The priest nodded.

"So they select their own schedules. They decide when and where they are going to arrive. They might decide to come by oxcart or to travel from San Francisco by way of the Canal. They might travel on a bus. They might walk or hitch-hike. But if they gave us a schedule, we would be expecting to meet them at the place and time they freely chose for the reunion. Correct?"

"Barring slip-ups."

"Oh, we're talking now about a man's limited knowledge. For a perfect schedule we would have to know the possible slip-ups too."

Father Hall turned to his pad again.

"Now besides scheduling their trip to New York and choosing a route either by water, air, or rail, Tom, Jane, and Harry are also scheduling their trip to heaven or hell. Let's look at each of the three. We'll omit all but one of the detours. For every mortal sin is a detour, and continuance in mortal sin is — Well, let's see. We'll start with Tom. Here's life as he schedules it."

[This time, the diagram starts over the left side with a little circle labeled 'Birth'. From this emerges an arrowed line labeled 'Tom'. It proceeds along until it hits a bump labeled 'Mortal Sin'. The line heads in a downward type of direction when it encounters a bump labeled 'Confession'. The line now heads back up and along the page until it hits a bump labeled 'Death'. From here the line heads slightly downward to a big circle labeled 'Purgatory'. Emerging from here the line heads up to a huge square labeled 'Heaven'.]

"Just a minute," protested Dick. "I can see where he chose the mortal sin, but he didn't choose purgatory."

"No more than a man coming back from Europe chooses the customs office. Purgatory is just the antechamber to heaven. The main point is, that Tom routes himself for heaven, takes the correct line, and arrives on schedule. Let's look at Jane. For three years she lives in mortal sin but then makes an act of perfect contrition, leads a perfect life; so —"

[Jane's diagram also starts over the left side with the little circle labeled 'Birth'. From this emerges an arrowed line labeled 'Jane'. It proceeds along until it hits a bump labeled 'Mortal Sin'. From here it spirals down and passes through the notation '3 Years'. Next it encounters a bump labeled 'Confession'. It swings back up and along the page, encounters 'Death', and then heads up to the huge area labeled 'Heaven'.]

"Now let's take a look at what Harry schedules for his life's journey. We can't possibly indicate all his detours. He is constantly sinning because he thinks that sin is a grand lot of fun. Once he repents, but he falls back immediately. Here is his schedule."

[Harry's diagram also starts over the left side with the little circle labeled 'Birth'. From this emerges the now familiar arrowed line, this time labeled 'Harry'. It proceeds along and hits a bump labeled 'Mortal Sin'. From here it swings down and stays down as it makes its way across the page. It encounters a bump labeled 'Confession' and immediately the line swings back up and levels out at the highest point (plus some) of its previous journey while it still makes its way across the page. It plateaus for a while, but then encounters another bump, labeled 'Mortal Sin'. The line plunges down again and encounters 'Death'. From here the line swings to the bottom of the page and enters a large rectangle labeled 'Hell'.]

"I'm dreadfully sorry, but he routed himself for hell, and he arrived there."

"Poor chap!" said Sue softly.

"Terribly unfortunate. However, he made his own schedule. He knew at each moment that he did not need to sin. He wanted to sin. He did so with open eyes and full choice."

"Not if he was a moron, an unfortunate —"

"We'll come to that in a minute. Let's stick to the schedules. Now God, Who sees all things that ever were or are or will be, looks into the world. He sees the schedules of the planets in their orbits."

"Yes," added Sue, more as an explanation than an objection, "but they work by irresistible law."

WE MAKE THEM.

"Exactly. They keep to the schedule that God gave them. But God looks at men. Just as we saw the schedules they chose to get to New York, He sees the schedules they use to route themselves through life. He knows from those schedules that Tom and Jane will reach heaven and that Harry will reach hell. He did not make their schedules. They made them. He knows their schedules, however, as we knew the other schedules. Now the question: Will they arrive in heaven or hell because God knows it, or does God know it because they will arrive?"

"I get it," said Dick. "We make the schedules. God sees the schedules we make. If we were to make them differently, God would see them differently. So what God sees about our arrival is what we decided about our arrival. Is that correct?"

"All except the time," Sue said.

"Yes. God decides the time. But we decide the direction, the route, the way we are going to go. Of course, God has to help us with grace; but that's another question. Now we're just talking free will."

"HOW FAR ARE WE FREE?"

"Thus far we're right with you," Dick agreed. "It isn't that Tom, Jane, and Harry reached New York because we knew they were coming; we knew they were coming because they had scheduled themselves for New York. So when Tom and Jane scheduled themselves along the road to heaven, and Harry scheduled himself along the road to hell —"

"— God knew that," finished Sue. "That's clear."

"Yes. But only that far," Dick intervened. "Just how far are we free? Can these poor morons and children who were brought up to sin before they knew what sin is, and the head hunters of Africa — can they schedule a course that —"

“Let’s draw some more figures,” said Father Hall. “We’ll stick to our parallel with traveling. We’ll make three little boats. We’ll call the rudder ‘free will’ because that decides our direction, of course.”

{Father Hall now drew three little sailing boats. They looked quite nice and he didn’t bother to label any thing on them.}

“Would you mind,” asked Sue, plaintively, “if we put Tom, Jane and Harry into those boats? For boats they don’t look any too seaworthy to me.”

“Tom, Jane, and Harry let it be. Now let’s suppose that there is a fourth boat, one you can’t see. The poor skipper, when he got in, found that he had no rudder at all, that the boat was —”

“— out of control?”

“Exactly. He can’t control his ship; he doesn’t know how to guide it. It is completely beyond his power of direction.”

“I know,” said Dick. “You mean he’s insane.”

RUDDERS GOOD AND BAD.

“Correct. When a man has no control over his own will, he is insane. And we have a phrase for that (a phrase I’m sure God echoes): ‘He is not responsible.’ For if in the boat’s construction the use of a rudder was not made possible, if the skipper has no way, of directing his boat, he’s not to blame when the boat goes on the rocks. So your insane man, Dick, these people born without any ability to choose good or evil —”

“I see. We can leave them to God. They’re not responsible. They can’t be blamed for what they can’t do.”

“Now let’s take a look at the three other boats. Each of your young skippers takes over his craft. Jane finds that her rudder is in perfect shape — well hung, clean, and, free swinging. Tom, however, as he grips the tiller, finds that through no fault of his own the whole rudder is a mass of sea-weed and old rope; while poor Harry discovers that his rudder is almost completely smashed, with just a little of the blade left in the water.” Father Hall was sketching while he talked. [You’ll have to use your imagination.]

“Here are the three rudders,” he said, showing the sketch to the twins.

“Naturally if Tom had been responsible for getting his rudder mired, if he had got drunk let’s say, and allowed the boat to drift among the sedges, he would be responsible. If Harry had deliberately or through criminal carelessness cracked the rudder of his boat on a rock, he would be to blame. But since they were each given boats with befouled or broken rudders, you can’t ask Tom and Harry to steer as straight and clear a course as Jane should be able to do.”

RESPONSIBLE.

“I think I get it,” said Dick. “Let me see if I can make the parallel. If a man, through some situation or some accident over which he has no control, has never had or loses the use of his free will, he is not responsible and hence not guilty of any crimes he happens to commit. If he has a clear, full free will —”

“I should think,” interrupted Sue, “that he would be held very responsible.”

“And so he is, and so is Jane for her ship; and so are two fortunate young people like you,” agreed the priest, “for the guidance of your souls.”

“I suppose,” said Dick, “that we could say the weeds and the old rope on the rudder are the effects of environment on the free will.”

“Exactly. If a child is brought up in criminal surroundings, or if he is born into the heart of a savage tribe, his will is bound to be clogged with the evil around him, even before he is aware of what is going on. You can see,” said Father Hall, “that such conditions would decidedly minimize his guilt.”

“So that if he were taught to be a criminal —”

“— or a head hunter —”

“— or a vicious sinner, and were taught this almost before consciousness or the awakening of conscience, he could not possibly be considered to have a clear rudder and a ship-shape tiller.”

HEREDITY.

“And,” continued Dick, “if a chap found he had a broken rudder, a little bit of blade but not much, maybe you could blame that on heredity. His sinful parents endowed him with a weak or broken will, a blear-eyed idea of what was right and what was wrong, and maybe some sort of disease that weakened him so badly —”

“— that his responsibility,” said the priest, “would be far, far less than the responsibility of Jane and Tom or, let’s say, our Dick and Sue.”

“And where does God enter into this?”

“God judges men according to the way they use the gifts they were given and the abilities and opportunities which they possess. He is certainly not going to judge a head hunter of Africa on the same basis that He judges the graduate of a Catholic high school. He can see in the hands of each the difference in the rudder. He is not going to be so exacting on the child who, born in the slums, is raised by a drunken mother and a criminal father as He will be on the child of a fine Catholic family. They haven’t equal powers of selecting their course and mapping out their schedules.

WHEN OUR BOATS COME IN.

“If we have free will at all, which means that we are sane and not irresponsible, we are obliged to use that free will. But the more free will we are capable of exercising because of fine training, good religious instruction, strong natural character, and the grace of God given to us through the sacraments, the straighter the course we must steer, and the more rigidly will God hold us accountable for our course. And the fewer of these helps and guides we have, the less free will we have, and the less severe will be God’s judgment on us when we finally bring our boats into port”

“Funny,” said Dick, looking a little annoyed, “none of the arguments you ever hear against free will seem to take these things into consideration.”

Father Hall crumpled up the papers on which he had sketched the diagrams and threw them into his capacious waste paper basket.

“Oh,” he said, “it’s so much easier to argue against a thing when you don’t try to understand it.”
