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**Does Compatibilism Make  
Relationship with God Artificial**

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Title

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Abstract

Free Will and Responsibility at the Basic Level

**Abstract**

The following argues that contemporary discussion of free will and responsibility is misguided because it does not focus on responsibility at the basic level with respect to the good. At this level, it will be argued, one can know the good if one wants to know the good, and the consequences for not knowing the good cannot be transferred to any other person or circumstance. Part of the misunderstanding occurs from not distinguishing between ability and liberty, and between ought, can, and want. The article considers defenses of the Principle of Alternative Possibilities given by Laura Waddell Ekstrom and David Widerker, as well as the libertarian position of Robert Kane, the noncausalist position of Carl Ginet, and the determinist position of Christopher Taylor and Daniel Dennett. Three necessary requirements for responsibility are presented: rationality, clarity, and freedom. Then it is argued that if the good is clear, and can be known through the use of reason, then wanting to know the good is sufficient for having the good. Ultimately,

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responsibility is seen to be in the logically necessary consequences of failing to have the good (for instance, emptiness/meaninglessness). Finally, attempts to transfer blame for meaninglessness are considered and rejected.

### **Free Will and Responsibility at the Basic Level**

Am I responsible for my actions? Can I be free and predestined? This is a very important question for practical issues, and yet it quickly becomes muddled. Contemporary discussion on agency and responsibility is divided among three groups: the libertarians who argue that responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise and that we do have this ability (at least sometimes); hard determinists who agree that responsibility requires this ability but argue that we do not have this ability; and soft determinists who argue that liberty and ability are distinct, and that responsibility relates to doing what you want. The following article will first present the author's position: responsibility at the basic level has to do with whether or not I want to use reason to live the examined life and know what is good. Then, by way of contrast, the article will look at the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, alternatives to this principle offered by Laura Waddell Ekstrom and David Widerker, the libertarian position of Robert Kane, the noncausalist position of Carl Ginet, and finally the determinist position of Christopher Taylor and Daniel Dennett. The thesis that will be asserted, and then defended against these authors, is that I am responsible for my actions because I can know the good if I want to, and I always get what I want with respect to knowing the good so that responsibility is always present at the basic level: at the basic level, the distinction between wanting to know the good and the ability to know the good collapses.

I am going to look at the historic problem as presented to Christian theism. One solution to this problem is to reject theism, or modify the nature of God, to become explicitly or implicitly open theism. In open theism, God does not know the outcome of certain human choices because it is believed this would limit the possibilities and therefore take away freedom. A free choice is said to be one that is not predetermined, and therefore to preserve this view of freedom

open theists alter the nature of God.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, we will explore what is meant by freedom. Others wish to keep historic theism, but perhaps unintentionally alter the nature of God from creator and determiner to *foreseer*.<sup>4</sup> For instance, some thinkers seek to solve the problem by discussing middle knowledge, where God looks ahead at the best outcome and then wills it to be actual. This is rejected historically by Christianity, for instance in the Westminster Confession of Faith: “Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions; yet **has He not decreed anything because He foresaw it as future**, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.”<sup>5</sup> In the middle knowledge view, God is not the determiner of what happens, but is dependent on the potential choices of humans. In contrast, the Confession says that: “God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.”<sup>6</sup> People are moved to take this middle knowledge position because of assumptions about the need for alternative possibilities for freedom, which we will discuss in a moment. But can we keep the theistic view of God, God as creator *and* determiner, and human freedom/responsibility?

The question behind free will and predestination is whether I am responsible for what I do. The responsibility this article is concerned with is not only responsibility before other humans, but ultimate responsibility where a person is held accountable for leading a morally evil life by failing to know the good. This accountability is an immediate, or inherent, kind of accountability in that it is logically connected to the good and the examined life: if I fail to live the examined life, to seek God and have the good, then my life becomes empty (by definition), and I cannot blame anyone/anything for this emptiness except my failure to have the good. For the purpose of this article the good need not be identified specifically, although for humans it involves a cognitive component of searching to find meaning and understand reality. There is a universal desire for

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<sup>3</sup> See *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, John Sanders, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> See *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Alvin Plantinga, 1977, and *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom*, William Lane Craig, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> 3.2. emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> 3.1.

meaning witnessed to by the universal attempt to explain the world, and a universal abhorrence of meaninglessness witnessed to by the extent to which persons/cultures go in order to avoid meaninglessness.

There are three necessary prerequisites for this kind of responsibility. The first is rationality: if humans are not rational, or the good cannot be known through the use of reason, then humans cannot be held responsible. If the use of reason to live the examined life does not lead to knowing the good, then I cannot be held responsible for knowing the good. The second is clarity: If the good is not clear to reason then I cannot be held responsible. Reason distinguishes between *a* and *non-a*, between good and non-good (evil). If, at the basic level, there is no clarity, then there is not clarity at any level, including what I should say and do. If there is not a clear distinction between good and evil, then there can be no rational basis for making one choice over another. The third is freedom: if I am not free to know the good if I want to, then I cannot be held responsible. Most contemporary discussion focuses on the third of these and yet this one is irrelevant if the good is not clear to reason.

“Basic level” means that level which is presupposed by other levels, or subjects of study. “Basic” in Ethics is the concept of the good. If there is not a clear distinction between good and evil, then there can be no responsibility for knowing the good and acting accordingly. Thus, when we speak about free will and responsibility we must first speak about this basic level: am I free to know the good, and in what sense I am responsible for knowing the good if I am predestined? Am I responsible for the extent to which I have lived the examined life, the extent to which I have critically and carefully used reason to know the good? Can I avoid blame by pointing out that God is the primary cause behind all secondary causes?

Historically, Augustine distinguished between liberty and ability, and discussed the four-fold state of man: *posse peccare* (possible to sin), *non-posse non-peccare* (not possible not to sin), *posse non-peccare* (possible to not sin), *non-posse peccare* (not possible to sin). While ability changes in each of these, liberty does not. At each state man is free to do as he pleases, but his ability to do good or evil

changes.<sup>7</sup> Thus ability, and therefore *possibility*, is not the only, or even the central, element for Augustine in thinking about freedom. Instead, the important element is liberty related to desires. For Augustine, liberty cannot be identified with ability, as it is by libertarians and the principle of alternative possibilities, because one can lose ability and yet still have liberty. Instead, liberty is assessed in relation to doing what one desires, or wants, which is always the case: in each of the states persons can do what they please. But Augustine also accepts as true that in one state persons are not able to be pleased to seek the good, and in another they are not able to be pleased to seek what is not good. Does this undermine responsibility?

This discussion of “responsibility” requires a discussion of primary and secondary causation. The primary cause is that which accounts for everything else but is not itself accounted for by more basic causes. In theism, God is the primary cause of all that comes to pass. The secondary causes are those causes that are established by the primary cause and bring about specific consequences, such as physical laws or human agency. In chapter 3.1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (God’s Eternal Decree) it is stated: “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**” (emphasis mine). So again, liberty is distinguished from ability. In chapter 9, Of Free Will, the Confession restates Augustine’s fourfold state.

But if I am not able to want otherwise, then how can I be responsible for my want or its outcomes/consequences? Note that in this question the principle of alternative possibilities is imported into the discussion. If that principle is rejected as the basis for liberty, as it is by Augustine and the Westminster Confession, then this question does not make sense—responsibility is not related to alternative possibilities. However, this principle (hereafter PAP) is very popular, so it is worthwhile to consider some contemporary thinkers who defend it, and others who offer modifications of it.

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*, Part 7.

A good deal of contemporary discussion is centered around the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, or PAP, which is stated in the following way by Laura Waddell Ekstrom: “a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise.”<sup>8</sup> The Frankfurt-Style Cases have been used to show that alternative possibilities are not necessary for freedom and have therefore called PAP into question. Such cases posit situations where a person’s desires do not match up with the possible outcome, and yet we would hold the person responsible for their desires (such as a sniper who intends to murder, but is thwarted by a fly that lands on his finger just before he shoots). Ekstrom gives a counter example to PAP in the case of Justin, who jumps into a pit to avoid helping his brother do yard work (310).<sup>9</sup> Justin is responsible for failing to help his brother even though he had no other alternative while in the pit. However, she also asserts that “it is unfair, and hence inappropriate, to blame a person for acting from, or in expression of, a self that could not have been different from what it is” (321).<sup>10</sup> Widerker believes that PAP must be nuanced because of the Frankfurt-Style Cases, although he does not believe that these prove PAP false (especially in the case of decisions) (232).<sup>11</sup> To replace PAP Widerker offers PAV, PAV’, and PAV’.<sup>12</sup>

None of these looks at the basic level of the use of reason to know the good. Instead, they consider actions that are relative to a person’s understanding of the good so that understanding why a person performed these less basic acts requires putting them in the context of the person’s understanding of what is good. Justin jumped into the pit because he believes leisure in a pit is better than helping

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<sup>8</sup> Waddell Ekstrom, Laura. "Libertarianism and Frankfurt-Style Cases." *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Ed. Robert Kane. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 310.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>11</sup> Widerker, David. "Libertarianism and Frankfurt's Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities." *Agency and Responsibility: Essays on the Metaphysics of Freedom*, Ed. Laura Waddell Ekstrom. Boulder: Westview Press, 2001. 232.

<sup>12</sup> PAV: A person is morally responsible for his *decision* (choice, undertaking) to do A only if he could have decided otherwise.

PAV: A person is morally responsible for performing a given act A only if he could have avoided performing it.

PAV’: Where V is a complex act-property (killing, voting, insulting, etc.), and t\* is the exact time at which a person S Vs intentionally, S is morally responsible for his V-ing *intentionally* at t\* only if it was within his power not to V intentionally at t\* (235).

his brother; the question is whether he got what he wanted. Both of these thinkers share the same problem in that they fail to see that what is important is our ability to know what is good and not an ability to have alternative possibilities (however these alternatives are construed).

What is my alternative possibility with respect to knowing the good? Obviously, to not know what is good. Assuming there is a clear distinction between good and evil (since if there is not then this discussion is fruitless), and that this distinction can be known by reason (again, necessary for this discussion), then the alternative to knowing the good is not distinguishing between good and evil, which is due to failing to use reason to understand the difference between good and evil. Another well known libertarian, Robert Kane, would ask: Am I in control of the “reasons” for my failure to use reason?

Kane begins his discussion by asserting that he does not want to appeal to any extra factors that the compatibilist does not also use. He then argues that in order “to be ultimately responsible for an action, an agent must be responsible for anything that is a sufficient reason (condition, cause, or motive) for the occurrence of the action” (Kane 407).<sup>13</sup> This does not explain responsibility because it uses the idea of responsibility in the definition of responsibility. But Kane sheds some light on what it means to be responsible by introducing what he calls self-forming actions (SFAs), and will-setting. SFAs are actions that form part of our character, and actions are will-setting, “when the wills of the agents (their motives and purposes) are not already ‘set one way’”(412).<sup>14</sup> Notice that this introduces PAP in that “one must not be set” means that one must have alternative possibilities.

Many compatibilists have argued that the idea of alternative possibilities is unintelligible because it introduces the idea of chance into actions. If my action is not determined then it is either uncaused or indeterministically caused and this seems to imply that it is a matter of chance, or luck. Kane rejects this critique by introducing the idea of teleological intelligibility (416).<sup>15</sup> In the instance of an

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<sup>13</sup> Kane, Robert. "Some Neglected Pathways in the Free Will Labyrinth." *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*. Ed. Robert Kane. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 407.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 416.

assassin, even though there is indeterminacy involved in what happens, he is responsible because he was trying to assassinate. Kane further introduces the idea of doubling, or parallel processing, where a person may have been trying to do two things, perhaps trying to assassinate and also wrestling with the moral dimension and so trying not to assassinate. Kane believes this provides alternative possibilities, and explains how there is responsibility while retaining indeterminate causation (425).<sup>16</sup>

The particular strength of Kane's argument lies in his seeing the teleological nature of actions. We act for a purpose, or, as Aristotle in the first line of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, all actions aim at some end. However, this strength becomes a weakness because of how Kane develops it. Rather than asserting, as this article does, that we are responsible for the extent to which we know the good, Kane focuses on indeterminate causation to preserve alternative possibilities. But if I am trying to use reason to know the good, and it is clear what is good, then I will know the good—there is no alternative possibility. And on the contrary, if I do not want to know the good then I will not know the good. Indeterminate causation only gets in the way in that it potentially keeps me from getting what I want. Further, indeterminate causation undermines the idea that I always get what I want. If there are indeterminate causes then sometimes I get what I want and other times I do not get what I want. This undermines freedom and responsibility in the most basic and important sense.

A further weakness of Kane's position is that he does not deal with the basic level of the use of reason to know the good. If I am trying to know the good then can I know the good? A mad scientist might convince me that something is the good when, in reality, it is not. But this does not change the reality that there is a clear distinction between good and evil knowable through the use of reason—I can use reason to “see through” the mad scientist's supposed “good.” Thus, if I had used reason critically I would not have been convinced by his argument. Hence, if the good is clear to reason then no one can keep me from knowing the good if I want to, and if the good is not clear to reason then there can be no responsibility. What is very commendable about Kane is that he is

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

concerned about ultimate responsibility. Yet, what is ultimate is the good, and the question is whether or not I can know what is good. Ultimate responsibility should deal with whether or not I want to know the good. The good as the highest value is the most desirable; as long as I get what is good I do not care if I was caused to want the good by a mad scientist because there is nothing better than the good. On the contrary, I cannot blame God (or an evil demon, or scientists) for my failure to know the good because I can immediately remedy the situation by using reason to know the good.

In contrast to Kane, Ekstrom believes that freedom is based on undefeated authorization. She writes:

I have proposed that in the case of free action, certain considerations cause without determining the formation of a particular preference concerning what to do. The account needs an additional requirement, namely, that the agent is uncoerced by any external force or agent, such as an invisibly controlling neurosurgeon or evil demon, as she decides what to do.<sup>17</sup>

Preferences must be indeterministically caused by the agent's considerations.<sup>18</sup> This differs from Kane's position in that Ekstrom relies on indeterminist causation to preserve alternative possibilities, while Kane has both indeterministic causation and doubling. For Ekstrom an agent is free because there might be a number of occurrences to consider options X-Z (or more), and these lead indeterministically to the formation of a preference R (this is the deliberative process).<sup>19</sup>

What Ekstrom's position does offer is the connection between considerations and actions. This could be helpful if she had connected consideration to the good. This is also the weakness of her position because she relies on indeterministic causation to maintain alternative possibilities and freedom. However, what I want is the good. I do not want indeterministic causation interfering in my deliberations. When I use reason to know what is good I do not want an indeterministic cause keeping me from getting what I want. This is a great weakness shared by both Kane and Ekstrom (and inherent to both libertarianism and hard determinism).

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<sup>17</sup> Waddell Ekstrom, Laura. "Indeterministic Free Action." *Agency and Responsibility: Essays on the Metaphysics of Freedom*, Ed. Laura Waddell Ekstrom. Boulder: Westview Press, 2001. 145.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

An alternative to Kane and Ekstrom can be found in Carl Ginet. In his noncausal account of agency Ginet attempts to give an explanation of freedom that is not dependent on whether this is a deterministic or indeterministic universe. Instead of arguing about whether there are indeterministic causes Ginet asserts that reasons for an action do not need to be understood as causing that action. Instead he offers 1-C and 2-C.<sup>20</sup> These state that Sue's reason for entering the room is not the cause of her entering the room. Rather, Ginet argues that the reason does not cause but instead explains Sue's action. Ginet does not believe "that these sufficient conditions *rule out* the possibility that the action was caused either by factors that include the intention or desire cited in the reasons explanation or by something else (for example, external manipulation of the subject's neural processes). Thus, as far as I can see, if our universe were one where every event is caused, or where every event is deterministically caused, our actions could still have the sort of reasons explanations we are accustomed to think they have."<sup>21</sup> In this quote Ginet comes close to asserting that what is important in responsibility is our want and not the ability to do otherwise. However, in allowing that we might be caused by something besides this want Ginet falls short of connecting what we want with what we get. If I could want to know the good and yet my actions are caused by something besides this want then there is no guarantee that I will get what I want. With respect to responsibility, getting what we want is central and therefore if Ginet's position falls short of providing proof that we get what we want it has not explained responsibility.

Having shown that alternative possibilities are not necessary to account for responsibility and getting what I want, it is next necessary to look at why libertarians and hard determinists believe this is important. This can be accounted for in the Consequence Argument. Tomis Kapitan states it this way:

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<sup>20</sup> 1-C: Concurrently with her A-ing S intended of that A-ing that by it (and in virtue of its being an A-ing) she would B (or would contribute to her B-ing).

2-C: Before her A-ing, S had promised to B, and concurrently with her A-ing S intended of that A-ing that by it she would keep that promise. (388).

<sup>21</sup> Ginet, Carl. "Reasons Explanations of Action: Causalist Versus Noncausalist Accounts." *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Ed. Robert Kane. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 403.

The past twenty-five years have witnessed a vigorous discussion of an argument directed against the compatibilist approach to free will and responsibility. This reasoning, variously called the ‘Consequence Argument,’ the ‘Incompatibility Argument,’ and the ‘Unavoidability Argument,’ may be expressed informally as follows: If determinism is true, then whatever happens is a consequence of past events and laws over which we have no control and which we are unable to prevent. But whatever is a consequence of what is beyond our control is not itself under our control. Therefore, if determinism is true, then nothing that happens is under our control, including our own actions and thoughts. Instead, everything we do and think, everything that happens to us and within us, is akin to the vibration of a piano string when struck, with the past as pianist, and could not be otherwise than it is.<sup>22</sup>

This captures the “intuition” behind much of the contemporary discussion. However, intuitions are often based on unexamined assumptions and therefore should not be allowed to operate in an authoritative position. An examination of the assumptions behind the intuition that makes the Consequence Argument, and those like it, powerful will reveal that behind these is a mechanistic materialism (such as is found in examples using chess computers or piano strings). It fails to distinguish between primary causes and secondary causes, instead collapses the entire discussion into the realm of material causes which seem to leave no room for human freedom.

The Consequence Argument states that if my actions are the result of physical laws operating throughout the past on physical objects, then I am not responsible. This is absolutely true. Neither matter nor physical laws can “want the good.” However, none of the physical laws can account for wanting the good. Materialism uses reductionism to explain why I want what I want. For instance, my want is caused by brain chemistry or the interaction of atoms. Therefore, a want is a certain kind of chemical interaction in my brain. The intuition of the libertarian is that this means there is no freedom, and the soft determinist can agree. It seems that reductionism is responsible for the contemporary worry about “who or what caused my want.” But the real worry should be about the materialism behind reductionism and the loss of the personal element. The hard determinism is using this form of reductionism to “explain away” my wants by saying that they are really just chemicals. But if

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<sup>22</sup> Kapitan, Tomis. "A Master Argument for Incompatibilism?" *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Ed. Robert Kane. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 127.

this is true, then the hard determinist's theory is "just chemical" and can also be explained away. The hard determinist's position leads to a self-refuting situation: if my wants are not free because they are "just chemicals" then the hard determinist's theory is nothing more than "just chemicals." This leaves us with the reality that my wants are as real as the hard determinist's position. And I *want* to know what is good. It does not matter to me if my want is caused by the past and the operation of natural laws, as long as I can get what I want.<sup>23</sup> Further, if the good is available to me if I use reason to know what it is, and I do not want to use reason, then I still get what I want. These secondary causes are what is relevant for my responsibility, not the primary causes. What the Consequence Argument does not consider is that what I do is a consequence of what I want. It presupposes materialism and, hence there is no problem once materialism is rejected.

The examples used by other determinists confirm the above. Taylor and Dennett use a computer chess analogy to argue that a narrow method of choosing possible worlds to explain if there are other possibilities is useless.<sup>24</sup> In the analogy two chess computers, A and B, are made to play each other with the result that A wins most of the games. The assertion is that our interest would be "why" A won most of the games and not whether B had alternative possibilities. What this is supposed to prove is that

possibilities of the broader, more interesting variety can exist quite comfortably in deterministic worlds. Indeed, introducing indeterminism adds nothing in the way of worthwhile possibilities, opportunities, or competences, to a universe.<sup>25</sup>

This conclusion is helpful but not for the reasons that Taylor and Dennett believe.

These authors dismiss the need for alternative possibilities in the idea of responsibility. B can be said to be responsible for the loss of the game and a number of reasons can be given for why this is so. What is especially important for responsibility, according to these

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<sup>23</sup> What does matter to me is preserving my personhood against materialistic reductionism, but this is not the same as the free will debate

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, Christopher, and Daniel Dennett. "Who's Afraid of Determinism? Rethinking Causes and Possibilities." *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*. Ed. Robert Kane. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 269.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

authors, is complexity. They also capture the need for a teleological understanding of action to account for responsibility. A got what it wanted in that it won the game. B got what it wanted in that it played the game how it wanted. B takes less time to consider the options than does A.

If we find that in many similar circumstances in other games, B *does* pursue the evaluation slightly farther, discovering the virtues of such moves and making them – if we find, in the minimal case, that flipping a single bit in the random number generator would result in B’s castling-then we support (‘with further experiments’) the observer’s conviction that B could have castled then. We would say, in fact, that B’s failure to castle was a fluke, bad luck with the random number generator. If, on the contrary, we find that discovering the reasons for castling requires far too much analysis for B to execute in the time available (although A, being a stronger player, is up to the task), then we will have grounds for concluding that no, B, unlike A, could not have castled. To imagine B castling would require too many alterations of reality.<sup>26</sup>

The soft determinist critiques this view by noting that it is reductionistic. It reduces humans to computers or other material objects. Yet as noted above it is not possible to reduce my want for the good to some kind of material object or the interaction of material objects without accepting a position that is self-referentially absurd.

The libertarian response to the hard determinism of Taylor and Dennett is based on the intuition that alternative possibilities are necessary for responsibility. But what if, as I argue here, alternative possibilities are not necessary for responsibility? I think the most basic problem for freedom and responsibility from materialistic reductionism is not the problem of possibilities, but the loss of the person. If all is matter then the mind is the brain, and there is no God as described by historic theism (where God is a spirit—non-material). It is this loss of the personal that is the problem. This is not because there are no alternative possibilities but because the personal is reduced to the non-personal.

In one sense (phenomenologically) materialism is irrelevant. I want what is good and it does not matter to me whether I have alternative possibilities. If the past and the laws of nature are such that I want what I want, I do not care as long as I get what I want (this secondary cause is what is important to me as a person seeking the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 269.

good). In another sense, materialism makes responsibility and agency impossible because it reduces the self to chemical reactions in the brain and denies the possibility of clarity and freedom (the necessary prerequisites for responsibility). If all is matter then there is no guarantee that I will get what I want. Further, there is not really an “I” but only a collection of chemicals. Chemicals cannot be held morally responsible.

Before concluding, it may be helpful to explore the intuition behind the demand for alternative possibilities. It is based on the ought/can principle, which states that if one ought to do something, then one must be able to do it. But if one does not have the possibility to do it (due to being predestined otherwise), then one cannot be held responsible. If I ought to use reason to seek and know the good, then I must be able to do so. But we saw earlier that Augustine and the Confession both deny that humans always have this ability and yet affirm responsibility. I think this is based on the insight that at the basic level the need for alternative possibility becomes unintelligible. Considering what Paul said about this will help:

One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’ But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?” ‘Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?’<sup>27</sup>

What is being demonstrated here is the ridiculous nature of the question. The question is coming from someone who has not sought God, and is therefore being held responsible. There are two possible ways to understand the question. It could be simply asking for information, or it could be demanding a justification and passing blame to God. Neither makes sense coming from a person who has not used reason to know what should be known about God and the good. “I want a reason to explain why I don’t use reason,” or “It is God’s fault that I don’t use reason, and I want an explanation for this.” If the person has come to see that he should seek God, then what is keeping him from doing so now? Is he saying: “If I’d known that God had predestined me not to use reason then I would have wanted to use reason”? This attempt to pass the blame to God makes

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<sup>27</sup> Romans 9:19-21 (NIV).

no sense: How can you complain if you did what you wanted to do which included (most importantly) not thinking critically or clearly, and not living the examined life? This complaint, and PAP, is based on the assumption that I am only responsible if I am the primary cause. But this is impossible as I am a dependent and derived being, and cannot be an eternal, independent, self-existing being. But making this the requirement for responsibility, libertarians have made freedom and responsibility impossible.

In order to better understand, we can expand the *ought/can principle* into the *ought/can/want principle*. It is true that if we *ought* to then we must be *able* to. But it is also true that at the basic level, with respect to the use of reason and living the examined life, *can* (ability) presupposes *want*. So, *ought* presupposes *can*, and *can* presupposes *want*. I ought to live the examined life, and I can live the examined life *if I want to*. The only thing keeping me from doing so is that I do not *want* to do so. This is the relevant secondary cause. To deny that this is important for responsibility because there is also a primary cause behind it, giving it existence, essence, and continuity, is a metaphysical claim about the nature of reality. It is a claim to the effect that there is only responsibility at the primary cause level, which is false. The reality that I can ever only be a secondary cause, and that primary causes are necessary, cannot be avoided. It is not the case that the reality of primary causes takes away the reality of secondary causes. We saw earlier that the Confession affirms that while God brings all things to pass according to his will, he does so without taking away the reality of secondary causes.

What is the alternative to using reason to seek the good? Am I free only if it is a possibility that I do not use reason to seek the good? We can say “yes” as long as we include the claim that this possibility requires that I want it. *Ability* presupposes *want*. To ask “but am I able to want” elicits the response “if you want to.” This can continue indefinitely. You are able if you want to. The consequences of this want are inherent, and cannot be negated by pointing out that all secondary causes have primary causes.

In conclusion, responsibility is guaranteed if there is rationality, clarity and freedom. I am responsible for living the examined life, for seeking God, which is related to my willingness to critically and carefully use reason. Responsibility presupposes that the good is

clearly knowable to reason so that if I want to know what is good then I can know what is good. The freedom necessary for responsibility does not require alternative possibilities but only that I can do what I want. Much contemporary discussion focuses on the cause of my want and misses the point. In failing to distinguish between primary and secondary causes, contemporary discussion misses that the importance for responsibility is in the secondary cause of my want. The good is by definition that which brings lasting happiness. As long as I want the good, and get what I want, I am not concerned as to whether I had alternative possibilities. On the other hand, if I do not use reason then I will not know the good: I do not want to have meaning so I cannot have meaning. At this basic level want always implies can. Responsibility and freedom are based on the claim that if I want to I can. PAP and libertarianism, through appealing to uncaused events or indeterministically caused events, undermine the possibility that I will get what I want. The hard determinist makes this same mistake and makes the situation worse by reducing the personal to the non-personal (chemicals/matter). Much contemporary debate is a reaction to the hard determinist position that tries to explain all of reality in terms of matter. Thankfully libertarianism and hard determinism are a false antinomy: there is a third option. Soft determinism, when properly understood, guarantees that I always get what I want at the basic level. I can know the good if I want to know the good; if I want meaning (start using reason) then I can have meaning (the good is clear to reason). This preserves human responsibility while allowing both freedom and predestination.