

## **Struggling with Voluntarism, Compatibilism, and Fideism in Religion: Can We Own Our Own Intimacy?**

There is an interesting cluster of commitments defining a variety of scattered Abrahamic and perhaps even extra-Abrahamic theistic traditions linking up voluntarism in some form with both compatibilism and fideism. This recurring cluster prompts the question, assuming the combination is not purely coincidental, of a conceptual relationship between them. Standing in the way of settling the matter has been an absence of attention to the fact that whereas compatibilism and fideism have been well-enough defined for those privy to the use of the terms, voluntarism has not. Compatibilism, the less provincial name for the provocative blend of divine determinism with personal responsibility known in religious circles as Calvinism, has perhaps more enemies than friends in large part due to the fact that words have not been minced describing it, while the surprisingly underexamined trend of fideism, also easy enough to conceive in principle, has in contrast flourished in the lack of reflective attention given to it. (I suspect more attention would harm it.) In contrast, voluntarism needs a bit of unpacking, as it appears to refer to at least two distinct perspectives. When we do so, I think we find, indeed, that a particular form of voluntarism that we can call epistemic voluntarism is responsible for both fideism and compatibilism, albeit perhaps with the aid of a bit of fallacious reasoning.

In this paper, I take the position that whereas metaphysical voluntarism deserves dismissal via the circularity criticism Plato pinned on it in ancient times, epistemic voluntarism does not, and must be taken seriously. How seriously depends on how generously we define what the faith life is or can be; that is, the life of being in good counsel with God. If it is something that can be lived “anonymously”, borrowing the terminology of Karl Rahner, so that it may apply both to self-described theists and atheists alike, that makes it all the more reasonable. On the other hand, the more narrowly we conceive of the faith life as something defined by outward confession, the less sense epistemic voluntarism seems to make. For typically we claim even to ourselves to believe things we don't, while denying even to ourselves we don't believe things we do. Since we are not reliable reporters of our own beliefs, we must recognize that conversations like these apply to all of us. The atheist may well be the true believer, while the self-avowed theist may be a counterfeit of sorts.

Briefly, compatibilism is the theory that I am responsible for my choices even though they are not of my original uncaused authorship. The most common version of compatibilism is that connected with theism, along with the correlate that God, the sovereign unlimited being, is the ultimate cause of all things. Responsibility is secured by means of a weakened definition of free will that does not require genuine originality, but simply absence of external coercion. My choices are mine and I must own them because the deliberations which caused them occurred in the privacy of my mind, with my attending to them. That the ultimate causes of those deliberations lie outside my mind matters no more to my being a free moral agent than that my ultimate ancestors being one-celled organisms matters to my being human. At any rate, so claim the compatibilists.

Fideism, in turn, is the view that faith is inherently either opposed to or unsupported by reason, in spite of which we ought to prefer faith over reason wherever the two conflict. This is opposed

to (anti-fideistic) rationalism, the view that faith is inherently either opposed to or unsupported by reason, and that therefore we ought to prefer reason over faith wherever the two conflict.

These both contrast with the third possibility, non-fideism, which is the straightforward denial of fideism by denial of its first clause, which it holds in common with rationalism. According to non-fideism, then, faith is in fact both supportive of and supported by reason, so there is never any reason, ultimately, to choose between them.

There is nothing that jumps out to me immediately suggesting that fideism and compatibilism should have anything to do with one another. It seems that I could be fideist and still believe either that I am the uncaused author of my choices or not, just as a non-fideist could be connected to either view. Perhaps non-fideists might be more inclined to think that reasons of human experience are supportive of moral choices as well as religious faith, but this certainly does not stop them from imagining decisive causal determinants of our thinking.

It may be that the connection between these two comes from voluntarism. But before answering that question, we have to come to terms with what voluntarism is – particularly the voluntarism not rare among Abrahamic theists.

In classical times we encounter voluntarism in the critique of it carried out by the character Socrates in Plato's *Euthyphro*, what we might call metaphysical voluntarism: what makes a right act right is not any intrinsic rationale other than that God chooses it to be so as an act of will.

Metaphysical non-voluntarism, in contrast, could be described as the view that what makes right acts right are intrinsic reasons related to the avoidance of superfluous harm, danger, loss, offense, etc.

The critique suggested by Socrates is that this kind of voluntarism makes a mockery of religion and morality by being viciously circular. Holiness/piety/virtue is doing God's will, but God wills what he wills because it is holy. The only way out of this circle would be to concede that yes, God does have independent reasons for judging holy things holy. Plato's suggestion is that adherents of this position fail to take that extra step, which would lead to a whole new discussion of objective morality. Thus they are stuck in the notion that moral truth is divinely subjectivist.

If this were all there is to voluntarism, it wouldn't be much, and one would rightly wonder what all the fuss is about, write it off, and move on. But there is another angle from which to approach the matter according to which it deserves to be taken more seriously: the angle of epistemic voluntarism, that is, voluntarism *quo ad nos* rather than *quoad se*.

Epistemic voluntarism can be taken as the view expressed by the following set of premises:

1. For any person *p* at any instant *t*, what is right for *p* at *t* is God's will.
2. God's will can only be known through an intimate relationship with God.
3. Intimate relationships with God are initiated and maintained by merit of God's grace alone.

Several things follow from these premises.

C1. Without God's grace, we cannot know what is right to do at any moment.

C2: We all ought to have an intimate relationship with God; otherwise we are disabled from knowledge-guided action.

C3. Our knowledgably doing the right thing is due entirely to God's merit.

This view allows plenty of room for us to be metaphysical non-voluntarists, accepting that we can have our own rational knowledge of moral act *types*, while maintaining the epistemic voluntarist position that we cannot have our own rational knowledge of moral act *tokens*. Moral act types are the classes under which acts fall: acts of giving, receiving, kissing hugging, caring, feeding, clothing, almsgiving, working, playing, worrying, praying, shouting, offending, killing, stealing, and so forth. If metaphysical non-voluntarism is true, we may justifiably make conclusions about the moral statuses of such things without special counsel with the will of God on the matter. In contrast, an epistemic voluntarist is convinced that the same cannot be said of act tokens. I may know that giving alms is a good and virtuous thing to do without thereby knowing whether giving alms right now is the right thing to do. Perhaps it would be too dangerous on this occasion, due to multiple considerations including traffic, who else is with me, the weather, who else is accompanying the one seeking alms, and so forth. It is just the nature of act tokens that they have the capacity to instantiate many, perhaps even countless (?) act types, some of which may be intrinsically good, others bad. The act types instantiated may conflict with one another: this act of saving life is also an acting of killing. How is one to decide on the spot on such matters with little time to waste? How else but by keeping oneself always in God's good counsel, in union with whose thought all the gaps in one's own thinking are easily filled? There is a social analog of this, of course, which enjoins us always to deliberate and choose as much as possible in good counsel with others; this spirituality echoes the early Christian doctrine of the "communion of saints".

Now, is it possible that knowledge of moral tokens is a finite, independently attainable thing? Is it possible, if not probable, that we could squeak by on our own without being in counsel with the divinity? This question is especially salient, of course, for those who doubt that God exists at all. Here we will attempt both a theist answer and an atheist answer.

The theist answer to this question is the one of Pelagius (354-418) which got him into so much trouble that Pelagianism became the label for a heresy. While it may be, as is typical with heresies, that the namesake turns out after all not to have been guilty of it, Pelagius posed a tough question about sin that Bishop Augustine of Hippo and company (354-430) never handled very well, and which eventually led to pronouncements of his on free will so ambiguously stated that

they led to a long-festering church debate which finally divided into a schism on the topic, with a big portion of Renaissance Christianity eventually siding with the compatibilist theology put into its most famous form by Calvin (1509-1564), with movements within Catholicism such as Jansenism teetering close to the edge.

Pelagius essentially posed a definitional problem regarding sin that led him to wonder about the sheer possibility of a sinless life without grace. His point of departure was the well-accepted Christian teaching that in any individual case of non-virtuous acting, I am not sinning unless on that occasion I could well have chosen and done otherwise. For it does not make sense, it was commonly thought, that someone be forced to sin. If it impossible for me not to choose something, then I am excused on the basis of invincibility.

The logic Pelagius was suggesting is finite: if every occasion for sin is by definition vincible, then assuming the total number of occasions for sin in one's life is finite, this should yield the result that it is possible in principle, although perhaps extremely unlikely, for someone never to sin: it would be like winning the lottery. No one ever thought to counter Pelagius by simply pointing out to him that the occasions for sin are not finite, but infinite: it is not that we have one temptation at a time to deal with, nor that they come to us ordered discretely in time; temptation assails us continuously in time, space, and thought.

Not being able to handle Pelagius's speculation to everyone's satisfaction troubled Augustine enough that he thenceforth departed from his heretofore unambiguously indeterminist characterization of human free will to an ambiguous narrative that some took to be compatibilist; a narrative subsequently inherited by Aquinas and injected from there into the Renaissance.

In short, the theistic answer to the question of possibly avoiding sin outside of God's grace and good counsel depends on one's assessment of the occasion for sin: if it is an infinite continuum, then the chances of sinless life are negligible. For probabilities are quantities less than 1, while countless quantities less than one multiplied against one another always equal zero for all practical purposes.

Now that we have gotten this far, can we answer the question posed any differently for the atheist? Not unless atheists are people who deny infinite quantities altogether. What makes sin so daunting is not so much about God as about temptation. As rational beings, we are constantly assailed by temptation not as an array of distinct individual items, but as a continuum in space, time, and thought, between any two of which lies another. That we do not always experience temptation reflectively in this manner is on account of our having girded ourselves against it, something we all have to a significant degree done. Assuming God exists, we are all in large part in God's good counsel whether we acknowledge it or not, unless we choose explicitly to leave it. Assuming God does not exist, then we are left with an unexplainable miracle, how we have come this far always increasing gradually the sense of human community in the world throughout human existence in spite of all our sin and dysfunction rather than having wiped ourselves out entirely by now. We certainly have had many occasions to do so. On this account, it may be that the atheist has the greater miracle to explain.

How does this all tie back in with fideism and compatibilism? If I am an epistemic voluntarist, I do not put much stock in my rational faculties drawing me nearer to God, since it is only by my I-thou relation with God that I am saved, not my acquired knowledge of God. This leads me to prefer faith experience over rational experience as constitutive of religion.

Similarly, as an epistemic voluntarist, I might tend to see my own salvation gained not by any choice originating in me, but in my intimacy with God initiated and maintained by God's grace with no merit on my part. This is in accordance with longstanding church teaching that our salvation is received without merit. That we are saved with no merit on our own part is often taken to imply that there was no original participation on our part in the establishment of this intimacy. This is a mistake. If I make the choice to go out and beg for something recognizing that my survival depends on it, that certainly should count as an original participation by me in the begging process. Moreover, it can be judged as sensible thing to do if circumstances warrant. But it should not be judged as meritorious, since nothing is produced by begging per se. Merit consists in the production of good, which in the case of begging comes from the giving. If I am about to die and I beg for and receive sustenance, my begging did not sustain me; it was the giving of sustenance that sustained me. Nonetheless, it is true that had I not begged I would have died. This does not make begging meritorious, but it does make it an original participation in the intimacy between giver and receiver. Thus, epistemic voluntarism, which implies that we need God just to know what is right from moment to moment, should not be taken to imply compatibilism rather than indeterminism, and is so taken only by the misguided assumption that any free, original participation in a good is meritorious, and that therefore our own salvation cannot involve our own original participation.

History, in fact did produce one great example of epistemic voluntarism combined with indeterminism: John Duns Scotus. For more on that, cf. "The Puzzle of John Duns Scotus's Indeterminism" (also attached).

The ultimate challenge against even this more reasonable version of voluntarism is its denial of or reluctance to go into more depth about the relationship between reasoned knowledge and what we might call relationship knowledge, or acquaintance knowledge. To be sure, intimacy cannot be gained simply by reasoned knowledge; but reasoned knowledge is yet vital to the quality of our relationships. To be an effective lover, parent, caretaker, etc. requires much study. Moreover, intimacy begets more study, as more study begets more intimacy.

Besides, there is so much about divinity and the will of divinity that we have to reason out in order to enable ourselves to have fruitful intimacy with God in the first place that we cannot afford to write off the entire relationship as based on acts of will, as voluntarism suggests. I tentatively conclude therefore, that epistemic voluntarism is not true in its entirety, but that there is something to it that may be crucial to human happiness, whether one identifies as a believer or not: it helps showcase intimacy as central to all our endeavors; but we have to be able to own our own intimacy by removing the shackles of compatibilist ideology and recognizing our own original participation in it. I think here I've pointed at a way of doing that that does not spoil the theology of salvation by grace.

