

THE PRICE OF INTERNAL CONSISTENCY?

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Summary

Clark Pinnock has attempted to reconcile divine sovereignty with human freedom by suggesting that any future based on human decisions is logically unknowable. God knows all that can be known, which does not include future human decisions, but he is omniscient and thus able to bring about his ultimate goals. This paper applies the three tests proposed by David Ciochi to decide whether Pinnock's solution is internally consistent, exegetically sound and intuitively acceptable.

The tension in affirming both divine sovereignty and human freedom has been a perennial first-order conundrum for theism, and it lies behind and impinges upon many fundamental areas of philosophy and theology. The fact that both divine sovereignty and human freedom are seen as parallel truths which pervade the biblical text with no explicit resolution, has made the tension a hermeneutical problem as well as an intellectual one. For Evangelical theology, the tension is particularly acute and can be seen at the heart of many of the great historical debates and schisms be they between Augustine and Pelagius, Calvin and Arminius, or Wesley and Whitefield. For this reason it is an emotive area of discussion which shows no sign of abating in the academic community.

David Ciochi states that responses to the tension fall into two categories, either the appeal to epistemic paradox which states that reconciliation is humanly impossible, or the appeal to reason where attempts are made to reconcile the two concepts.¹ In this paper I wish to concentrate on the reconciliation project attempted by the Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock, bringing out some of the implications projects like his have for philosophical and systematic theology. While Pinnock's project is not particularly original or radical in the

¹ David. M. Ciochi, 'Reconciling Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom', *JETS* 37 (1994), 395.

context of theistic belief in general, what should be borne in mind is that Pinnock is an influential Evangelical scholar, and in the context of this community his project is to say the least controversial in what it implies for the nature and definition of Evangelical theology.

In describing one attempted reconciliation of the sovereignty/freedom tension, I wish to follow the approach used by Ciocchi. Firstly, he uses the concept of human freedom to organise the reconciliation task because, ‘only the freedom concept offers a clear distinction between standard, established definitions. Any attempted reconciliation...must employ a version of libertarian free-will or compatibilist free-will, since these two accounts of free-will exhaust the possibilities for a rational explanation of human freedom.’² As we shall see, the libertarian view of freedom often refuses to acknowledge that there can be any other definition of freedom than the one they define.

Secondly, Ciocchi notes that any attempted reconciliation of divine sovereignty and human freedom must pass three tests if it is to be deemed successful. The first is the ‘internal consistency test’³ which says that all the statements made in a reconciliation attempt must be logically consistent with each other. The second test is the ‘exegetical test’⁴ which provides the necessary external qualification to the first test by saying that all definitions given and statements made must conform to the Biblical texts. (It should be noted for our purposes that, while there can be a major disagreement as to whether a reconciliation attempt actually passes this test, all Evangelical attempts must believe that they are meeting the requirements of this test in their project, and that the exegetical test is as important as the internal consistency test.) The third and most problematical test is the ‘moral intuition test’⁵ which states that a genuine reconciliation will ‘comport well with our most deeply held intuitions about right and wrong, good and evil’.⁶ Of course the problem here is that a clash of intuitions is very difficult to resolve. If for example the libertarian accuses the compatibilist of failing this test in terms of our intuitions about the nature of freedom, the compatibilist can respond either by denying this fact outright, or by saying that the libertarian view of freedom is inconsistent with our

² Ibid., p. 400.

³ Ibid., p. 401.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

intuitions of divine sovereignty. This is because there are deep intuitional differences between libertarians and compatibilists. Ciochi believes the reconciliation task to be a daunting one, and even if there is a genuine reconciliation, he thinks it will never gain general acceptance. In my exposition of Pinnock's reconciliation project, I wish primarily to concentrate on the internal consistency test but will have recourse to mention the other tests when necessary.

Pinnock tells the story of his pilgrimage from 'Augustine to Arminius'. Theologically educated in a Calvinist environment, he had sometimes understood the divine sovereignty/human freedom question either as a divine mystery or antinomy which simply accepted that human actions are divinely determined yet free, or he had attempted to reconcile the two concepts by defining freedom compatibilistically, that is a version of freedom compatible to divine determinism. However he says that in 1970 he began to have doubts about the whole Calvinist system because he could not square the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints with the biblical passages about falling away from Christ. He writes,

The exhortations and the warnings could only signify that continuing in the grace of God was something that depended at least in part on the human partner. And once I saw that, the logic of Calvinism was broken in principle, and it was only a matter of time before the larger implications of its breaking would dawn on me. The thread was pulled, and the garment must begin to unravel, as indeed it did.⁷

Basic to this change was Pinnock's definition of human freedom: 'I began to doubt the existence of an all-determining fatalistic blueprint for history and to think of God's having made us significantly free creatures able to accept or reject his purposes for us.'⁸ Pinnock believes that moral responsibility requires us to believe that human actions are not determined either internally or externally. This is variously described by philosophers as categorical, indeterministic, contra-causal or libertarian freedom. It can be summarised as this: 'An agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent's power to perform the action and also in the agent's power to refrain from the action.'⁹ So while reasons and

⁷ Clark H. Pinnock, 'From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology' in ed. Clark Pinnock, *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), p. 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁹ William Hasker, 'A Philosophical Perspective' in eds. Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker & David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A*

causes can affect our decisions, they cannot determine them and the agent can always categorically do otherwise than what he did. Pinnock believes that, in creating man in his image, God gave humans this relative autonomy of self-determination and it is only this definition of freedom that can firstly account for the mutuality and relationality we see between God and his creatures and secondly account for freedom in a way which does not make God responsible for our sin. Significant freedom shows itself in the fact that we are sinners who have rejected God's plan: 'Our rebellion is proof that our actions are not determined but are free—God's plan can be frustrated and ruined.'¹⁰ Pinnock believes that the appeal to paradox in the sovereignty/human question is problematical because for him the appeal to epistemic paradox is actually a belief in a logical paradox—holding together two contradictory statements which are impossible and not plausible for the sceptic to simply accept as 'mystery', or for the Christian to live by. The compatibilist account of freedom which states that God determines all human actions while upholding human responsibility and not making God the author sin, Pinnock calls, 'a euphemism for nonsense'¹¹ and a view that is 'biblically flawed, rationally suspect and existentially repugnant'.¹²

So far this debate over the nature of freedom will be a very familiar one to those acquainted with the theological positions known as Calvinism and Arminianism. In light of this revelation concerning libertarian freedom, Pinnock realised that he had to reformulate certain areas of theology especially his soteriology. So, in contrast to the Calvinist doctrines, man was never so depraved that he could not freely respond to grace, election was conditional and based on God's foreknowledge of faith, the atonement was unlimited and included everyone in its provision, grace was resistible, and believers could fall away and lose their salvation. Again this is all elementary to those familiar with the Calvinist/Arminian debate. An interesting aside here is that even at this stage Pinnock realised that a logical consequence of his move to Arminianism was a reduction in the precision of the substitutionary model of the atonement. This made him look at the

Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), p. 136.

¹⁰ Clark H. Pinnock, 'God Limits His Knowledge' in eds. Randell Basinger & David Basinger, *Four Views on Predestination and Free-Will* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984), p. 147.

¹¹ Clark H. Pinnock, 'Systematic Theology' in Pinnock et al., *Openness of God*, p. 115.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

models of Anselm and Grotius with their emphasis on judicial demonstration rather than strict substitution. Most recently he appears to favour Irenaeus' model of recapitulation rather than a penal substitutionary model. He himself realises this is a controversial move for an Evangelical to make, as penal substitution has been a foundational tenet of Evangelicalism. I mention this because it could be argued that this is another avenue one could pursue, in looking at logical consistency and the effect one doctrine has on another.

In the last ten years, Pinnock has realised that there are further implications of adopting a libertarian view of freedom if one is to remain internally consistent. This has led him into the territory of the doctrine of God, a journey in which he has been accompanied by like-minded Evangelicals, namely Richard Rice, John Sanders, David Basinger and William Hasker. The outcome of this has been the proposal of a new theistic paradigm called 'free-will theism' or an 'open view' of God. This places itself against the model of classical theism which is accused of being heavily influenced by Neoplatonism. This open model can be summarised as such:

Our understanding of Scriptures leads us to depict God, the sovereign Creator, as voluntarily bringing into existence a world with significantly free personal agents in it...In line with his decision to make this kind of world, God rules in such a way as to uphold the created structures and, because he gives liberty to his creatures, is happy to accept the future as open, not closed and a relationship with the world that is dynamic not static...Our lives make a difference to God—they are truly significant.¹³

To pass the internal consistency test, Pinnock with his belief in significant freedom has realised that he has to reformulate his understanding of sovereignty. God is sovereign in that he created the world out of nothing and does not rely on anything for his existence (*contra* process theism). Indeed God could have created a world in which he determined everything, but he has not done this. In fact he has created human creatures with genuine autonomy and so has accepted limitation on his divine power. Therefore God's sovereignty is not in the form of dominion but in God's ability to anticipate obstructions to his will and deal with them. In this way God's ultimate goals will finally be realised.

Naturally such a revision has led Pinnock to rethink many of the 'classical attributes' of God. So omnipotence is not the power to determine everything but the power to deal with every circumstance

¹³ Ibid.

that can arise; it is an omniscience. Likewise, there are changes in the attributes of immutability and impassability. Although Pinnock believes there to be biblical foundation for these changes, on the logical consistency test, these changes are all deemed necessary if libertarian freedom is to be upheld. To demonstrate this point, I wish to focus on Pinnock's understanding of divine knowledge, that is the doctrine of omniscience.

Let us for a moment return to the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism. For the Calvinist, God is totally sovereign in the world and this is the basis for his omniscience. Helm defines this as 'A-foreknowledge': 'If X A-foreknows that p then he knows that p as a result of ordaining or effectively willing or otherwise ensuring that p is true. At the very least X's A-foreknowledge that p is causally necessary for the truth of p and perhaps it is causally sufficient as well.'¹⁴ This is commonly known as foreordination. For all Arminians, such a view of omniscience is said to contradict libertarian freedom because it is deterministic and is said to make God the author of sin because omnicausality involves omniresponsibility. For classical Arminianism God has foreknowledge but it is of a different kind. Helm defines this as 'O-foreknowledge': 'If X O-foreknows that p then X knows that p but not as a result of bringing it about that p is true. There is a contingent connection between the foreknowledge of p and the making of p true.'¹⁵ So Arminians attempt to combine absolute foreknowledge of the future with libertarian freedom.

But the question now becomes this: if humans are indeterministically free, how can God know what we will do in the future? Three well-known arguments are used to provide an answer. The 'timeless eternity' solution states that as God is outside time he can see past, present and future all in one eternal moment, thus knowing what a free creature will decide. The Middle-Knowledge solution uses the language of possible worlds and says that God knows what any free creature will choose in any possible world and on the basis of this actualises one of those worlds, hence retaining ultimate omniscience through human free choice. Finally the simple-foreknowledge argument says that God just 'sees' what will happen without causing it to happen.

¹⁴ Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 129.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

However, Pinnock and the free-will theists reject all these ‘solutions’ because they are seen to compromise the basic definition of libertarian free-will which states that the agent not only has the ability to choose, but has the ability to choose otherwise. The details behind their rejection of the Arminian solutions can only be briefly summarised. The rejection of the ‘timeless eternity’ solution is part of a wider free-will theistic argument which states that a timeless God necessarily leads to an affirmation of the classical divine attributes of immutability and impassability. For Pinnock a God outside of time creates problems for biblical history which speaks of God planning in and experiencing temporal time. For God to experience events as they transpire, he must be in the temporal process without being subject to it. Therefore Pinnock wishes to speak of God as temporally everlasting rather than timelessly eternal.¹⁶ Middle-Knowledge is rejected because if an agent is truly free in a libertarian sense, no matter how infallibly God knows the circumstances surrounding a decision, the agent can always do otherwise. To say God knows what we will do in a set of circumstances is to return to determinism. Similarly simple-foreknowledge has the same results. Pinnock notes, ‘I found I could not shake off the intuition that such a total omniscience would necessarily mean that everything we will ever choose in the future will have already been spelled out in the divine knowledge register, and consequently the belief that we have significant choices to make would be mistaken.’¹⁷ The free-will theists therefore agree with Calvinists like Jonathan Edwards, that foreknowledge implies foreordination and that classical Arminianism is guilty of importing Calvinistic thought into its doctrine of omniscience. Pinnock therefore points the way forward to a more consistent ‘neo-Arminian’ position which attempts to uphold full libertarian freedom and a doctrine of omniscience.

Pinnock and the free-will theists define an omniscient being as one that knows everything logically knowable. If, as the free-will theists maintain, human decisions are genuinely creative, then there is no deficiency in the divine knowledge if God does not know about them until they occur. As Rice says: ‘...to say that God is ignorant of future creaturely decisions is like saying God is deaf to silence. It makes no sense, because before they exist such decisions are nothing to be

¹⁶ See Pinnock, ‘Systematic Theology’, pp. 119-21.

¹⁷ Pinnock, ‘From Augustine to Arminius’, p. 25.

ignorant of.’¹⁸ This then is a redefinition of perfect knowledge. God is not limited in his knowledge because future free decisions are not logically knowable in the same way that classical theism defines omnipotence as God not being able to do anything that is logically impossible. God does know directly what will happen as a result of factors that already exist and he also knows the future actions of Himself. He also knows that his general strategies for the world will finally prevail. All he does not know is future human decisions, although he is prepared and can deal with any eventuality that might arise. He can also accurately predict many human decisions based on his exhaustive knowledge of past and present.

Pinnock sees many benefits from adopting this view of omniscience. God is said to be pictured in more dynamic terms. He takes risks and opens Himself up to genuine rejection and failure. The world is, ‘a world of freedom, capable of genuine novelty, inexhaustible creativity and real surprises.’¹⁹ This is the stuff of genuine personal relationship where one partner not only acts but reacts to the other. He likens this relationship to a dancer and her partner, who move in perfect co-ordination. For Pinnock it also means that God learns things and enjoys learning them. He also argues that this view of God shows him to be more sovereign than the classical view: ‘more power and wisdom are required for God to bring his will to pass in a world that he does not control than in one that he did control.’²⁰

Such a view also means that so-called ‘anthropomorphic’ or ‘anthropochronic’ descriptions of God which refer to him as rejoicing, repenting, grieving, changing his mind, being frustrated etc., can be interpreted literally and so retain their natural meaning and evocative power. Finally such a view provides a powerful theodicy, for although God knows that evil will occur, he does not know what specific instances will arise from free human decisions: ‘rather God governs the world according to general strategies which are, as a whole, ordered for the good of creation but whose detailed consequences are not foreseen or intended by God prior to the decision to adopt them.’²¹ Although God will ultimately be victorious, history is the scene of a real battle between God and evil and God is not

¹⁸ Richard Rice, ‘Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism’ in ed. Pinnock, *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, p. 129.

¹⁹ Pinnock, ‘Systematic Theology’, p. 124.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hasker, ‘A Philosophical Perspective’, p. 152.

orchestrating both sides. But what about prophecy? Doesn't this depend on God's exhaustive foreknowledge? Pinnock believes that it does not. He writes:

A very high percentage of prophecy can be accounted for by one of three factors: the announcement ahead of time of what God intends to do, conditional prophecies which leave the outcome open, and predictions based on God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present. I suggest that the crystal-ball variety of divine omniscience is not biblical in its origin and not presupposed by the biblical writers.²²

Before making some general comments on Pinnock's project, I would like to demonstrate how this free-will theistic model of God affects Pinnock's soteriology. I mentioned before how Pinnock adopted the traditional Arminian position on the doctrines of grace. However in view of his move to free-will theism, Pinnock's soteriology must be described as extreme Arminianism and possibly goes beyond it. I will mention a few features. Firstly, 'election' cannot be God's choice of those whom he foreknows will have faith, because God does not know who will accept or reject his grace. Therefore 'election' for Pinnock is a corporate category which potentially includes everyone rather than the selection of certain individuals. This adds an element of surprise when someone decides to accept grace: 'Heaven rejoices when someone turns to God because it is never a foregone conclusion...God is not all-determining and God's grace is not irresistible.'²³ So too with the term 'predestination', which must be seen in a universal sense as the purposes of God which give structural content to history and in an individual sense as God setting goals for us, goals we can accept or reject. This in turn raises questions about the nature of sin. Pinnock seems to vacillate between a Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace and a view which claims that man can turn to God in his natural state. Whatever position he adopts, he firmly believes that responsibility necessarily implies ability: 'Scripture everywhere assumes our ability to call on God and everywhere holds us responsible on account of it.'²⁴

Finally, Pinnock must explain his position on eschatology in which he predicts (based on the wideness of God's mercy), that the majority of the human race will be saved in the end. But surely God cannot know the final numbers in heaven, indeed there must have been the

²² Pinnock, 'God Limits His Knowledge', p. 158.

²³ Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), p. 158.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

possibility however remote that no one would accept the offer of grace and that people have accepted it is due to nothing more than God's 'luck'. Pinnock responds by saying that we must not underestimate God's resourcefulness or his powers of persuasion to achieve his holy purposes: 'It must be that God knows us well, and he knows that what he has done to save us will produce a large result. The delay of the parousia would suggest that God is patiently waiting for more to repent (2 Pet. 3:9).'²⁵ In spite of this answer, there still seems to remain the possibility that God could be wrong and that probability will not become actuality.

How should we judge the successfulness of Pinnock's reconciliation of divine sovereignty and human freedom? I would like to make a few brief comments. Firstly, I believe that Pinnock and the free-will theists have passed the internal consistency test. If one starts with a libertarian definition of freedom which gives autonomy to the creature, then there has to be a major revision in the doctrine of God especially notions of exhaustive omniscience and timelessness. Like Pinnock, I agree that all other attempts to reconcile libertarian freedom and exhaustive foreknowledge fail because they end up compromising the essence of libertarianism which is the categorical ability to choose otherwise. For the creature to have this freedom means that it is impossible for God to know the outcome of those free decisions without the decisions becoming determined. It would also appear that the libertarian account of freedom does well in the moral intuition test however problematical it is. As Pinnock states in an early work, 'Universal man almost without exception talks and feels as if he was free...this fundamental self perception, I believe, is an important clue to the nature of reality.'²⁶

But what is the price of this internal consistency? For many non-Evangelicals not to mention Evangelicals, the model of God presented by Pinnock and the free-will theists seems to be far removed from the traditional biblical picture of God and his sovereign rule over the world, a picture which has been faithfully held for centuries and which is represented in the orthodox confessions and creeds. Does Pinnock's success in internal consistency necessarily lead to miserable failure in the exegetical test? Many Evangelicals say yes and point to three main

²⁵ Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 175.

²⁶ Clark H. Pinnock 'Responsible Freedom and the Flow of Biblical History' in ed. Pinnock, *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975), p. 95.

ways in which Pinnock has misinterpreted the biblical evidence. Firstly, there is the accusation that reason and logic have become primary to Scripture and that this rationalisation has made redundant the central idea of ‘mystery’. Secondly there is the accusation of being a reductionist whom Carson defines as ‘the person who first constructs his theological system out of those texts and theorems which seem to support some form of human freedom, and who filters out election and predestination passages until he can safely defuse them by redefining them.’²⁷ Finally there is the accusation that Pinnock has neglected important literary devices such as analogy and metaphor. As Kelly puts it, ‘They [people with Openness views] seem to work on the assumption of the univocal validity of language for both God and man...we must not attempt to project our creaturely limitations onto the God who made us (as though we had made him). That would be a violation of the Second Commandment.’²⁸

Before we deem Pinnock’s reconciliation a failure though, we must remember that as an Evangelical he believes that Scripture does validate his position, indeed it is the primary evidence for it and what started his pilgrimage. The irony is that Pinnock and the free-will theists accuse those who hold to a classical theistic model of exactly the same methodological errors, namely that, for example, Calvinist logic has skewed the biblical data, that reductionism has occurred by taking those passages which imply absolute sovereignty and using them as a filter, and misinterpreting literal readings of Scripture by calling them anthropomorphisms. What we seem to have here are two separate hermeneutical paradigms, both which claim to be more Evangelical and less rationalistic than the other. It is difficult to see how one side could persuade the other on purely exegetical grounds that the other was wrong.

Returning specifically to the internal consistency test there would seem to be some choices to make. If Pinnock is right and libertarian free-will necessarily implies free-will theism with all its revision for our view of God and his sovereignty, then it would appear that the classical Arminian position holding together libertarian free-will and exhaustive foreknowledge would be untenable and therefore not a credible option. I believe that many Evangelicals would think that libertarian freedom itself must be questioned and rejected if it does

²⁷ Donald A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 220.

²⁸ Douglas F. Kelly, ‘Afraid of Infinity’ in ‘Has God Been Held Hostage by Philosophy?’ in *Christianity Today* Jan. 9, 1995, p. 33.

necessarily imply free-will theism, because it is too high a price to pay in what it means for the doctrine of God. But having rejected libertarian freedom, where can we go in the reconciliation task? We are driven to consider the notion of compatibilist free-will which does appear to be internally consistent and exegetically possible in that it can hold to an orthodox definition of sovereignty and can speak of free agency. However for many (especially exlibertarians), such an account of freedom is counterintuitive and raises its own difficulties the main ones being the question of human responsibility in a deterministic framework and the feeling that God becomes the ‘author of evil’. But if we are to reject libertarianism and compatibilism, we have exhausted the two options for reconciliation. We have to go back to the appeal to paradox, which is itself a logical paradox. But secondly, even if the tension is an epistemic paradox there are problems. As Ciocchi notes,

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 to this, since the standard appeal is both a recognition of human epistemic limits and the making of a sweeping epistemic claim (i.e. we know that any attempted logical reconciliation...will fail).²⁹

Where does this leave us in our response to the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom? Perhaps we should agree with Ciocchi that underlying this theological tension is a more fundamental tension, which he calls the ‘paradox/reason tension’³⁰ and which leads him to adopt an agnostic position on the possibility of reconciling divine sovereignty and human freedom. With regret my conclusion is the same as his,

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.³¹

²⁹ Ciocchi, *Reconciling Divine Sovereignty*, p. 399.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

³¹ *Ibid.*