

RECONCILING DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN FREEDOM

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For Christian theists it has long been a theological commonplace to say that there is an intellectual problem about the relation between divine sovereignty and human freedom. Various described as an antinomy, a tension, or (most frequently) a paradox, this problem belongs to a set of seemingly intractable conceptual difficulties arising from such traditional claims as that God is both one and three and that Jesus is both divine and human. Responses to the problem fall into two categories: (1) the appeal to paradox, in which it is asserted that a reconciliation of divine sovereignty and human freedom is beyond our intellectual competence; (2) the appeal to reason, in which attempts are made to effect a reconciliation between sovereignty and freedom. There is something to be said in favor of each of these appeals but not enough to sustain the view that one particular appeal is clearly the right way to go. In fact a careful look at one of the options is likely to drive a thinker into seriously considering its alternative. Accordingly in this paper I argue that we must, however reluctantly, work with two distinct but closely related tensions: (1) the sovereignty/freedom tension itself, generated by the Biblical texts and Christian theological tradition; (2) the paradox/reason tension, generated by our efforts to respond to the first tension. The paradox/reason tension, which I will describe more fully below, leads me to adopt an agnostic stance about the possibility of reconciling divine sovereignty and human freedom.

The paper has two sections. In the first section I describe the appeal to paradox, paying particular attention to the various senses of the term "paradox" that are relevant to understanding how some thinkers have regarded the sovereignty/freedom tension. I conclude that the appeal to paradox probably fails due to its reliance on the dogmatic claim that a logical reconciliation of sovereignty and human freedom is known to be impossible. In the second section I describe the appeal to reason. I argue that this appeal permits two general reconciliation projects, each one employing a different, standard definition of "free will" and each one facing significant intellectual difficulties. I conclude that the appeal to reason may hold promise for a genuine sovereignty/freedom reconciliation but that this is far from certain. The upshot of all this is the paradox/reason tension: It is not certain that the appeal to paradox can be sustained, nor is it certain that the appeal to reason can produce a genuine reconciliation.

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I. THE APPEAL TO PARADOX: DENYING RECONCILIATION

Both the appeal to paradox and the appeal to reason rest on the belief that there really is a tension between the concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom. If there is a tension, then it makes sense to ask whether a reconciliation between the two concepts is possible (the appeal to reason) or impossible (the appeal to paradox). I take the common view that there is tension here and that it can be found easily enough in the Biblical texts.

The sovereignty/freedom tension can be discovered by examining any one of a large number of sets of Biblical statements. For instance we can compare "[God] works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11) to "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body" (2 Cor 5:10). The first statement affirms divine sovereignty in sweeping terms, and the second statement is just as emphatic in its affirmation of human freedom.¹ There is tension here because it seems puzzling that God should somehow control "all things" and that human beings should be real agents who are responsible for their "deeds."

Although it is easy enough to come up with instances of the tension by comparing Biblical statements, there are limits to the value of this practice. As D. A. Carson notes in a different connection, there is "the danger of overlooking variations of approach and emphasis within the biblical literature" as well as "the danger of forcing the biblical writers to respond to too many questions which do not interest them."² It is possible that a set of Biblical statements may appear to generate tension between sovereignty and freedom without actually doing so. Even granting this, there remains a mass of Biblical material that strongly and clearly implies a tension between the concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Given that the Biblical texts do imply the sovereignty/freedom tension and that Christian thinkers have taken these texts as normative for theology, it comes as no surprise that the Christian theological tradition uses concepts that express the tension. This tradition presents God as the omnipotent, omniscient Creator and human beings as free creatures who are responsible to their Creator for the conduct of their lives. The tension becomes apparent as soon as any attempt is made to develop a coherent explanation of the connections between these concepts.

The sovereignty/freedom tension is not only real but is also strong enough to earn the title "paradox," the term that is so frequently applied to it in the theological literature. This term is used by some writers without any clear definition, or any definition at all, in spite of the fact that "paradox" has a number of distinct uses and that the failure to distinguish

¹ Generally I will use "human freedom" in place of "human responsibility." I have two reasons for this: (1) Freedom in the sense of "free will" is traditionally considered to be the ground of human responsibility, and (2) attempts to reconcile divine sovereignty and human responsibility invariably explain responsibility in terms of a particular definition of freedom.

² D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 3.

among them will impede any examination of the prospects for reconciling divine sovereignty and human freedom I will give four uses of the term, of which the latter two are particularly helpful for understanding the theological appeal to paradox

The first two senses of "paradox" are the surprising-fact paradox and the semantic paradox Any paradox is likely to induce surprise, and there is an older use of "paradox" in which the word refers to "a statement which is surprising, contrary to general expectation or belief, but not necessarily having even the appearance of self-contradiction"³ A semantic paradox retains the capacity to induce surprise but adds "the appearance of self-contradiction" by using a word or words equivocally For instance, to say that "Captain Gomez outranks Captain Smith" surprises us because we do not see how one captain can outrank another, given that they have the same rank But if we learn that Gomez is in the United States navy and Smith is in the United States air force, the paradox is resolved (navy captains outrank air force captains) There are Biblical examples of semantic paradox, such as the statement of Jesus that "many who are first will be last, and the last, first" (Matt 19 30) The sovereignty/freedom tension has at least the appearance of logical inconsistency, and so it cannot be a surprising-fact paradox It does not rest on equivocation, and so it cannot be a semantic paradox either

What the sovereignty/freedom tension can be, or at least can be argued to be, is an epistemic paradox C S Evans defines this use of "paradox" in the standard way

A paradox is an apparent contradiction In general the discovery of a paradox is the result of an encounter with a reality which our concepts are inadequate to deal with, a reality that ties us in a conceptual knot When we try to understand it we find ourselves saying self-contradictory things, but of course this does not mean that the reality we have encountered is itself self-contradictory It means that there is a problem with our conceptual equipment⁴

To call a paradox an "apparent contradiction" is very common, but not logically correct because it implies a distinction between types of contradiction I follow David Basinger in maintaining that there is nothing ambiguous about the concept of contradiction or, more generally, the concept of logical inconsistency A statement or set of statements either is or is not logically consistent, and hence there can be no genuine distinction between "real" and "apparent" contradictions⁵

All the same there is a point to the term "apparent contradiction," for it allows us to distinguish between epistemic paradox and its close relative, the logical paradox To make this distinction I will stipulate that a theological claim is a statement or set of statements employing vague, ambiguous, nontechnical language to express a Biblical teaching Familiar examples of

³ W H Austin "Complementarity and Theological Paradox," *Zygon* 2 (December 1967) 366

⁴ C S Evans "Is Kierkegaard An Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox, and Faith," *RelS* 25 (Spring 1989) 353

⁵ D Basinger, "Biblical Paradox Does Revelation Challenge Logic?," *JETS* 30 (June 1987) 205-213

this are "Jesus is both divine and human" and "God is sovereign, and human beings have freedom." The sovereignty/freedom tension is, then, a claim. I will also stipulate that a theological formulation is a statement or set of statements employing clear, precise, even technical language to spell out the supposed meaning of a claim. Theological claims cannot be logically inconsistent, but theological formulations can be.

With these stipulations I can define an epistemic paradox, or "apparent contradiction," as a theological claim for which it is (humanly) impossible to create any logically consistent formulations. Due to its imprecise language the theological claim itself is not logically inconsistent, but all of its formulations are logically inconsistent. This definition requires that by "all" of its formulations we mean not only "all those formulations so far devised" but "all possible formulations," so that it would be irrational to regard a theological claim as an epistemic paradox yet continue to search for a logically consistent formulation of it. In other words the "appeal to (epistemic) paradox" precludes the "appeal to reason." The standard "appeal to paradox" with respect to the sovereignty/freedom tension is an appeal to epistemic paradox.

This is not, however, the only possible "paradox" approach to the sovereignty/freedom tension. There is the more radical appeal to logical paradox. A logical paradox is a statement or set of statements that (1) is believed by some to be true but (2) is logically inconsistent. A paradox of this kind is a "real contradiction" and it, too, precludes the appeal to reason. The radical appeal to logical paradox is more likely to be made by a skeptic than by a Christian believer because it requires that one or more theological statements be false (logical inconsistency entails falsity). If the sovereignty/freedom tension is a logical paradox, then at least one of the statements that comprise the tension must be false.

The standard appeal to epistemic paradox rests on the belief that the theological claim in question is true but that finite human minds cannot understand it well enough to formulate it in a logically consistent way. It is true that God is sovereign, and it is true that human beings have freedom, but these true statements are not clear enough for us to see and show their harmonious relation. The standard appeal, then, is concerned with preserving the truth of theological claims by exempting them from rational examination. This is a case of faith above, but not against, reason. As Anthony Hoekema expresses this position: "If we wish to understand the Scriptures, therefore, we must accept the concept of paradox, believing that what we cannot square with our finite minds is somehow harmonized in the mind of God."⁶

If this standard appeal to epistemic paradox can be shown to reduce to logical paradox, then its truth-preserving feature will have been lost. The advocate of epistemic paradox makes the strong assertion that the theologi-

⁶ A A Hoekema, *Saved By Grace* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1989) 6 For a classic statement of this position see *The Concordia Triglotta The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (St Louis Concordia, 1921) 1079-1081

cal claim is true but that it is not susceptible to any logically consistent formulation. It makes sense to ask what basis there might be for the latter assertion, and it seems that any answer will require that there be something about the wording of the theological claim itself that indicates the presence of logical inconsistency. This implies that the theological claim is too clear in its language to justify being called a "claim" in my stipulated sense of the term, and it follows from this that the statement or statements involved do not constitute an epistemic paradox. If, for instance, the joint affirmation of divine sovereignty and human freedom is worded clearly enough to rule out its having any logically consistent formulations, then the affirmation itself is logically inconsistent and is thus a logical paradox.

Suppose, however, that epistemic paradox can be successfully defended against the charge that it reduces to logical paradox, and suppose further that the sovereignty/freedom tension really is an epistemic paradox. Given these suppositions, two important assertions may be made. The first of these is that this tension is an intelligible (meaningful) theological claim. There is nothing in its wording that would guarantee logical inconsistency. In other words the joint affirmation of divine sovereignty and human freedom is free from the problems inherent in affirming the existence of, for instance, "square circles" or "impossible possibles."

The second of these assertions is that all possible formulations of this theological claim are logically inconsistent. The appeal to paradox runs into trouble here because the first assertion gives us good reason to be suspicious of the second assertion. The problem is how to get from the first assertion (intelligibility) to the second assertion's requirement that all the claim's possible formulations be logically inconsistent (and hence unintelligible). To put it another way, if the sovereignty/freedom claim is intelligible, then there is no apparent reason to suppose it to be impossible that a logically consistent formulation of it should be found.

The standard appeal to paradox is nothing less than the affirmation that a logical reconciliation of the sovereignty/freedom tension is impossible, at least for human beings. There is some irony in this, since the standard appeal is both a recognition of human epistemic limitations and the making of a sweeping epistemic claim (i.e. that we know that any attempted logical reconciliation of the sovereignty/freedom tension will fail). Given reasonable doubt about this sweeping claim, we may say that the appeal to paradox is probably a failure. And the condition for its failure provides the necessary, minimum condition for undertaking the appeal to reason. It will be rational to undertake the appeal to reason provided that a logical reconciliation between the concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom is not known to be impossible.

II. THE APPEAL TO REASON: ATTEMPTING RECONCILIATION

My general approach to the task of reconciling the concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom presupposes the minimum condition of

rationality I mentioned above—namely, that such a reconciliation is not known to be impossible. That condition alone is enough to justify the reconciliation task, but a Christian theist may wish for more and may perhaps expect more. Some will agree with W. S. Anglin that “if God respects the reason he gave us then we cannot suppose that incomprehensible mysteries constitute part of his revelation.”⁷ Those who take Anglin’s line are likely to believe that a genuine sovereignty/freedom reconciliation is possible. It does not follow from this that the possibility would ever be actualized, much less that it has already been actualized in the work of theologians and philosophers who have attempted the reconciliation task. Those who are less optimistic than Anglin may still affirm the reconciliation undertaking provided that they accept the minimum condition for its rationality.

Besides affirming the minimum condition for the rationality of the reconciliation task, my approach takes the classic line that concepts in tension must be directly compared in an attempt to discover their (supposed) logical consistency. This is not the only approach possible to the reconciliation task, but it is arguably the best one. Some will disagree with me about that and will take a different line. One of these is W. L. Sessions, who uses a “perspectival” approach to the resolution of the tension about the authorship of faith, itself an instance of the broader sovereignty/freedom tension.⁸ If the classic approach I am taking has any real promise of genuine sovereignty/freedom reconciliation, then I see little reason to experiment with other approaches.

Another feature of my general approach is that it uses the concept of human freedom to organize the reconciliation task. There are good reasons for this. Of the two concepts in the sovereignty/freedom tension, only the freedom concept offers a clear distinction between standard, established definitions. Any attempted reconciliation of divine sovereignty and human freedom must employ a version of either libertarian free will or compatibilist free will (I will explain these below), since these two standard accounts of free will exhaust the possibilities for a rational explanation of human freedom.⁹ Anyone who wishes to attempt a reconciliation of the sovereignty/freedom tension must, therefore, make a choice between the libertarian reconciliation project and the compatibilist reconciliation project.

The libertarian reconciliation project (LRP) and the compatibilist reconciliation project (CRP) share a set of commitments. First, each project presupposes that the reconciliation of divine sovereignty and human freedom is not known to be impossible. Second, each project takes it for granted that both concepts—divine sovereignty and human freedom—truly reflect aspects of Biblical teaching, so that neither concept can be sacrificed to the

⁷ W S Anglin, *Free Will and the Christian Faith* (Oxford Clarendon, 1990) 201

⁸ W L Sessions, “The Authorship of Faith,” *RelS* 27 (March 1991) 81–97

⁹ There are nonrational accounts of human freedom, but these are useless in the task of devising a logical (rational) reconciliation of the concepts of divine sovereignty and human freedom. See *Christian Perspectives on Being Human* (ed J P Moreland and D M Ciochi, Grand Rapids Baker, 1993) 88–91

other.¹⁰ And finally, each project assumes the correctness of its own account of human freedom. There is one other thing worth noting: Both the LRP and the CRP are project types that can be instanced by an indefinite number of tokens. In other words there may be any number of libertarian and compatibilist attempts to reconcile sovereignty and freedom, so that the failure of a given reconciliation attempt does not by itself discredit its project type.

An attempted sovereignty/freedom reconciliation, if it is to be judged as genuine or successful, must pass a battery of tests. The first and most obvious is the internal consistency test. By this I mean that the statements that make up the reconciliation must form a self-consistent set—that is, it must be logically possible for all the statements in the set to be true. This test is the primary one, since the purpose of the reconciliation task is to devise a logically consistent formulation of the sovereignty/freedom claim.

Given the freedom to define “sovereignty” and “freedom” any way one wished, it would be easy to devise an internally consistent reconciliation of the two concepts, which helps to indicate why the second test for a genuine reconciliation is scarcely less important than the first test. This second test is the exegetical test. The sovereignty/freedom tension is a theological claim rooted in centuries of reading and reflecting upon the Biblical texts, and it is precisely the task of reconciling the Biblical concepts that is at stake. It therefore follows that a genuine sovereignty/freedom reconciliation will pass the exegetical test—that is, it will conform to the teachings of the Biblical texts. A genuine reconciliation will not only be internally consistent (first test) but will also be externally consistent with Biblical teaching (second test). This conformity or consistency must be understood as a logical consistency, and a demonstration of such consistency (to the degree that this is possible) will require exegesis of the Biblical texts. This of course opens the door to many disputes about whether a given reconciliation attempt really passes the exegetical test.¹¹

Besides these two tests there is a third one that figures prominently in some discussions of the sovereignty/freedom tension: the moral intuition test. This test requires that a genuine reconciliation comport well with our most deeply held intuitions about right and wrong, good and evil, and it is usually advocated by libertarians who believe that only their view of human freedom truly comports with our (human) moral intuitions. As they apply this test, then, no compatibilist reconciliation attempt could possibly pass it, for (they maintain) God’s goodness and our moral dignity require

¹⁰ The general danger of reducing one theological concept to another, or of eliminating one altogether, is widely recognized by theological writers. Cf e.g. P. D. L. Avis, “Polarity and Reductionism,” *SJT* 29 (1976) 401–413, R. G. Gruenler, *The Inexhaustible God: Biblical Faith and the Challenge of Process Theism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 105, M. A. Stenger, “The Significance of Paradox for Theological Verification: Difficulties and Possibilities,” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983) 171–182.

¹¹ For some ways in which an attempted reconciliation might fail the exegetical test see D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty* 3.

that human beings enjoy nothing less than genuine—that is, libertarian—free will.¹²

Unlike the first two tests, then, the moral intuition test is controversial, and its controversial nature reduces its value for judging attempted reconciliations of the sovereignty/freedom tension. If for instance a libertarian charges that a compatibilist reconciliation fails to comport with our moral intuitions about the goodness of God, the compatibilist might respond with (1) a flat denial or (2) the countercharge that any libertarian reconciliation will be inconsistent with our intuitions about the sovereignty of God. A clash of intuitions will be difficult if not impossible to resolve, and this suggests a daunting problem for those undertaking the reconciliation task in the form in which I am approaching it. It is possible that libertarians and compatibilists differ at a deep, intuitive level about what grounds human responsibility and will therefore be unable to overcome the division between them. If this is the case, then no attempted reconciliation of the sovereignty/freedom tension, even if genuine, will ever win anything even close to general acceptance.

In what follows I will first present a general description of the libertarian reconciliation project (LRP) and then of the compatibilist reconciliation project (CRP). In each description I will explain the account of free will involved and will spell out the primary intellectual challenge faced by those who undertake that particular project. After each general description I will present and evaluate sample attempted reconciliations. I will be more hopeful about the CRP's prospects than the LRP's, but I will be far from certain that either project can result in a genuine reconciliation of the sovereignty/freedom tension.

The LRP employs the popular and venerable libertarian account of free will.¹³ According to libertarian thinkers, the free agent has the categorical ability to choose (and do) otherwise than he actually does. That the agent's ability is categorical implies that an agent who made a particular choice might actually have refrained from doing so—that is, being just what he was and feeling just what he felt, and being in just those circumstances, he might still have chosen differently. Another way of putting this is to say that the free agent has ultimate control over his free choices, so that it is the agent's very choosing, and nothing else, that truly determines whether a particular event occurs or fails to occur.

With this libertarian conception of human freedom as a given, those attempting the LRP look to the Biblical texts and to Christian theological tradition for an account of divine sovereignty. Although the idea that "God is sovereign" is a theological "claim" in my stipulated sense, and is therefore imprecise enough to require "formulation," it is nonetheless an idea that

¹² For an example of this line of argument see J. L. Walls, "The Free Will Defense, Calvinism, Wesley, and the Goodness of God," *Christian Scholar's Review* 13 (1983) 19–33.

¹³ In the vast literature on free will both the libertarian and compatibilist accounts of free will go by a variety of names. I have settled on these two for the sake of convenience. "Libertarian" comes from "liberty," which is a synonym for "freedom." The term "compatibilism" comes from the adjective "compatible," to represent the idea that free will is compatible with determinism.

suggests a very strong, uncompromising view of the power of God. It is associated in theological tradition with concepts such as omnipotence and omniscience, and so it is not surprising that libertarian thinkers have long felt a logical tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom. Feeling this preformulation tension, some libertarians make the appeal to paradox, but this course of action is not open to those attempting the reconciliation project.

The primary intellectual challenge for the LRP is to formulate the sovereignty/responsibility claim in a way that exhibits a logical consistency between (1) a convincing, Biblically-grounded account of divine sovereignty and (2) an uncompromising libertarianism. If libertarians succeed in this, then they have passed the first two tests. Generally they do not worry about the third test (moral intuition) since they are confident that their conception of human freedom firmly grounds moral responsibility.

The logical tension between (1) and (2) can easily be formulated in ways that exhibit logical inconsistency. For example, suppose that divine sovereignty is formulated as a theological determinism in which through the will of God there are antecedent conditions for each human choice such that, given those conditions, no other choice could (actually) have been made. This will be logically inconsistent with libertarian free will, which involves the categorical ability to do otherwise, so that the free agent could (actually) have made choices other than those he made. To put the inconsistency in other terms: If we suppose that divine sovereignty entails that God has ultimate control over all events, but that libertarian free will entails that human agents have ultimate control over some events, then one proposition or the other must be false. The primary challenge for those who attempt the LRP is to show that these and all other inconsistent formulations can be avoided.

In a recent article Jack Cottrell makes an attempt at the LRP, combining a strongly worded formulation of divine sovereignty with a standard account of libertarian free will.¹⁴ According to Cottrell, God freely chose to make a world that is “relatively independent” of him but that is nonetheless a world over which he exercises “total control.” God’s control is not entirely deterministic, but Cottrell believes it nonetheless deserves to be called “control.” As he puts it, “many things *are* directly determined by God, but most occur according to his permissive will or through his nondeterminative influence.”¹⁵ God maintains his control over this relatively free world “through his *foreknowledge* and through his *intervention* in creaturely affairs whenever this is necessary to accomplish his purposes.”¹⁶

In Cottrell’s view, God’s special providence includes interventions even in the free choices of human agents:

¹⁴ J W Cottrell, “The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty,” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man A Case for Arminianism* (ed C H Pinnock, Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1989) 97–119

¹⁵ *Ibid* 111

¹⁶ *Ibid*

Still, through the subtle manipulation of such laws and of mental states, God is able to produce variations in nature and bring about free-will decisions that would not have occurred otherwise. The result is something similar to determinism's redefined notion of free will, as discussed above and dismissed as not being truly free. That is, I am granting here that through his special providence God brings about sets of circumstances calculated to influence people to make particular decisions that will serve his purposes.¹⁷

To read Cottrell is to feel the power of the logical tension between divine sovereignty and the libertarian view of human freedom. There is a sense that something has to give, to break apart—and it does. After insisting that God can maintain total control over his relatively free world, partly through special interventions aimed at influencing people to make particular decisions that will serve his purposes, Cottrell reminds his readers that libertarian free will conditions even God's special providence. As he puts it, "the manipulated circumstances do not infallibly produce the desired result; because the individual's will is truly free, he can resist and act to the contrary."¹⁸ In other words, God's influence is as Cottrell described it: "nondeterminative." Applying "nondeterminative influence"—that is, respecting the libertarian free will of his creatures—God cannot bring it about that people make the particular choices that will serve his purposes. As Cottrell has explained things, then, God cannot guarantee that all his purposes will be achieved, and thus it makes no sense to say that he is in "total control" of the world.

What Cottrell has sketched cannot be a genuine reconciliation of the sovereignty/freedom tension because it fails to give a convincing, Biblically-grounded formulation of divine sovereignty. He uses the language of a very strong view of sovereignty, but his libertarian beliefs prevent him from taking that language seriously. To use his own terms, Cottrell fails to show that God can have total control of a world containing creatures who enjoy libertarian free will. In sum, his reconciliation attempt fails the exegetical test by weakening the sovereignty concept in order to preserve the libertarian free will concept. Certainly this is not Cottrell's intention, but it is his result. For the libertarian the uncompromising, morality-grounding categorical freedom of the human agent comes first, and divine sovereignty must be understood in a way consistent with that freedom. Cottrell gives us no reason to suppose that this is possible. There are, however, other recent attempts at the LRP, perhaps the most notable of which is found in the revival of Molinism, named after the Spanish Jesuit thinker Luis de Molina (1535–1600).

Contemporary Molinists make effective use of Molina's theory of God's "middle knowledge" by which God is said to know what any possible agent would freely choose to do in any given set of circumstances. One of these Molinists, William Lane Craig, applies divine middle knowledge to the LRP in a very straightforward way:

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 112.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The world view of the Bible involves a very strong conception of divine sovereignty, even as it presupposes human freedom and responsibility. Reconciling these two doctrines without compromising either has proven extraordinarily difficult. But Molina's theory of middle knowledge furnishes a startling solution to this enigma. Since God knows prior to his decision to create what any possible creature would do in any possible circumstances, God in deciding what creatures to create and which circumstances to bring about or permit ultimately controls and directs the course of world history to his desired ends, yet without violating in any way the freedom of his creatures.¹⁹

Craig goes on to explain that God uses his middle knowledge to select which possible world to actualize, a possible world including free agents who will act precisely as God knows they will act—and yet act freely. God chooses his own interventions in this world according to his middle knowledge of just how his free creatures would respond to this or that particular initiative on his part. For Craig's Molinism, then, there is no possibility of a human agent's free choice frustrating the divine purposes. Given God's middle knowledge, even the sinful acts of human beings "will fit into the overall scheme of things so that God's ultimate ends in human history will be accomplished."²⁰

The concept of divine middle knowledge confers an ontological status on conditional future contingents—that is, on future libertarian free choices that will occur if certain other things occur. For instance, it will be true from eternity that if God creates a world containing Judas Iscariot, and if the chief priests offer him thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus, then he will freely choose to take them up on their offer. God knows this through his "most profound and inscrutable comprehension of each free will" by which he discerns "what each such would do with its innate freedom were it to be placed in this or that, or, indeed, in infinitely many orders of things—even though it would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite."²¹

There are serious difficulties with the concept of middle knowledge.²² I will comment on just one of them, a difficulty that is particularly pertinent to those such as Craig who wish to use middle knowledge as the key to an LRP attempt. The problem is that it can be argued that middle knowledge is inconsistent with libertarian free will. To understand this argument it will help to supplement my earlier definitions of libertarian free will with one that uses the language of possible worlds:

¹⁹ W. L. Craig, "Middle Knowledge: A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?", *Grace* (ed. Pinnock) 152. For a detailed account of Molinism cf. A. J. Freddoso's introduction to Molina's *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1988).

²⁰ Craig, "Middle Knowledge" 155.

²¹ Molina, *Divine*, disputation 52, para 9, 168.

²² For discussions of some of these difficulties cf. Freddoso, "Introduction" 62–81, L. T. Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1991) 141–152. For a writer who argues that the concept of middle knowledge is not as helpful to Christian theology as its proponents suppose cf. D. Basinger, "Divine Control and Human Freedom: Is Middle Knowledge the Answer?", *JETS* 36 (March 1993) 55–64.

Someone makes a free choice if and only if he makes a choice (*C*) in the actual world, and there is a possible world such that he does not make *C* in this possible world and everything in this possible world except his making *C* and the consequences of his making *C* is the same as in the actual world.²³

If we apply this definition to the choice Judas makes to betray Jesus, we will affirm that there is a possible world in which Judas chooses not to betray Jesus. In other words, if Judas has libertarian freedom with respect to his choice about betraying Jesus, then there is nothing in Judas or in his circumstances that determines that he makes the choice he makes. It is psychologically possible that he choose otherwise than he does. But if God by his middle knowledge knows that Judas would betray Jesus, that he would do so in any possible world containing the relevant circumstances, then there is no possible world in which Judas chooses to refrain from betraying Jesus. Libertarian free will requires that there be a possible world in which Judas refrains, so it follows that the concept of divine middle knowledge contradicts the very account of freedom it was devised to support.

In fact, rather than implying libertarian free will the middle knowledge concept could be taken to imply compatibilist free will. Molina affirms that God by his middle knowledge knows what a possible creature would choose in a given set of circumstances, even though this creature would really be able, if it so willed, to do the opposite. Although Molina is a libertarian, his language here could be interpreted in terms of the compatibilist notion of the hypothetical ability to choose (and do) otherwise. Taking that line we could say that a possible creature in any set of possible circumstances could choose otherwise than it would, if it preferred to. But God knows that it would not prefer to, and this knowledge of God rests on his comprehension of the possible creature's nature, character, and the like, in relation to a particular possible set of circumstances. God can be certain that this possible creature would not choose otherwise, because God knows it to lack the categorical ability to choose otherwise. The creature's freedom is the freedom to act on the preference it has (compatibilism) rather than the categorical freedom to perform a given act or to refrain from performing it (libertarianism). This line is the one taken by Leibniz in his "best of all possible worlds" CRP of the *Theodicy*.

Neither Molina nor contemporary Molinists such as Craig would accept my compatibilist reading of middle knowledge. They would say that by his "natural knowledge" God knows that, for instance, Judas could exercise his libertarian free will either to betray Jesus or to refrain from betraying Jesus. In this sense Molinism appears to allow for a possible world in which Judas refrains from betraying Jesus, just as libertarianism requires. But this is no more convincing than Cottrell's assertion that in his view of things it is fair to say that God has "total control" of the world. If by his middle knowledge God knows that there is no possible world in which Judas would refrain from

²³ J. M. Boyle, Jr., G. Grisez and O. Tollefsen, *Free Choice: A Self-Referential Argument* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1976) 11.

betraying Jesus, it seems that the choice of refraining is impossible—psychologically—for Judas. And that is just what a compatibilist would say.

It appears that neither Cottrell with his notion of sovereignty as God's total control over a relatively independent world nor Craig with his Molinism has come up with a successful libertarian reconciliation of divine sovereignty and human freedom. Cottrell's attempt faithfully affirms libertarianism, but it is unconvincing in its account of divine sovereignty and thus fails the exegetical test. Craig's more intellectually ambitious attempt appears to pass both the internal consistency and the exegetical tests, but ironically it may not be an instance of the LRP (though intended as such) since it is arguable that it implies the falsity of the libertarian free will concept. I am not aware of libertarian reconciliation attempts that are any more successful than these two, and I suspect that the prospects for a genuine LRP reconciliation are bleak. The tension between the Biblical notion of divine sovereignty and the philosophical notion of libertarian free will is probably ineradicable, which suggests either that there is hope for a successful compatibilist reconciliation project or else the need for a return to the appeal to paradox.

The CRP employs the compatibilist account of free will, according to which freedom is compatible with determinism in the sense that the agent's free choice is determined by his character and circumstances. To put this another way: Compatibilist thinkers maintain that the free agent has the hypothetical ability to choose (and do) otherwise than he actually does. As I said in my discussion of Molinism, this means that the agent would have done otherwise if he had wanted to. What the compatibilist is doing here is to equate free will with the agent's acting on his preference. In other words, a free choice is to be understood as the agent's choosing to do whatever matters most to him at the time of choice. If compatibilism had a motto it would probably be "What you are will always determine what you do."

There is a clear logical inconsistency between this compatibilist account of freedom and the libertarian account. According to libertarianism a free choice is such that its agent could (actually) have refrained from choosing it. But according to compatibilism a free choice is such that its agent could not (actually) have refrained from choosing it, since it expressed the agent's actual preference at the time of choice. Not only is there no rational alternative to these logically opposed accounts, there is no splitting the difference between them. An agent's free will, supposing there really is free will, must be either a categorical ability or a hypothetical ability.

For thinkers who opt for compatibilism and so undertake the CRP, the primary intellectual challenge lies not with the internal consistency or exegetical tests but with the more controversial moral intuition test. Given the fact that the compatibilist account of human freedom is logically consistent with determinist theories of reality, including the strictest possible theological determinism, it is fairly easy to demonstrate an internal consistency in the "strong sovereignty with compatibilist freedom" set of propositions. The CRP does not require a deterministic interpretation of divine sovereignty since compatibilism calls for choices caused by the agent's character

and not caused by God, even indirectly. It can, however, be adapted to as strong a view of sovereignty as anyone thinks is warranted by the Biblical texts and Christian theological tradition. The first two tests, then, are no problem for the CRP, although they are a serious problem for the LRP. It is the third test, the moral intuition test, that is thought to be (and is) the real difficulty for those attempting the CRP.

What the moral intuition test demands is that a reliable account of free will provide believable grounds for the ascription of all the normal moral predicates, such as right and wrong, good and evil, praiseworthy and blameworthy. That, after all, is the point of theories of human freedom: to ground the responsibility that most human beings daily take for granted and that is presupposed throughout the Biblical texts. The compatibilist says that the free agent's character determines his choice and that given the antecedent conditions neither the character nor the choice could be any different from what they are. Not only libertarian thinkers but also many persons with no particular philosophical bent find this compatibilist position to be at odds with their deepest sense of genuine moral responsibility. In the clash of moral intuitions, sheer numbers seem to be on the side of the libertarian, so it really will not do for the compatibilist to resort to the "I have different moral intuitions from you" defense. If there is to be a genuine compatibilist reconciliation of the sovereignty/freedom tension, then compatibilists must take the moral intuition test seriously. This will require work on the compatibilist account of freedom itself, and that means replacing what I call "classical compatibilism" with something better, as I will explain below. In doing this, the compatibilist must keep in mind the possibility I have already mentioned—namely, that the libertarian-compatibilist intellectual split may arise from an ineradicable difference between the deepest moral intuitions of the persons involved, with the result that no generally acceptable sovereignty/freedom reconciliation could ever be achieved.

In his treatise *The Freedom of the Will*, Jonathan Edwards attempts the CRP by using a version of old, or "classical," compatibilism.²⁴ He combines a very strong view of divine sovereignty with what he took to be the ordinary, everyday meaning of human freedom, which he describes in this way:

The plain and obvious meaning of the words "freedom" and "liberty," in common speech, is power, opportunity, or advantage, that anyone has, to do as he pleases. Or in other words, his being free from hindrance or impediment in the way of doing, or conducting in any respect, as he wills. And the contrary to liberty, whatever name we call that by, is a person's being hindered or unable to conduct as he will, or being necessitated to do otherwise.²⁵

In this passage Edwards incorporates the two standard elements of classical compatibilism: (1) the idea that freedom is simply doing as one pleases (or

²⁴ For a standard edition of this work see J. Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (ed. P. Ramsey; New Haven: Yale University, 1957). For another CRP attempt using the old compatibilism cf. G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy* (ed. A. Farrer; LaSalle: Open Court, 1985).

²⁵ Edwards, *Freedom* 163.

acting on one's preference), and (2) the idea that freedom entails the absence of restraint and constraint.

The possible objections to this old compatibilism are many, and they have been extensively discussed for many years. One standard objection maintains that the mere fact that an agent acts on his preference or does "as he pleases" is insufficient to sustain attributions of moral responsibility. It is insufficient (so runs the objection) because the agent may have had nothing to do with acquiring the preferences he has. They may have been induced in him without his knowledge or consent, perhaps by subtle forms of social conditioning. What the agent supposes to be his own choosing may be nothing more than preferences generated in his unconscious by experiences from his early childhood. He is acting on his preferences, but he is not acting freely—at least not in any morality-grounding sense of "freely"—because it is not clear that his preferences are really his. Objections of this sort are readily transferred to a theological setting in which the divine sovereignty manipulates the mental life of an agent so that he will have those preferences, and only those, that God wishes him to have, making God a sort of cosmic puppeteer.

Nothing Edwards offers in his treatise, nor anything else based entirely on classical compatibilism, has much chance of overturning the standard objections. A new, contemporary compatibilism is needed that is strong enough to answer objections to classical compatibilism in a way that will make it possible for a CRP attempt to pass the moral intuition test. Anyone working on this will find it necessary to turn primarily to philosophers rather than to theologians, and in fact to philosophers with few if any theological concerns. This is not surprising, given that libertarianism is by far the more popular view of free will among contemporary theologians and religious inclined philosophers, while compatibilism has been much in favor among philosophers generally.

For a thinker attempting the CRP, contemporary compatibilism must do two things. (1) It must account for free will in a way that removes the fears about divine sovereignty overwhelming human agency and thus voiding human moral responsibility. In other words, it must do away with visions of cosmic puppeteers. (2) It must describe free will in such terms as to make it believable that a choice could be determined by antecedent conditions and yet still be free.

The problem with cosmic puppeteers and similar agents is that if we take them seriously they will interfere with our intuitions about freedom and responsibility. If we are puppets, we are not free. And if we are not free, we are not responsible. Daniel Dennett mounts a compatibilist defense against cosmic puppeteer-like bugbears in the philosophical literature, and I will adapt his line of argument to the sovereignty/freedom theological context.²⁶ In terms of the free-will debate, the point of bugbears like cosmic puppeteers, mad scientists, clever hypnotists and so on is to arouse our moral

²⁶ See D C Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge MIT, 1984) chap 1

sense against the belief that determined choices can be free choices. A strongly sovereign God would be the ultimate bugbear who reduces human beings to mere parodies of free agents, or so it would seem. If God is the ultimate determiner of our choices, then we are no more free than puppets.

Dennett asks, quite reasonably, why we should pick scary-sounding superagents such as cosmic puppeteers rather than more reassuring agents like, say, "great cosmic teachers" or "benevolent revealers of truth." It offends our moral sense to think of ourselves as puppets, but not to think of ourselves as, for instance, students. A compatibilist theologian might maintain that a God who is strongly sovereign infallibly brings about certain human choices by granting human agents insight and understanding of truth. The agent's choice is determined by this grant of understanding, but is nonetheless free. In fact it is free only because it rests on seen truth. As Brand Blanshard says in a similar connection: "For a rational being to act under the influence of seen necessity is to place himself at the farthest possible extreme from the behavior of a puppet."²⁷ This will not satisfy a committed libertarian, for there is no categorical freedom here. It does, however, suggest that compatibility as such is not susceptible to bugbear charges. There is something intuitively appealing about a determined choice when that choice is determined by a vision of the truth. A God who indirectly determines human choices by acting as a cosmic teacher is no bugbear, and choices determined in this way at least are not obviously or intuitively unfree.

If we set aside any worries about cosmic agents, there still remains the task of giving a compatibilist account of free choices in a way that will make it believable to say that they are determined and yet are free in the sense that grounds moral responsibility. This requires a formulation that will meet the stipulation of Charles Hodge that the agent's "volitions are truly and properly his own" and of Susan Wolf that the agent's will be "wholly and deeply her own."²⁸ Classical compatibilism always insisted on the agent's ownership of his choices, so that it would be appropriate to attribute responsibility to the agent for those choices. The problem was, and is, how to justify the claim to ownership in the absence of the libertarian's categorical ability to choose A or not-A. In the current literature, some compatibilist philosophers are attempting to meet that challenge with strong "rationality" accounts of human freedom in which a compatibilist free choice is a conscious, deliberate, intelligent choice and is thus properly said to be owned or controlled by the agent. Richard Double offers a recent account of this type.²⁹

Double's version of compatibilism lays down five conditions that must be met in order for an agent's choice to be considered free.³⁰ (1) The agent

²⁷ B. Blanshard, *Reason and Analysis* (LaSalle Open Court, 1962) 492-493

²⁸ C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London James Clarke, 1960) 2 285, S. Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason* (Oxford Oxford University, 1990) 13

²⁹ R. Double, *The Non-Reality of Free Will* (Oxford Oxford University, 1991), esp chap 2. Double develops a strong view of compatibilism, but then rejects the idea that any account of free will could correspond to a real property of human beings

³⁰ *Ibid* 48

must know the nature of his own beliefs, desires, and other mental states. This self-knowledge will preclude the self-deception that can overturn freedom. (2) The agent desires when appropriate to perform a careful evaluation of his proposed choice and of the mental states that might bring it about. The point of this is that the agent, to be truly free, must desire to act on the truth as far as the truth can be known. (3) The agent's reasoning about his proposed choices must meet normative standards of intellectual skill—that is, the agent must be intelligent and act intelligently. (4) The agent must have the power at each step in his decision-making process to produce subsequent deliberations that are in accord with the first three conditions for free choice. Double calls this the "efficacy" requirement. (5) To overcome worries about personal identity Double requires that the agent making the choice be a single agent whose identity is maintained throughout the deliberative process.

As Double notes, many human choices fall short of the requirements he makes for a choice to count as a compatibilistic free choice. There is good reason to suppose that freedom is often a matter of degree and that at least some of what human agents do is not free at all. Libertarians and compatibilists agree on this last point and so are united in believing that an agent can be morally responsible for the conduct of his life without having freely chosen every bit of his behavior over the course of that life. An advocate of the CRP might suggest that God so arranges things that he guarantees for human agents that a significant number of their choices will be attended by a high enough degree of compatibilistic freedom to ground their moral responsibility for their lives.

Given these recent developments in compatibilism, there may be hope for a genuine compatibilist reconciliation of the sovereignty/freedom tension. Attempts at the CRP start with the advantage of having no difficulty with the internal consistency or exegetical tests, so all that remains is the persistent moral intuition test. The problem here is that so many people suppose that moral intuition is clearly and obviously opposed to the CRP. If what they suppose were true, then there would be no hope for a successful compatibilist reconciliation project. To counter this moral intuition charge, all that is logically necessary for the CRP's apologist is to show that moral intuition is not clearly and obviously opposed to the CRP. And the groundwork for this, I believe, has already been done in the work of thinkers such as Dennett and Double. It remains for theological thinkers of a compatibilist bent to see if they can use this work in the development of a successful compatibilist reconciliation.

There is hope here, but it may not be much hope. Even if the compatibilist theologian's CRP passes the moral intuition test in the weak sense I have suggested by avoiding clear and obvious conflict with moral intuition, this might not be enough to relieve the doubts of the libertarian. The libertarian might reasonably argue that just because a CRP that is not obviously inconsistent with moral intuition is logically possible, it does not follow that such a CRP would be a plausible solution to the sovereignty/freedom tension. The libertarian is likely to demand a CRP with a high degree of moral plausibility, and this is something the compatibilist is unlikely to deliver.

Doubts of various kinds run right through any serious exploration of the sovereignty/freedom tension, so that it is fair to say that this standard theological problem generates another and perhaps deeper problem, which I have called the “paradox/reason” tension. The appeal to paradox seems to respect our doubts through recognizing human epistemic limits, particularly in matters of theological import. All the same, this appeal is epistemically dogmatic in asserting that a genuine sovereignty/freedom reconciliation is known to be impossible. As I have argued, that assertion is subject to doubt, so the appeal to paradox is probably a failure. It appears that reconciliation is not known to be impossible, and that is all it takes to justify the appeal to reason. But a justified appeal to reason is no guarantee that a genuine sovereignty/freedom reconciliation can—much less will—be achieved. The libertarian reconciliation project probably rests on a conception of human freedom that is hopelessly inconsistent with any Biblically adequate account of divine sovereignty, and the compatibilist reconciliation project continues to elicit doubts about the adequacy of compatibilism to ground the moral responsibility of human agents.

What all of this comes to is that we cannot dogmatically affirm that the sovereignty/freedom tension is an (epistemic) paradox, nor can we dogmatically affirm that it is not. In practical terms this means that we are justified in attempting the reconciliation task, although only as an intellectual venture whose success remains in doubt.