

A NARRATIVE THEOLOGICAL ESSAY

Free Under God's Hand

TWO FRIENDS DISCUSS FREE WILL, THE BRAIN,
GRACE, AND RESPONSIBILITY

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Two Friends Discuss Free Will, the Brain, Grace, and Responsibility

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Prologue - The Missed Turn

Thomas and Elias had been friends since their student days. Thomas taught history at a secondary school and felt at home in the Reformed tradition. Elias worked as a physiotherapist and attended an evangelical church in which personal choice and discipleship were often emphasized. They could talk wonderfully well, except when the conversation turned to free will. Then every friendly disagreement quickly became a debate about election, grace, and responsibility.

One Friday evening Elias drove them to a lecture. At an intersection the navigation system told him to turn right. He continued straight ahead.

"You missed the turn," Thomas said.

"Deliberately," Elias replied. "I wanted to know whether you would say it had been predestined from eternity."

Thomas laughed. "And I wanted to know whether you were truly free, or merely controlled by your need to make a theological joke."

They arrived too late for the lecture. In a café opposite the closed hall, they decided to hold their own conversation-not in one evening, but in several sessions. They agreed that they would first try to understand one another before attempting to persuade each other.

Session 1 - What Do We Mean by Free Will?

"Let me begin simply," Elias said. "Do human beings have free will?"

"Only if you first tell me what you mean by that," Thomas replied. "Free from what, and free for what?"

Elias wrote three possibilities on a napkin. The first he called freedom of choice: a person can choose between genuine alternatives. The second was freedom of action: a person can do what he has decided, without coercion or obstruction. The third was moral and spiritual freedom: a person can know, love, and do what is good.

Thomas added a fourth description: responsiveness to reasons. A choice is not free because it appears out of nowhere without a cause. It is free when the person acts, understands what he is doing, and can respond to reasons.

"So randomness is not freedom," Elias said.

“Exactly. If a coin toss controls your arm, you are no freer than if a machine controls it. Chance does not create a responsible person.”

They then distinguished three philosophical positions. Hard determinism holds that every choice follows entirely from earlier causes and that genuine moral freedom therefore does not exist. Libertarianism holds that at least some human choices are not completely determined by previous conditions and that the person truly could have chosen otherwise. Compatibilism holds that responsibility and freedom are compatible with causation, provided a person acts from his own desires, convictions, and reasons and is not compelled by external force.

“Christians do not all use these terms in the same way,” Thomas warned. “A Reformed compatibilist means something different from a secular determinist. He sees God as Creator and Sustainer, yet regards the human being as a genuine acting cause. Joseph’s brothers sold him from an evil intention, while God intended the same event for good. Scripture places both statements side by side.”

“And an Arminian Christian says that God’s prevenient grace makes a genuine response possible,” Elias said. “Not that human beings save themselves.”

They reached a provisional definition: human freedom is the created capacity, within real limits and under the influence of character, body, environment, and desire, to act with understanding and for reasons, and therefore to be answerable for one’s actions. For Christians, the deepest freedom is not autonomy from God, but the capacity-restored by grace-to love what is good.

The will never stands alone

Layers that shape our choices without erasing the person

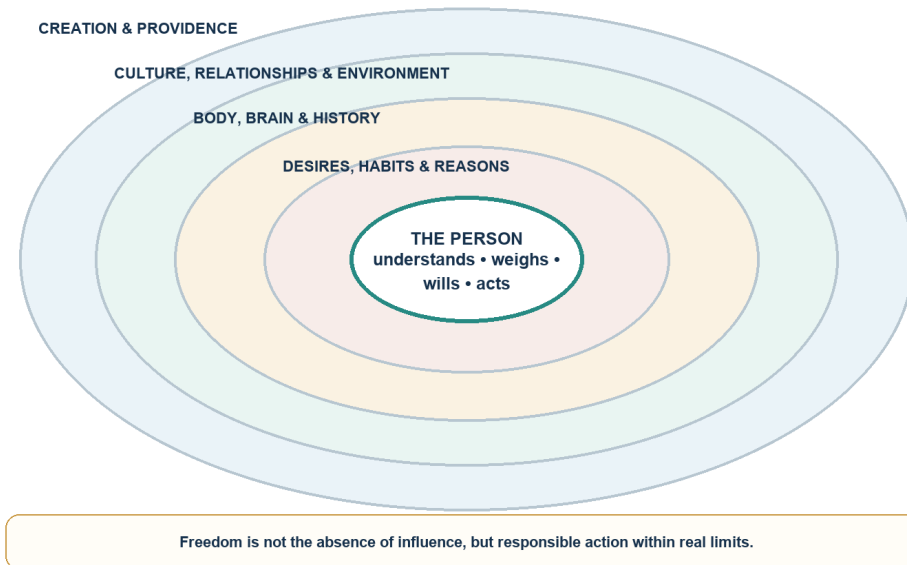


Figure 1 - The human will at the center of bodily, social, and spiritual influence.

“So our will is real,” Elias concluded, “but never unlimited.”

“Yes,” Thomas said. “A free will is not a will without history, body, relationships, or God.”

Session 2 - Does My Brain Decide Before I Do?

A week later they met in the university library. Elias placed an image of a brain scan on the table.

“Dick Swaab wrote that we are our brains. If my brain prepares my decision before I become conscious of it, who is choosing?”

Thomas answered with a question. “Why do you say ‘my brain’ as though it were a foreign intruder? When your brain weighs options, retrieves memories, and anticipates consequences, are you not deciding bodily?”

They read about Benjamin Libet’s famous 1983 experiment. Participants could move their wrist at a moment of their own choosing and had to report when they became conscious of the intention to move. A slowly rising electrical signal, the readiness potential, began on average before the reported conscious moment. This finding was often interpreted as though “the brain” had already made the decision before “the person” knew anything about it.

"But the task had almost no meaning," Elias observed. "A random wrist movement is not the same as forgiving someone, entering a marriage, or refusing fraud."

"That is an important objection," Thomas said. "The experiment measures the timing of a simple movement. It does not prove that a life decision is unconsciously fixed in advance."

Later studies complicated the picture. Schurger and colleagues described the readiness potential as an average of fluctuating neural activity reaching a threshold, not necessarily as a predetermined decision. Maoz and colleagues found that the classic readiness potential appeared clearly in arbitrary choices but far less in deliberate decisions with consequences. The laboratory can measure components of voluntary action, but a single signal cannot settle the entire metaphysical question.

"Consciousness is not a little person inside the head who presses a button at the last moment," Elias said. "Decision-making is a process: attention, emotion, memory, valuation, inhibition, planning, and finally action."

They mapped the functions involved. The prefrontal cortex supports planning, working memory, and behavioral inhibition. Reward circuits evaluate expected value. Emotional systems mark danger and significance. The hippocampus makes experiences and possible future scenarios available. Habits can accelerate action without constant conscious attention. Yet no single region is the seat of a detached "free will."

"Neuroscience shows how choosing is physically carried out," Thomas said. "That is not the same as proving that nobody chooses. Describing the muscles with which someone makes a promise does not make the promise unreal."

Elias noted that brain injury, dementia, psychosis, compulsive disorders, and addiction can genuinely reduce decision-making capacity. This does not support the claim that responsibility is always an illusion. It shows that responsibility is graded and depends on capacities. Law and pastoral care likewise consider knowledge, coercion, fear, habit, and illness.

Their conclusion was cautious: the brain does not influence the will from outside; it is an indispensable bodily level at which the human person perceives, considers, and acts. Many processes are unconscious, but this does not automatically make purposeful, reason-responsive action unfree. Neuroscience can investigate limitations and mechanisms, but it cannot by itself decide between materialism, dualism, compatibilism, and libertarianism.

Session 3 - What Influences My Will?

During their third conversation they walked through a shopping street. The smell of fresh bread, notifications on their phones, and illuminated advertisements competed for their attention.

“Here you can see how free we are,” Thomas said. “We are constantly being steered.”

“Influence is not the same as coercion,” Elias replied. “But it can narrow our room to act.”

They named temperament, hormones, sleep deprivation, pain, upbringing, culture, peer pressure, advertising, anxiety, trauma, economic need, digital algorithms, and ingrained habits. Love, community, education, prayer, and virtues also shape the will. No one chooses from a neutral starting point.

Thomas used Augustine’s image of love as gravity: what we love most draws our actions. The will does not choose apart from desire. The Christian question is therefore not only, “Can I choose?” but also, “What have I learned to love?”

“Then character is solidified choice,” Elias said. “Earlier decisions make some later decisions easier and others more difficult.”

“And that is why the Bible calls sin slavery. Not because people cease to will, but because their willing becomes misdirected and bound.”

They discussed addiction. It would be unjust to describe every addicted person solely as guilty or solely as a helpless victim. Addiction narrows attention, alters reward expectations, and strengthens habits. Yet recovery often works through small, genuine decisions: accepting help, avoiding triggers, becoming honest, using medication, and learning to desire differently.

“Responsibility must therefore go together with mercy,” Elias said.

“And mercy with truth,” Thomas replied. “If we say that no one can choose anything, we also take away the dignity of repentance and growth. If we pretend that every choice is equally easy, we deny brokenness.”

They formulated a pastoral principle: do not judge only the outward act, but ask how much knowledge, ability, freedom from coercion, and opportunity the person actually possessed. At the same time, a human being remains a person who can be addressed, helped, and invited to change.

Session 4 - Animals, Humans, and Angels

Their fourth conversation took place at the zoo. At the monkey enclosure they watched a macaque hesitate between two routes to food.

“Animals choose too, don’t they?” Elias asked.

“Certainly,” Thomas said. “We should not diminish their capacities in order to protect human dignity.”

Research shows that various animals learn, plan, solve problems, cooperate, and sometimes monitor uncertainty. Rhesus macaques can use an uncertainty option in experiments when a task is difficult. Such findings warn against a simplistic contrast between mindless machines and rational humans.

Christian tradition nevertheless speaks differently about humanity. Humans are created in God’s image, receive a moral calling, can account for their actions in words, live under norms, form institutions, and bear responsibility before God and neighbor. The difference probably does not lie in one isolated brain function, but in a constellation of self-awareness, language, symbolic culture, moral normativity, long-term life planning, and relational orientation toward God.

“So we must not confuse ‘unique’ with ‘the only species possessing any intelligence,’” Elias said.

“Indeed. Human dominion should mean serving stewardship, not permission for cruelty.”

Then they turned to angels. The Bible describes angels as personal, intelligent servants of God and also speaks of angels who sinned. Classical theology therefore concluded that angels possess will and choice. Thomas Aquinas held that, as intellectual creatures, they act freely, though not through the slow bodily and discursive process of human beings. His further explanation—that an angel makes its fundamental choice with exceptional clarity and stability—is a theological construction, not a directly empirical fact.

“Animals are embodied living beings with different forms of purposeful action,” Thomas summarized. “Humans are embodied image-bearers with moral, linguistic, and covenantal responsibility. According to Christian teaching, angels are non-bodily personal creatures with intellect and will.”

“And only humanity is redeemed because the Word became human,” Elias added. “Not because He became an animal or an angel.”

Animal, human, and angel

Similarities and differences in research and classical Christian theology

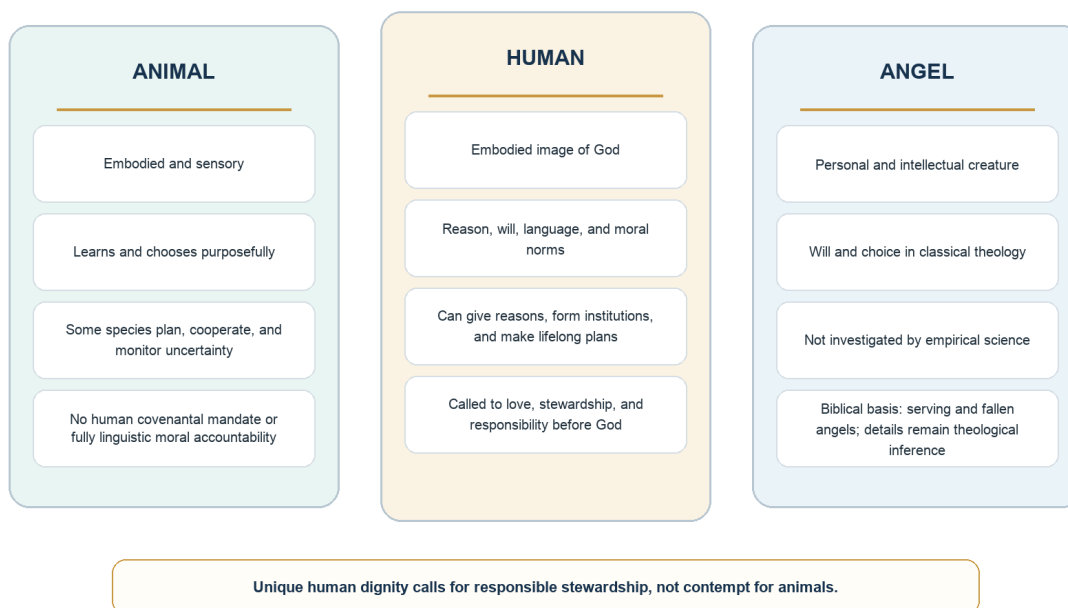


Figure 2 - A careful comparison of animal, human, and angel.

Session 5 - From Augustine to Arminius

In an old church building Thomas and Elias arranged their fifth conversation as an imaginary court hearing. Books by Augustine, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Arminius, and the Canons of Dort lay on the table.

Elias began with Pelagius and Augustine. Pelagius feared that people would regard God's commands as meaningless if they truly could not obey. Augustine feared that grace would be reduced to advice and that humanity would become its own savior. In his later work Augustine emphasized that the fallen will truly wills, yet needs healing and liberation by grace.

"That remains a Christian boundary," Thomas said. "No orthodox mainstream tradition teaches that sinners save themselves without prior grace."

In the sixteenth century Erasmus and Luther debated the matter. Erasmus defended a limited human power of choice and warned against fatalism. Luther replied in *De servo arbitrio*-*The Bondage of the Will*-that in matters of salvation the human being has no neutral power to move himself toward God. He wanted to exclude all boasting and place assurance in God's grace.

“But Luther did not deny that people make decisions in everyday life,” Thomas said. “The Augsburg Confession later states that the will has some freedom in civil matters, but cannot produce spiritual righteousness without the Holy Spirit.”

Calvin worked in the same anti-Pelagian direction and stressed God’s providence and electing grace. Yet he too did not describe people as stones: they act voluntarily according to their desires, while their hearts require renewal.

Then came Arminius and Gomarus. Jacobus Arminius, professor in Leiden, opposed a particular supralapsarian account in which God’s decree of election and rejection was placed logically before the fall. He did not teach that fallen human beings can come to God in their own strength. In his *Declaration of Sentiments*, he wrote that in the fallen state a person is unable of himself to think, will, or do what is truly good and must be renewed by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. At the same time, he emphasized that grace makes the human response possible and should not be understood in a way that erases human responsibility.

Franciscus Gomarus defended a stricter Reformed doctrine of election. After Arminius’s death, his followers formulated the Remonstrance in 1610. The conflict became ecclesiastical and political. The Synod of Dort (1618-1619) rejected the Remonstrant articles and emphasized total depravity, unconditional election, and effective grace.

Elias read from the Canons of Dort that through the fall humanity did not cease to be human, endowed with understanding and will, and that grace does not treat people as “stocks and blocks,” but spiritually quickens, heals, and renews the will.

“That matters,” he said. “The best Reformed formulation is not mechanical fatalism.”

“And the best Arminian formulation is not self-salvation,” Thomas replied. “Both seek to preserve grace, but differ about how grace produces human assent and whether it can finally be resisted.”

John Wesley later developed an Arminian view in which prevenient grace enables all people genuinely to answer God’s call, without turning that answer into a meritorious achievement. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions more often speak of cooperation with grace, yet in both God’s initiative comes first. The Catholic Catechism teaches both that freedom is rooted in reason and will and that preparation for grace is already a work of grace.

The historical debate

Every generation sought to preserve both grace and responsibility

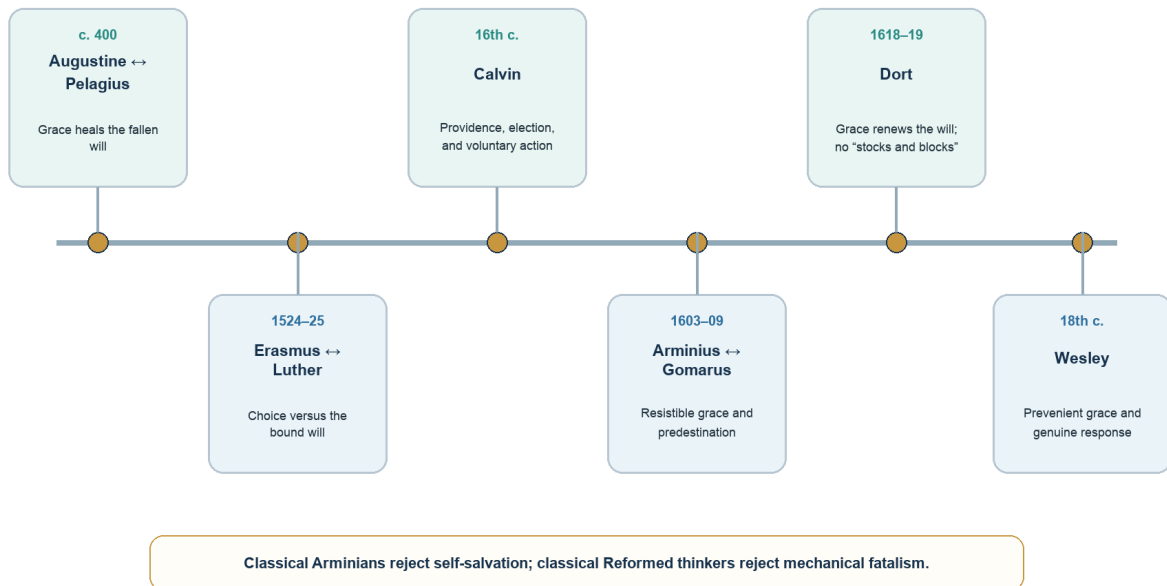


Figure 3 - Key moments in the Christian debate about free will and grace.

Session 6 - What Do Christians Believe Today?

For their sixth conversation the friends placed five cards on the table.

The Reformed card said: God's sovereign grace effectively renews the heart; the renewed person comes willingly to Christ. Freedom does not mean the ability to choose outside one's desires, but acting without external compulsion. Critics say this view struggles to explain in what strong sense a person could have chosen otherwise.

The Lutheran card said: genuine choice exists in earthly matters, but in relation to God the fallen will is bound; conversion is God's work through Word and Spirit. Lutherans are generally more cautious than Reformed Christians about speculating on a decree of reprobation.

The Arminian-Wesleyan card said: fallen people cannot save themselves, but prevenient grace awakens and liberates them so that a real, resistible response becomes possible. Critics say that the decisive difference between two hearers then seems to lie in their own response.

The Roman Catholic card said: freedom is a God-given capacity; sin wounds it, while grace precedes, assists, and completes it. Human assent is real, yet is itself made possible by grace. Freedom grows through doing good.

The Eastern Orthodox card said: humanity is called to communion and deification; grace and human cooperation are not understood as competing causes. The emphasis falls less on a legal scheme and more on the healing of desire and personhood.

“Which card, then, gives the true Christian view?” Elias asked.

Thomas paused. “Perhaps we must distinguish the shared boundaries of faith from the debate within those boundaries.”

Together they formulated seven core affirmations.

1. God is Creator and sovereign Lord; nothing exists or acts independently of Him.
2. Human beings are not puppets but created persons with understanding, will, and genuine responsibility.
3. The will is embodied, socially formed, and wounded by sin; freedom never means uninfluenced autonomy.
4. Sin is both guilt and power. People continue to will, but need grace in order truly to love God and persistently do good.
5. Salvation does not begin with human merit. God’s grace comes first, calls, convicts, forgives, renews, and sustains.
6. Grace does not destroy the human will but liberates and recreates it. God’s action and the human response are not two equal forces competing for the same territory.
7. Christians may continue to differ over whether grace can finally be resisted and how divine foreknowledge, election, and alternative possibilities relate.

“That is less simple than ‘free will: yes or no,’” Elias said.

“But it is more honest.”

Session 7 - The Test of Real Life

Theory became concrete when their friend Mark was admitted to a psychiatric hospital after a manic episode. During his illness he had spent money he did not have and deeply hurt several friends.

“Is he responsible?” Elias asked after their visit.

“Not as though his illness meant nothing,” Thomas replied. “But not as though he had ceased to be a person altogether.”

They realized that moral judgment requires more than a simple label. Could Mark understand the consequences? Could he restrain his impulses? Were coercion, delusions, or severe anxiety involved? What help had he rejected or sought? What choices could he make now to repair the damage?

The Christian view of responsibility allows for degrees. Jesus speaks of people who know more or less. Civil law recognizes diminished responsibility. The Catholic Catechism names ignorance, inattention, duress, fear, disordered attachments, and habit as factors that can reduce responsibility. This does not abolish morality; it applies morality more carefully.

Thomas and Elias visited Mark again. They avoided two harsh messages. They did not say, "You could do nothing about it, so nothing needs to be repaired." Nor did they say, "Everything was entirely your free choice, so you deserve only blame." They helped him distinguish illness, negligence, damaged relationships, and possible next steps.

"Perhaps freedom becomes visible in the ability to receive the truth," Mark said softly. "Not in pretending that nobody influences me."

The sentence stayed with them.

Session 8 - Free Under God's Hand

For their final session Thomas and Elias returned to the intersection where their conversation had begun.

"I still believe that a person must genuinely answer God's call," Elias said. "Warnings, promises, and invitations are not theater."

"I believe that too," Thomas replied. "But I never want to speak as if that answer came from an untouched, independent core that did not need God's grace."

"And I never want to speak about sovereignty as if God were glorified when human beings become less human."

They read Philippians 2:12-13: believers are called to work out their salvation, for it is God who works in them both to will and to act. Paul did not solve the mystery by deleting one half. God's work did not make human action superfluous; it made it possible and fruitful.

Their final answer was therefore this: yes, humanity has a real, created will and makes meaningful choices for which each person is responsible according to the measure of knowledge and ability. No, that will is not absolute, autonomous, or uninfluenced. It is bodily, historical, relational, and wounded by sin. In salvation, no one can begin or boast in his own strength; grace precedes and sustains. Christian

traditions legitimately differ about the precise working of grace, but in their classical forms they agree that grace is not violence against the person. It heals the will so that obedience increasingly comes from the heart.

Freedom is therefore more than keeping as many options open as possible. A person who obeys every desire can become profoundly unfree. True freedom grows when understanding, love, and action are directed toward truth and goodness. In Christian language, the human being is not most free when detached from God, but when the Son sets him free to love God and neighbor.

At the intersection Thomas asked, "Which way?"

Elias looked right, then left. "Today, right. Not because no one influenced me, but because I understand the reason, accept it, and am driving the car myself."

"And because the road was already there," Thomas said.

"That too."

Questions for Discussion

1. Which definition of free will do you usually employ: the ability to choose otherwise, acting without coercion, or responding to reasons?
2. When does influence become so strong that responsibility is reduced?
3. Is a choice without causes truly freer, or merely more random?
4. What does Libet's readiness potential demonstrate, and what does it not demonstrate?
5. What roles do habit, upbringing, trauma, addiction, and digital media play in your own choices?
6. How can the church both call people to repentance and confess that grace precedes every good response?
7. Does Reformed compatibilism do sufficient justice to biblical warnings and human responsibility?
8. Can an Arminian view adequately explain why a believing response is not a human merit?
9. What does it mean that grace does not treat the will as a block or stone, but heals and renews it?
10. How does human responsibility differ from the purposeful choices of animals?
11. Which claims about angels come directly from Scripture, and which are theological inferences?
12. How should illness or diminished decision-making capacity affect judgment, pastoral care, and forgiveness?
13. Do you recognize freedom mainly in the number of available options or in the capacity to love what is good?
14. Which of the seven shared affirmations do you find convincing, and which requires further explanation?
15. How can Christians discuss election and free will without accusing one another of fatalism or self-salvation?

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Source Document Supplied

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