They Ask Too Much: Libertarian Desert Responsibility and the Demand for Control of Existence

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Abstract

The freedom that those who defend libertarian freedom of the will want, whether on Arminian foreknowledge or Molinist middle knowledge, is a freedom impossible on every level. This paper presses their own standard for desert responsibility consistently. If desert requires that the agent be the ultimate source of what makes him blameworthy, then he must also be the ultimate source of the fact that there is an agent to blame. Creation is the first and most decisive condition of responsibility, and no creature authorized his own existence. I call this the existence problem for libertarian desert. Ultimacy taken at full strength is a demand for aseity, which belongs to God alone, and the same demand returns under preservation, for no creature begins or sustains himself or the natural order. On their criteria the charge that a determining God is a moral monster does not vanish when their freedom is granted; it relocates to the act of creation and to God's sustaining of the creature. I do not grant that conclusion. The impossibility is a defect in the demand, not in divine justice, and the demand echoes the serpent's question in the garden. They ask too much. The coherent alternative is a compatibilist-like frame, though not the compatibilism of modern treatments: the creature is a real secondary cause, contingent diachronically and synchronically, under an atemporal God, and the Westminster Confession and Turretin's necessity of the consequence show how the decree secures what comes to pass without coaction and without taking away creaturely liberty.

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I. The Freedom They Want

The kind of freedom that those who pursue, demand, and defend libertarian freedom of the will want, based on either Arminian foreknowledge, or Molinist middle knowledge, is a type of freedom impossible on every level. That is not an overstatement. It is the plain conclusion that follows when their own standards for desert responsibility are pressed consistently, without the usual exemptions that keep God, creation, and the sustaining of the natural order out of the ledger. They are demanding an autonomy they do not fully get even in their own systems, because—though they have not realized it—the only way to have that freedom is to have overseen one's own existence. Let me be plainer. By "overseen," I mean that one must have participated in creation, or at least been consulted over it, and then involved in sustaining that creation.

Some softer version of determinism is necessary, if they will allow the word or concept at all, unless they can figure out how to create and sustain themselves in creation. This holds for both the Arminian and Molinist views. It is subject to the same deterministic claims: God chose to create this particular world by his foreknowledge, or middle knowledge of what creatures with complete libertarian freedom would do. If God chose to actualize this world and not some other, how is he not ultimately responsible for the choices and decisions of those he will judge and hold accountable in this world? Those advocating libertarian free will (LFW) within these frameworks can claim to explain by referring to God's maximal greatness in choosing the world where the most of humanity would be saved, but that claim and attempted explanation falls on deaf ears when spoken to those who do not presently believe. The lost hear only the words the LFW camp is fond of using toward Calvinists, i.e. "moral monster", but it is now directed at them. And based on the conditions and stated purposes of the LFW camp, the accusation would be

legitimate because the next question will be “then, why did he create me at all, or why did I not get the benefit of being consulted on it if I am to be held responsible?”.

I mean this in the ordinary sense in which a person is held answerable for what he has done. Libertarian accounts of free will typically insist that desert responsibility—praise and blame, reward and punishment, condemnation and acquittal that the agent truly *deserves*—requires a kind of ultimate self-determination. The agent must be the decisive source of the choice beyond what is actually required to be the decisive choice. The past, the environment, the divine decree, and the created nature itself must not settle or be involved in the matter. Something like an uncaused or self-caused turn of the will must remain, or else responsibility collapses into excuse according to their scheme. That is the demand in its bare form. And once it is stated that way, the question is not whether the demand sounds noble. The question is whether any creature can meet it.

They cannot. The difficulty is not merely that libertarian freedom is hard to square with providence, or with a fallen will enslaved to sin, or with the federal headship of Adam. Those are serious matters, and they matter. But the deeper difficulty is prior. Before anyone deliberates, chooses, sins, or stands under judgment, someone other than the agent has already brought that agent into being. Existence itself is given. The stage is set. The agent did not authorize his own appearance in the story. And if the standard for desert is that nothing outside the agent may determine the conditions under which he becomes answerable for the agent to be answerable, then creation itself already breaks the standard.

Call this the existence problem for libertarian desert. It is easy to miss because debates about free will usually start midstream: with a formed agent already standing at a fork, already able to speak, already inside a moral world. The libertarian then asks whether that agent's choice is

determined, and with no willingness to consider any nuance in defining that word. But the more searching question is how that agent got into the situation at all, and whether a desert theory that refuses every determining condition outside the will can tolerate the determining condition of having been made and currently being sustained—made and sustained by a being who is himself outside of time (atemporal), able to comprehend all of time at a moment by being outside of it, and who has perfect knowledge. If the theory cannot, then the freedom the theory is defending was never available to creatures. It was a freedom fit only for a being who needs no Creator.

II. Control of Existence as the Hidden Price of Libertarian Desert

In essence, you cannot say that libertarian freedom of the will is necessary for desert responsibility without also requiring control over existence. That means control over whether you exist at all, control over how that existence presents itself circumstantially, and so on. Why? Because if someone had not created you, you would not be in the position to be held responsible in the first place. The position of responsibility is not a pure product of the will. It is a position occupied by a creature who did not invent himself, did not choose his nature, did not arrange the world into which he was born, and did not decide whether there would be a moral order at all. Press the libertarian requirement honestly. If desert requires that the agent be the ultimate source of what makes him blameworthy, then the agent must also be the ultimate source of the fact that there is an agent to blame. Otherwise the chain of conditions that make blame possible begins outside him. Creation is not a minor preface. It is the first and most decisive condition. Without it, there is no choice, no fall, no guilt, no condemnation. With it, there is already a Creator whose act places the creature in the arena where desert is even thinkable. Under the libertarian requirements as I see them, God at least bears some level of responsibility because he chose to create—to create this specific world—and did.

So the libertarian who makes libertarian freedom of the will (LFW) necessary for desert responsibility has already, without noticing it, made control over one's own existence necessary as well. That is the autonomy they want and do not get—not even on paper in their own systems. They describe a will that must be free of determining causes; they do not mention in that description a will that authored or sustains its own being. Yet the second follows from the first if the first is treated as a strict condition of desert. A freedom that begins only after creation has already happened is a freedom that begins too late for the kind of ultimate freedom they demand. Look more carefully at what ultimacy actually costs. When the demand is that the creature be the uncaused source of his own choices—not merely a real chooser, but the final originator—the demand has already crossed from creaturely agency into something else. Self-existence belongs to the uncreated. Classical Christian metaphysics has long marked that as aseity: God alone is from Himself; the creature is from Another. To insist on libertarian ultimacy as the price of desert is, in effect, to insist that the blamed agent possess an attribute that belongs only to a being who needs no Maker. The freedom they want is not simply undetermined choice. It is a freedom that would require the agent to stand where only the self-existent stands.

The antecedents make the same point from the ground up. The creature did not choose his DNA, his time or place of birth, his first inclinations, the structure of his mind, or the stream of inputs that form his desires. If choices flow from character and desire, and the creature did not fashion that character and those desires from scratch, then—on the sense of ultimacy their desert theory requires—the chain of what settles the choice is already grounded outside him. To be the ultimate source of the choice in the sense their desert theory requires, he would have to be the ultimate source of himself—a cause of himself. That is not an exaggeration. It is what "ultimate" does when it is not watered down. Either the creature is “causa sui” in the relevant respect, or

ultimacy fails before the first deliberated act is ever named. The demand for control of existence remains load-bearing here on its own terms; the scholastic refusal of self-origination only corroborates the impossibility. Turretin, proving a first unproduced Being from the subordination of causes, states the point without ornament: nothing can be the cause of itself—"nihil potest esse causa sui".[1] That reference is cosmological, not a dedicated treatise on libertarian ultimacy. It is enough, narrowly, to mark that self-causation is already absurd on the page where the first cause is demonstrated. The creature who must be *causa sui* in order to deserve blame under their standard is asking for what that demonstration already rules out. That is not to say that the libertarians admit or even recognize this, but it is to iterate that their qualifications for desert responsibility require it.

Would it not be better for the person held responsible and condemned never to have been created? That question is not a joke, and it is not a sentimental dodge. It is the moral pressure their own standard generates. If condemnation is intolerable unless the agent controlled every decisive condition of his culpability, then the creation of a being who can fall, be judged, and be punished looks like the first injustice. The person who ends under wrath did not ask to exist under the conditions that make wrath possible. On their terms, that is enough to reopen the charge they so often bring against God according to the compatibilists' understanding.

Notice how far the logic travels once it is allowed to move. It is not only that a particular bad choice was not "up to" the agent in the libertarian sense. It is that the whole career of responsibility—being someone who can be praised or blamed—was never up to him in the sense their desert theory requires. He did not vote for creaturehood. He did not consent to the possibility of fall and judgment. He was placed. In their sense of liberty, placement by another is

1 Franciscus Turrettinus, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, Pars Prima (Edinburgh: John D. Lowe, 1847), 154 (Loc. III Q.I §VI): "Nam si certum esse debet et indubitatum, nihil a seipso fieri, et nihil esse sui ipsius causam, quia sic foret seipso prius et posterius;… Non a se quia ut jam dictum, nihil potest esse causa sui;"

already enough to void desert, so no placed creature is ever justly condemned. That is the hidden cost of making libertarian freedom necessary for desert responsibility: either the creature controls existence, or desert never gets off the ground. If it does, the claim of being a "moral monster" leveled at those who take a compatibilist view still lands on them, too.

III. The Moral-Monster Charge Rebound

So again, God is to blame—and the moral monster these critics have claimed—if they are denied their version of freedom. Notice what has happened. The accusation that a determining God is a moral monster is supposed to force the conclusion that libertarian freedom must be real, or else divine justice collapses. But if libertarian desert-freedom demands the level of control they require, that control would necessarily include existence, and creatures do not have that control, so the same accusation lands whether or not one grants them their preferred metaphysics of the will. Deny them LFW, and God is the monster for holding them responsible even with the freedom they demand. Grant the logic of their desert requirement consistently, and God is still the monster for creating them into a position of responsibility they did not authorize. The charge does not vanish when their freedom is affirmed in theory. It relocates to the act of creation itself. That rebound is not a clever trick. It is what their standard does when it is not selectively applied. They want to say: no desert without libertarian freedom. They do not want to say: no desert without self-creation. But the second is the unacknowledged twin of the first. If ultimate sourcehood is the price of desert, then ultimate sourcehood of existence is part of the price. They ask for the first and quietly assume the second can be ignored. It cannot.

And they can’t argue accurately that God owes no one salvation as a way of shrugging off the difficulty. God owes no one salvation; that remains true. Punishable guilt remains real where the creature sins. The point here is narrower and sharper: the libertarian desert criterion, taken at full

force, cannot stop at the moment of choice. It reaches backward into the conditions that make choice and condemnation possible. And once it reaches that far, the "moral monster" objection becomes a weapon that cuts the hand that wields it. The demand that was meant to protect the creature from unjust blame ends up indicting the Creator for having made any blameable creature at all.

IV. Sustaining the Order: Causation They Cannot Escape

Additionally, some level of causation is absolutely necessary, given that humanity cannot begin and sustain the natural order. This is not a speculative theology point. It is a plain fact about creatures. We do not start the world. We do not keep the world running. We do not hold atoms together, preserve the regularity of nature, or maintain the continuity of our own lives from one moment to the next by an independent power. Whatever account one gives of secondary causes, the creature is not the first cause of the created order, and the creature is not its final sustainer. Their accusation of a moral monster lands again at this point, because God sustains the created order. Creation is not a wound clock left to tick on its own. The powers of intellect and will by which a human being deliberates and chooses are finite powers, upheld moment by moment by the Primary Cause. Continuous preservation is itself a form of divine causal involvement without which there would be no agents left to choose. To be consistent, God's ongoing causation is treated as disqualifying for desert—because it means the creature's life and powers depend on Another—so desert is already impossible in any world God keeps in being. If, on the other hand, sustaining causation is allowed while determining decree is not, the distinction needs a reason that does not simply beg the question. Why is the God who upholds the sinner's existence compatible with desert, while the God who also orders the ends of that existence is not? The selective outrage is doing more work than the principle.

Absolute self-determination independent of divine concurrence would therefore require more than an undetermined flick of the will at the point of decision. It would require self-sustaining existence. Otherwise the very ability to choose at this moment is contingent upon God sustaining the chooser in existence at this moment. The libertarian who wants ultimacy without dependence has already asked for aseity again, only now under the heading of preservation rather than origin. Same demand. Same impossibility for a creature. Reformed orthodoxy, speaking of providence rather than of desert theory, already refuses the inference that divine concurrence empties the second cause. Providence does not take away the contingency of things with respect to the second cause, nor overturn the liberty of the will: the hypothetical necessity of the decree inflicts no coaction on the will, but permits it to exercise its motions most freely, though inevitably; and the concurrence of the first cause does not exclude the concurrence of second causes—it draws them after itself.[2] That is not a license for libertarian ultimacy. It is the older grammar in which dependence on the Primary Cause and real second-cause agency are held together without pretending the creature sustains himself. The simultaneity of the adverbs "freely" and "inevitably" is not a contradistinctive concept as the libertarians would have us believe.

In order for their version of libertarian freedom to work under their own desert requirements, they would need to sustain that created order themselves, or to be brought into the deliberation over whether to maintain a creation where fallen humanity could be judged responsible, condemned, and eternally punished—or pack it up. That is the honest extension of the demand. Either the creature must occupy the Creator's seat as sustainer, or the creature must sit at the table where the decision is made: keep a world in which the fallen can be held to account, or shut the

2 Turrettinus, *Institutio* (Lowe, 1847), 442 (Loc. VI Q.I §IX): "Providentia Dei, nec contingentiam rerum tollit, quia remanet semper indifferens respectu causae secundae, quod necessarium fit per Providentiam, respectu causae primae. Nec libertatem voluntatis evertit, quia necessitas hypothetica decreti, nullam infert coactionem voluntati, sed eam liberrime, licet inevitabiliter, sinit motus suos exercere." And: "nec concursus causae primae excludit concursum secundarum, imo eum post se trahit;"

whole thing down. Short of that, the conditions of responsibility remain conditions the creature did not choose and cannot maintain.

How is it fair that we can be condemned when God is responsible for maintaining this working order to begin with? How can we be held responsible when this is His fault, if their requirements for desert responsibility are kept? Those questions are theirs, once their standard is followed out. I do not grant the conclusion that God is at fault. I grant that *their* criteria force that conclusion. The injustice they claim to detect in divine judgment is an injustice generated by a requirement no creature can meet and no Creator can satisfy without ceasing to be Creator. If desert requires that God neither create nor sustain the one who will be judged, then desert requires that there be no judged creature at all. That is not a defense of human dignity. It is the abolition of the moral world under the banner of fairness.

Put the two pressures together—creation and sustenance—and the pattern is the same. The libertarian desert criterion keeps discovering divine causation wherever a creature lives long enough to be judged, and then treats that discovery as a scandal. But a world without that causation is not a freer moral world. It is no world. Humanity cannot begin the natural order and cannot keep it. Some level of causation above the creature is not an optional theological extra; it is the condition of there being human agents at all. To suggest that condition as a moral defect in God, while demanding in a courtroom for human desert that the only alternative is to deny or ignore or reject that condition, is to want the fruit after cutting down the tree. It is more than that. It is the rejection of that which is necessary for existence, that which is necessary for God and for creation, and the subsequent rebuilding of God in our own image. What seems clear is that the libertarian is suggesting some of the same that the serpent suggested in the garden—namely, how can God hold you accountable if you eat the fruit? "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of

any tree in the garden'?"[3] is an accusation of God not being fair or reliable in his pronouncements, of God overstepping his boundaries, of God taking on an authority that free creatures should have left to themselves. Can anyone hear that hissing sound coming out of the demands for libertarian freedom? I can. "You will not surely die."[4] is an accusation that God will not and cannot hold you responsible for that. Can you hear the hissing now?

V. They Ask Too Much

Hence it begins to be obvious that they ask too much; they demand too much. Desert responsibility, according to LFW demands, cannot be had with a creator or a sustainer other than the human being held responsible. That is the end of the road for the libertarian desert program when it is not softened by special pleading. As long as there is a Creator distinct from the creature, and a created order the creature did not begin, and was not consulted on, and cannot sustain, the ultimate-sourcehood condition for desert is already broken before the first free choice is ever described. The only world in which their desert-freedom would be coherent is a world in which the responsible party is also the author and keeper of his own existence. That is not our world. It is not any world of creatures. It is the world of pride, the world the serpent demanded, the world of the original rebel against God as he exalted himself against the Most High.

What they are demanding, when the demand is stated without mercy to their own vocabulary, is not merely a robust freedom of choice. It is the shift from creature to Creator. Creaturely freedom, on any sober account, is derived, bounded, and dependent. A creature can be truly responsible, voluntary, and contingent—under a compatibilist grammar, or the older Thomistic humanist grammar—while remaining a secondary cause. Only the Creator possesses ultimate, uncaused, self-originating freedom, because only the Creator possesses self-existence and

3 Genesis 3:1 (ESV): "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

4 Genesis 3:4 (ESV): "You will not surely die."

sustains all that is. Demanding absolute libertarian independence as the prerequisite for meaningful desert is, in short, demanding to be God. It insists on creaturely status while claiming the uncreated, self-sustaining autonomy that belongs exclusively to the One who is from Himself. That is too much for a man, and it is not what justice requires of a man.

The confession that orders Reformed churches does not treat eternal ordination as a solvent of creaturely agency. God, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass—yet so as neither to author sin, nor to offer violence to the will of the creatures, nor to take away the liberty or contingency of second causes, but rather to establish them.[5] That is not a polite softening of decree. It is the confessional refusal of the very dilemma the libertarian desert program forces: either ultimate creaturely independence, or else emptied wills and canceled contingency. The confession keeps the Creator as Creator and the creature as creature, and it establishes second-cause liberty inside that order rather than outside it. The same providence that brings all things to pass immutably with respect to the First Cause orders them to fall out according to the nature of second causes—necessarily, freely, or contingently.[6] Creaturely modes remain. What is refused is the demand that the creature occupy the First Cause's seat before desert can be just. What is established alternatively, by adherence to the Biblical explanation, is a causal roadmap that recognizes the atemporal/temporal distinctions that exist between the creator and creature.

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5 *Westminster Confession of Faith* 3.1, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms… with Proof Texts* (PCA/OPC reprint; © 2005, 2007 OPC), 12: "God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

6 *Westminster Confession of Faith* 5.2, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms… with Proof Texts* (PCA/OPC reprint; © 2005, 2007 OPC), 21: "Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the First Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently."

The point of citing that confessional grammar here is not to change the subject from desert to systematics. It is to show that the tradition already had a way to refuse the false choice the libertarian desert criterion keeps offering. Eternal ordination established; creaturely will unviolated; liberty and contingency of second causes established rather than erased. If that formula is coherent—and Reformed churches have confessed it as coherent—then the demand that desert require independence from the First Cause is not the only serious moral option on the table. It is a demand that treats confessional orthodoxy as if it had already conceded the monster charge. It has not. It has located justice inside creaturehood, not beyond it.

I do not say this to make light of the pastoral weight of condemnation, or of the terror of eternal punishment, or of the ache in the question whether it would have been better never to have been born. Mercy without softness can still hear that ache. What it cannot do is rewrite the terms of creaturehood to soothe it. We are not puppets in the crude sense that libertarian polemics often invent—mindless toys jerked by invisible strings. Nor are we self-existent wills who floated into being already armed with ultimate autonomy. We are creatures: real agents, real choosers, real sinners with punishable guilt, and yet never the ground of our own being. Federal headship, secret counsel, God's permissive will, the bondage of a will enslaved to sin—these belong to the full Christian account of how responsibility and grace actually work. But even before those doctrines are opened, the libertarian demand based on the Arminian or Molinist foundation has already overreached. It asks for a freedom that would require us to be gods in order to be justly judged as men, because it makes God's decisions subject to the creature's decisions in an attempt to justify desert responsibility and frankly, to justify God.

They want desert without dependence. They want blame without a Giver of existence, unless possibly they were consulted on the existence. They want a moral court in which the defendant

authorized the courtroom, the law, the life he lived under that law, and the continued ticking of the clock that brought him to the courtroom. That is too much. It is impossible on every level—metaphysically, morally, and theologically. And the impossibility is not a defect in divine justice. It is a defect in the demand. It is a defect caused by a refusal of revelation, of Scripture—one not unlike the condemnation found in Romans 1:18, when Paul describes those "who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."[7]

LFW advocates need to earn the necessity they demand, not only name it. The opponent will grant dependence and still say: desert needs control of the choice, not control of existence. That reply only works if "control of the choice" can be sealed off from the conditions that make there be a chooser, a nature, a history of desire, and a sustained power to act. Under their own ultimacy grammar it cannot. If blame requires that the agent be the unconditioned source of what settles the act, then every prior condition that settles the act—and that the agent did not settle—is already a defeat if not understood according to the revelation of Scripture. Existence, nature, and continual sustenance are not optional scenery around an otherwise self-originating will; they are among the originators. So, either "ultimate sourcehood" is watered down to proximal voluntariness (and my target has moved), or the existence-condition is load-bearing on their standard. Those two choices are an either/or that ignore the Biblical explanation and thereby create a false dilemma. The target is desert that treats any unchosen foundation of the act as a defeat. Real Biblical desert, desert that meets the requirements of justice, desert that asks only uncoacted proximate choice has left that target. Modest leeway or compatibilism views that already deny self-creation are not refuted by the existence problem as such; they are pressed to show how sourcehood of the choice survives the unchosen foundation they also admit, but this is

7 Romans 1:18 (ESV): "who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."

not an agreement with their modern presentations either. The problems for modern compatibilism treatments need a separate treatment, but suffice it to say that these press the language of the confessions and the supposed agreement of the Reformed Orthodox heirs of Calvin too far.

Nor does the liberty the LFW advocates demand deliver the moral value they advertise. Even if every choice were undetermined in their favorite sense, the chooser would still wake inside a creation he did not author and under a providence that sustains him without his vote. He remains subject to circumstances, events, and responsibilities he neither chose nor was consulted about. The value LFW was supposed to purchase—authorship deep enough to silence every complaint—never arrives, because the creature never escapes being creature. That is why the information-objection has the shape it has: "Woe to you, Chorazin!"[8] becomes, in the mouth of Sodom, "If I had seen what Chorazin saw, I would have repented—but I was not allowed that information." The grievance is a misplaced fairness claim. It treats unequal revelation and unequal circumstance as if justice required a consultation table no creature was ever owed. This diagnosis already named the ache; it will not rewrite creaturehood to soothe it.

Push the demand one inch further and its edge shows. The cry for libertarian freedom, when it will not rest until the creature stands unconditioned by Creator and Sustainer, is not a cry for a larger human freedom. It is a demand for what only God has—aseity, self-existence, underived willing. In that sense it is older than the garden quarrel and deeper than a philosophical preference: it asks for the creature what can be true only of the Creator, and in asking it edges toward wanting something more than God, as if the throne itself were not enough unless the

8 Matthew 11:21 (ESV): "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes." See also Luke 10:12–13 (ESV): "I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes."

petitioner sat there. That is not moral seriousness. That is the old idolatry wearing the mask of fairness.

VI. The Coherent Alternative Frame

If the libertarian desert requirement of LFW advocates collapses into an impossible demand for control of existence, what remains is not fatalism and not the puppet theater of popular caricature. The coherent alternative is a compatibilist-like frame in which creature and Creator are not confused, but this is not the compatibilism of any modern treatments I have found. The creature remains a secondary cause—responsible, voluntary, contingent—without being handed the aseity that would make him the uncaused ground of his own acts. The Creator alone retains ultimate freedom, because the Creator alone is not derived.

But is that statement too strong? Is there a non-compatibilist and non-incompatibilist path? Have the Reformed Orthodox of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries already explained this or at least hinted at it? Has further work been done to present their attempts honestly? What other considerations might there be both philosophically, but more important theologically that need further consideration? I want to make a few more remarks before I attempt to answer some of these questions I believe are crucial and pivotal. Neither compatibilism or incompatibilism as currently being presented in the modern discussion may be the way.

On the creature's side, contingency is real in two related ways. Diachronically, human life moves through time: earlier moments give way to later ones, and the future unfolds in sequence relative to what has gone before. Synchronically, at the moment of choice, the creature's nature retains a real structural potency—an alternate possibility in the order of the nature itself—even when that alternate is not what comes to pass. The agent is not a stone. The will is not an empty name.

Contingency of this creaturely sort is not canceled by providence; it is the mode in which providence concerns rational agents.

On the creaturely side, I would argue a more Biblically narrated approach, one that is not new, but one often seemingly overlooked in both the compatibilism of modern treatments and their detractors in the Arminian and Pelagian and Molinist critiques. To do that, I will argue that "libertarian freedom of the will", in the sense that God does not determine the creature to sin or to choose evil or to do evil, but rather determines the "libertarian freedom of the will" experiment, for lack of a better terminology, and its resultant consequences, such that LFW properly understood is obviously a true reality. This is LFW via "hypothetical necessity" wherein the connection between God's decree (i.e. the process by which God's purpose is worked out by decree) and the event purposed is necessary (here I will be distinguishing between the event purposed being any specific decision but rather the proof that LFW is a weight unbearable by creatures, and one necessitating gracious, merciful redemption and reconciliation). This is not a new approach. It was, I contend, the argumentation of Antoine de Chandieu in the post-Calvin period.[9] Separately, it was also that of Aquinas, as Charles Trinkaus points out: "Nor is divine providence in any way a limitation of human freedom, because freedom of the will is in itself a participation in the providential government of the universe."[10] The real value of these lines of argumentation is in their accurate reflection of the Biblical portrait of Providence rendering the

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9 Antoine de Chandieu [Antonio Sadeele], *Opera theologica* ([Geneva]: Jean Le Preux, 1592), 489–90 (*Responsio ad Fidei [quam vocant] Professionem, a Monachis Burdegalensibus editam*, Art. XLV): "Quanquam enim, secundum naturalem volendi facultatem, voluntas sit libera: homo tamen, in natura sua consideratus, delectatur malo, & hoc appetit tantopere (**non coactè** quidem, hac enim impossibile, sed **libentissimè**) ut eius voluntas tota serviat & mancipetur peccato. Itaque necesse est ut Spiritus sancti vis & efficacia nos boni cognitione instruat, efficiatque ut hoc velimus"; "…quae non libera esse non potest: alioquin non esset Voluntas, si cogeretur: siquidem opponuntur **Coactio & Voluntas**. Nam **Cogi est Nolle**"; "Libertatem dicere possumus **à Necessitate** eò quòd Necessarium videtur esse Contrarium Voluntario"; "Doctrina autem haec Bernardi ex Augustino desumpta est, qui expressis verbis ait, **Gratiam non tollere Liberum Arbitrium**…" Art. XLV continues; only pp. 489–490 are cited here.

10 Charles Trinkaus, "The Problem of Free Will in the Renaissance and the Reformation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10, no. 1 (January 1949): 51–62, at 53 (summarizing Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.113; cf. III.73).

outcomes of history infallible according to the purposes of God while not destroying the contingent or voluntary nature of human decisions and willing. This did not and does not mean "freedom from God's sovereign decree", but "freedom in and sustained by God's sovereign decree", i.e. freedom guaranteed and made possible by the sovereign decree—not different than modern demands for LFW in experience but different in foundation.

On God's side, the frame is different because God is not a temporal item among others. God is atemporal: not one more actor waiting in the timeline for the creature's turn, but the One whose decree does not compete with creaturely moments as if it were another event of the same kind. What theology has long marked as the necessity of the consequence—*necessitas consequentiae*—names the necessity of the *link*: if God decrees that a free creature chooses thus, then the creature does choose thus. The connection does not fail. What that necessity does *not* require is the necessity of the consequent—*necessitas consequentis*—as if the choice itself were stripped of contingent character and the nature robbed of its synchronic potency. The decree secures the outcome; it does not flatten the creature into a forced mechanism. The libertarians should consider the difference between the two—necessity of the link versus necessity of an emptied consequent. But the distinction I am arguing is even more nuanced because both necessity of the consequence and necessity of the consequent have been used in a way that focuses on specific events without consideration of directing purpose, in this case the purpose of God to show his multi-faceted wisdom in proving the overwhelming weight of absolute freedom such that its allowance results in the need for the deliverance found in salvation, or the outworkings of eternal justice, or both.

Turretin draws the pair with scholastic exactness under the doctrine of divine knowledge. Given foreknowledge of future contingents, all things come to pass by a necessity of the consequence—

necessitate consequentiae—in a qualified sense, with respect to infallibility; not by a necessity of the consequent absolute—*non consequentis et absoluta*. The distinction between necessary and contingent things therefore remains.[11] Liberty of will is overturned by physical necessity and coaction, which fight the formal reason of liberty; it is not overturned by hypothetical necessity and the infallibility of the event. The same act can be free and necessary in different respects. Foreknowledge brings the infallibility of futurition and *necessitas consequentiae*; it does not bring coaction or violence, nor strip the will of intrinsic liberty.[12] That lighter or softer determinism is exactly what is necessary for there to be a creation in the first place, and what continues to be necessary in sustaining the creation that exists.

The same taxonomy governs the decree. The question is not absolute and physical necessity with respect to second causes in themselves—some are necessary, some contingent—nor necessity of coaction, because the decree inflicts no force on second causes but decrees that things come to pass agreeably to their own natures. What is asserted is hypothetical necessity and necessity of the consequence, with respect to the certainty of the event and its futurition from the decree.[13] What establishes determination to one by physical necessity or coaction takes away liberty and contingency; what establishes it only by hypothetical necessity does not, because the certainty

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11 Turrettinus, *Institutio* (Lowe, 1847), 191 (Loc. III Q.XII §XXIII): "Si datur praescientia futurorum contingentium, omnia fient necessario necessitate consequentiae, secundum quid, infallibilitatis; non consequentis et absoluta. Manet ergo discrimen semper inter necessaria et contingentia,"

12 Turrettinus, *Institutio* (Lowe, 1847), 191 (Loc. III Q.XII §XXIV): "Libertas voluntatis evertitur quidem per necessitatem physicam et coactionis, quae pugnat cum formali ratione libertatis; sed non per necessitatem hypotheticam et infallibilitatis eventus, idem enim hoc respectu potest esse liberum et necessarium: Unde quamvis actiones hominum sint liberae, quia sponte fiunt et previo rationis judicio, non desinunt esse necessariae ratione decreti et praescientiae Dei. Praescientia autem Dei infert quidem futuritionis et eventus infallibilitatem, et necessitatem consequentiae, non tamen infert coactionem aut violentiam, nec aufert voluntati intrinsecam libertatem."

13 Turrettinus, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (Edinburgh: Lowe, 1847), 287 (Loc. IV Q.IV §III): "Non quaeritur de Necessitate absoluta et physica, respectu causarum secundarum in se, quia fatemur alias esse necessarias, alias contingentes; Sed respectu Dei et in ordine ad ipsum. Non de necessitate coactionis, quia decretum nullam vim infert causis secundis, sed futuritionem rerum decrevit fieri convenienter naturae ipsarum; Sed quaeritur de necessitate hypothetica et consequentiae, respectu certitudinis eventus et futuritionis ex decreto; quam asserimus."

arises extrinsically from the immutability of the decree, which so determines the futurition of the event that it does not change the nature of things, but lets necessary things act necessarily and free things act freely.[14] The necessity of the decree takes independence-liberty, not the liberty of spontaneity and indifference: Adam sinned necessarily with respect to the decree and the futurition of the thing, and freely with respect to his will and the mode, because whatever the necessity of the decree, he sinned willing, and therefore most freely.[15] Let me be clear about the nuance I am arguing here by quoting Turretin. In the sense I am arguing, the statement "Adam sinned necessarily with respect to the decree and the futurition of the thing" points to the necessity of God's purpose to show that creatures cannot and will not behave in a praiseworthy manner under the weight of absolute freedom, but will rather require deliverance from the epic catastrophe of their choices and misuse of such freedom.

Notice what these distinctions do *not* do. They do not hand the creature the independence-liberty the decree expressly takes. They do not pretend that, given the decree, an alternate choice can be actualized. They do not relocate ultimacy from God to man. What they do is refuse the caricature that determination must mean coaction, emptied contingency, or a will stripped of its formal liberty. Free acts freely; necessary acts necessarily; the mode of futurition is itself decreed. That is the older hinge, now stated in its own tongue, for the compatibilist-like frame already argued

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14 Turrettinus, *Institutio* (Lowe, 1847), 287–288 (Loc. IV Q.IV §VI): "Quod statuit determinationem ad unum per necessitatem physicam, vel coactionis, tollit libertatem et contingentiam; sed non quod eam statuit tantum per necessitatem hypotheticam; quia certitudo non oritur ex causarum secundarum natura, quae liberae sunt et contingentes, sed extrinsece ex decreti immutabilitate, quod ita determinat futuritionem eventus, ut rerum naturam non mutet, sed res necessarias necessario, liberas libere agere sinat."

15 Turrettinus, *Institutio* (Lowe, 1847), 288 (Loc. IV Q.IV §VIII): "Necessitas decreti tollit quidem libertatem independentiae,… Sed non tollit libertatem spontaneitatis et indifferentiae, quia necessitas est tantum hypothetica, quae eventus certitudinem ponit, sed causarum secundarum naturam et proprietates non tollit. Hinc est quod recte dicatur, Adamum necessario, et libere peccasse: Illud quidem respectu decreti, et rei futuritionis; Istud respectu voluntatis ejus, et quoad modum, quia qualiscunque fuerit necessitas decreti, Adamus tamen volens peccavit, et per consequens liberrime."

in plain English: the necessity of the link without the necessity of an emptied consequent, secondary cause without aseity, responsibility without self-creation.

Put that in the plainest terms. Under compatibilist-like freedom ordered by the necessity of the consequence, God determines the *relationship* as necessary according to a specific purpose—not the outcome as something intrinsically necessary in itself. The necessity sits in the connection: given the decree, the choice follows. It does not sit in an emptied will, as if the act had no contingent character left once God had spoken. That is why the human agent remains fully contingent, fully voluntary, and uncoerced. He acts from real internal desire. He chooses what he chooses because he genuinely wants it. His nature still holds the structural capacity to do otherwise—the synchronic potency already named. Nothing in this frame turns him into a pushed object. The divine guarantee is that his free choice will match what God has decreed, not that an external force overrides his will and stuffs an alien act into his hands.

And still this is not libertarian freedom in the sense that Arminian and Pelagian and Molinist advocates are requiring. Given the decree, the choice will occur. Our future is fixed. The connection does not leave room for the decree to stand and the choice to fail. The creature may retain capacity in the order of nature; he does not retain the power to *actualize* an alternate choice while the decree stands. If the freedom they want means that the ultimate variable determining the act rests solely in human self-determination, independent of prior causes and independent of God's counsel, then the necessity of the consequence does not give them that. God's decree remains the ultimate primary cause. This keeps the creature free as a creature. It does not hand him the Creator's seat. The older sources agree: decree and providence establish second-cause liberty and contingency in their own mode; they do not grant the independence-liberty that would make the creature a god.

That combination—creaturely diachronic and synchronic contingency together with divine atemporality and the necessity of the consequence—remains compatibilist-like, not libertarian in the Arminian or Pelagian or Molinist sense. It does not hand the creature ultimate independence from God's counsel. It does not pretend that desert requires self-creation or self-sustenance. It locates responsibility where responsibility belongs for creatures: in what they are and what they do as real agents under a Creator who owes no one salvation and yet justly holds sinners to account. The libertarian asks for more than creaturehood can bear. This compatibilist-like hinge asks for what creaturehood actually is—and the confession and the elenctic institute say the same in their own tongues: second causes remain free and contingent under a decree that secures futurition without coaction.

This end section is not offered as a borrowed authority stack meant to replace the argument. The load-bearing claim remains my own: they ask for control of existence, and that is too much. The older sources corroborate the hinge already named—compatibilist necessity of the consequence, aseity demand, secondary cause—without inventing a freedom that would make us authors of our own being. The creature remains contingent in time and in nature. God remains God—atemporal, not one more link in the temporal chain. The necessity that matters on the divine side is the necessity of the link, not a necessity that empties the creature of potency. And the whole remains inside a compatibilist grammar. That is enough to show that refusing libertarian desert-freedom in the sense opposed is not the same as refusing responsibility, contingency, or moral seriousness.

They ask too much. The answer is not to invent a freedom that would make us authors of our own existence. The answer is to refuse the demand.