

More than a Potter

Vincent Cheung

Copyright © 2005 by Vincent Cheung

PO Box 15662, Boston, MA 02215, USA

<http://www.vincentcheung.com>

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted without the prior permission of the author or publisher.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

"If God determines all that we do so that we are not free from him in any sense, then we are nothing more than robots and puppets."

This is one of the most common objections against the teaching of divine sovereignty. Popular Calvinism answers it by attributing to man some kind of freedom or power of "self-determination," alleging that this is somehow "compatible" with God's control over all things. Some Calvinists (e.g. A. A. Hodge, R. L. Dabney, etc.) answer the objection in a way that sounds dangerously close to open theism. They say that since God knows the dispositions of his creatures, he is able to "control" their decisions and actions by manipulating their surrounding circumstances, and thus "inducing" them to "freely" think and act in ways that are in accordance to God's plans.

But many of these Calvinists also realize that this explanation of God's "control" over the decisions and actions of man is in fact logically incompatible with their alleged belief in God's sovereignty. So after some initial explanations and evasions, they finally have to call it a "paradox" and a "mystery." It will save everyone a lot of time if they will just admit the self-contradiction at the beginning, and call it a "paradox" and a "mystery" from the start. This way everyone can go home early.

Since I reject compatibilism and human freedom in *any* sense relative to God, it also follows that my answer to the objection is different. Instead, I affirm that God is sovereign and man is *not* free. This position provides the only biblical and rational answer, which also happens to be the simplest and boldest response against the challenge. And since I have already extensively explained and defended the biblical teaching of divine sovereignty elsewhere,¹ I am not going to repeat all of that here. What follows will be an application of what I have already written about divine sovereignty to the above objection.

We begin by noting that the objection is incomplete. It fails to specify what exactly it is about robots and puppets that would make them relevant. Why would we be like robots and puppets if God indeed determines all our thoughts and actions? What would be the similarities? Then, the statement fails to even become an actual objection by neglecting to note why it would be a problem for us to be robots and puppets. Would it mean that Christianity is false if we are robots and puppets? The objection does not explain. Would it undermine moral responsibility if we are robots and puppets? The objection fails to prove or even mention this.

We must not allow our opponents to get away with making lazy and half-baked objections. They assume that they understand the issues and that their objections are unanswerable. One of the things that we must do in defending the faith is to show that our opponents are not nearly as intelligent and careful as they think, so that rather than challenging the teachings of Scripture, they ought to humble themselves before the wisdom of God.

¹ See Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Commentary on Ephesians, The Author of Sin, and Ultimate Questions*.

The competent apologist should be able to show that no objection against biblical revelation ever makes any sense. After showing that the opponent fails to issue a challenge that demands an answer, since the challenge itself is unintelligible and the opponent himself never knows what he is really asking, the apologist can then address the topic from a position of knowledge and authority.² That is, we answer objections not because our beliefs are so apparently problematic that we must awkwardly put out fires left and right, but we first humiliate the spiritual rebels, showing that they speak nonsense even in their protests, and now we pronounce to these defeated foes what God is saying to them through the Scriptures – to repent and believe the truth.

It is always possible to neutralize any objection against Christianity before we even begin to answer it. After showing that the objection is careless and incomplete, we will now proceed to address the topic anyway, but not because the objection logically compels us, since it has already been neutralized.

First, the fact that God controls all of our thoughts and actions does not make us robots and puppets, because even when completely controlled by God, humans are very different from robots and puppets. Humans have minds – they reason, decide, and emote. In fact, since our identities are preserved even when we are disembodied, it is more accurate to say that humans *are* minds that live in bodies.³ Robots and puppets are not minds, but are entirely physical objects. They have no thoughts to be controlled, but only physical parts and properties to be manipulated.

Some of our thoughts are occasions for physiological events. There is no inherent and necessary relationship between mind and body, but it is God who directly controls both, *usually* correlating the two. Nevertheless, we are still different from robots and puppets, since they have no thoughts at all. Their physical movements are not occasioned by their own thoughts, since they have none, but by the thoughts of those who use their hands and instruments to control them. And it is in fact God who directly controls them all – the human mind, the relationship between the human mind and the human body, the human body itself, and the relationship between the human body and the instruments, the robots and the puppets. That is, on the occasion that God directly acts on one (for example, when he causes the human mind to decide to move a finger), he also directly acts on the other (in this case, he causes the finger to move).⁴

Remember that the objection does not explain why it is a problem for humans to be robots and puppets, and this is one reason why it fails before we even answer it. So we are pointing out the differences that humans have against robots and puppets not because the objection compels us, but because we are addressing the topic in spite of the

² See Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions, Presuppositional Confrontations, and Apologetics in Conversation*.

³ Peter refers to the body as a "tent" that could be "put aside" (2 Peter 1:13–14; also 2 Corinthians 5:4). See also "The Ching Ming Festival" in Vincent Cheung, *Doctrine and Obedience*.

⁴ For an explanation of the metaphysics assumed here, please see Vincent Cheung, *Ultimate Questions and Captive to Reason*.

objection. The differences are there to be noted, so that even if humans are completely controlled by God, they are unlike robots and puppets.

Second, although sometimes unstated, the objection falsely makes human freedom the basis of moral responsibility. The assumptions are: (1) It is necessary to affirm that humans are morally responsible; (2) Moral responsibility presupposes human freedom; and (3) Robots and puppets are not free. Given these assumptions, the objector *rightly* reasons that if God is *absolutely* sovereign, then humans are *not* free. Then, he likens these humans, who are not free, to robots and puppets, which are also not free. This in turn means that humans are not morally responsible if God controls all things, but since it is necessary to affirm that humans are morally responsible, it means that we cannot affirm that God controls all things.

We will first dispense with a less important problem with this reasoning, and that is the unnecessary analogy of controlled humans to robots and puppets. This step could be skipped altogether and the objection would still be intact; in fact, it would be clearer without the analogy. In other words, it would be simpler to just say, "If God controls all things, then humans are not free. But since moral responsibility presupposes human freedom, this necessarily means that if God controls all things, then humans are not morally responsible. But then, since it is necessary to affirm that humans are morally responsible, we must therefore deny that God controls all things."

The process of reasoning is sound in itself, so that the conclusion would be correct *if* all the assumptions were true. However, not all the assumptions are correct, and therefore the objection crumbles. The fatal error is in assuming that moral responsibility presupposes human freedom. This premise is explicitly contradicted by Scripture, and it has never been justified in the history of theology and philosophy. It is so ingrained in most thinkers that when they even bother to mention it or consider possible ways to justify it, they would often just say that it is intuitively known and then move on.

But as I have repeatedly stated elsewhere, the assumption is false. By definition, "responsibility" refers to accountability. In other words, for one to be morally *responsible* means that he is morally *accountable* to some person or standard. The issue of whether this person is free is irrelevant to the discussion. The only relevant issue is whether the one who has authority over this person has decided to *hold him accountable*. Since God rules over all of humanity, and he has decided to judge every man, this means that every person is morally responsible, *regardless* of whether he is free. Human freedom has no logical place to even enter the discussion.⁵ Moreover, the only reason to affirm that humans are morally responsible is because of this same reason in the first place – that is, that God has decided to judge all of humanity.

God could just as easily hold robots and puppets responsible, not in the sense that they could understand their actions, but in the sense that God could reward or punish them if he so pleases. Jesus cursed a fig tree for failing to bear fruit. The tree was not free, or

⁵ I have discussed this extensively and repeatedly in my other writings. Please see Vincent Cheung, *Systematic Theology, Commentary on Ephesians*, and *The Author of Sin*.

even conscious, but it was punished, and Jesus was fully justified for doing it. Of course, the tree and the curse were symbolic, but the symbolic (what is apparent, on the surface) cannot contradict that which is symbolized, or the one would not really be symbolic of the other. The fact is that, whatever deeper meaning is intended, the tree failed to bear fruit, and Jesus cursed it for this reason. Likewise, if God so pleases, he could destroy a robot for malfunctioning, and since he is the sole standard of morality, he would be righteous by definition for doing so. He certainly does not need our permission or to satisfy our false assumptions.

In other words, humans are morally responsible for precisely the opposite reason assumed by the objection -- we are responsible because God is sovereign and we are *not* free.

Third, contrary to its intent, the objection uses an analogy that ascribes *too much* freedom to humans relative to God. The objector would expect the Christian to explain how humans are *more* free than robots and puppets, or how humans have genuine freedom while robots and puppets do not. Those who affirm popular Calvinism will also try to affirm God's total sovereignty at the same time.⁶ This plays right into the objector's expectation – it exposes the fact that the position of these Calvinists is indeed incoherent and paradoxical, and that it is affirmed by sheer force, as even the major Calvinistic theologians admit.⁷

However, if we would cast aside the usual unbiblical and irrational assumptions, we would confront the objection by claiming the very opposite. The objection fails to apply not because its analogy denies freedom to man, but because it concedes *far too little* control to God.⁸ Certainly, God has *infinitely more* control over us than we have over robots and puppets.

⁶ Even "total" (or equivalent terms) has become relative for some of those who affirm popular Calvinism. They would affirm God's "total" sovereignty against those who challenge them, but then they would turn around and challenge me for affirming God's "total" sovereignty and its application to metaphysics, epistemology, and soteriology. They (these "Calvinists") would even begin their objections against me by saying, "But if God controls everything..." indicating that they do not really believe that God controls everything (for example, see section I of "Short Answers to Several Criticisms" in Vincent Cheung, *Captive to Reason*). The truth is that they do not believe in God's *total* sovereignty – they just believe a stronger version of God's crippled sovereignty than the Arminians.

⁷ See "Forced to Believe" in Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin*, in which I use A. A. Hodge as an example of this incoherent Calvinism. He writes, "Although the absolute origination of any new existence out of nothing is to us confessedly inconceivable, it is not one whit more so than the relation of the infinite foreknowledge, or foreordination, or providential control of God to the free agency of men, nor than many other truths which we are all *forced to believe*." I respond, "Biblical doctrines are inconceivable only if measured against some irrational premise or standard. What we need to do is to cast aside these false principles and assumptions that are not part of the biblical worldview in the first place. But if you are going to take principles and assumptions from two contradictory worldviews and try to jam them together, then, yes, you are going to end up with something inconceivable. Just don't call that Christianity or Calvinism."

⁸ See "Determinism, Fatalism, and Pantheism" in Vincent Cheung, *The Author of Sin*, in which I respond to the charge that my position on divine sovereignty amounts to fatalism by noting that fatalism is in fact *weaker* than the biblical determinism that I affirm – it ascribes *too little* control to God over his creation.

With robots and puppets, we can only rearrange and combine preexisting materials to form objects whose designs and functions are limited by its materials, by our intelligence and creativity, and then by our ability to maintain and manipulate them.

This is not so with God. Whether we are speaking of robots, puppets, or humans, God is the one who creates, sustains, and controls the very materials from which they are made. He is the one who conceived their designs and functions, and even then he is not limited to these, but he can change them at any time if he so wishes. He can create out of nothing (Genesis 1:1), change water into wine (John 2:9), turn stones into humans (Matthew 3:9), and humans into salt (Genesis 19:26). He could cause any object to function in ways that is apparently beyond their original design, such as to cause a donkey to speak (Numbers 22:28, 30; 2 Peter 2:16), and stones to cry out and praise him (Luke 19:40).

In the light of Scripture's testimony, it is an abominable insult to God's majesty and power to assert that he has no more control over us than we do over robots and puppets, or that we have more freedom relative to him than robots and puppets have relative to us.⁹ Of course humans are greater than robots and puppets, as we have already acknowledged. But then, God is *far* greater than humans.

This leads us to a discussion about a related objection against divine sovereignty. However, this time the objection is not based on an extra-biblical analogy, but a direct attack against Scripture. The passage is in Romans 9, and it is enough to cite only verses 18–21:

¹⁸Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. ¹⁹One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" ²⁰But 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?'" ²¹Does 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?

Paul refers to an objection against God's total and direct control of human hearts, including his power to directly cause faith and unbelief in them. The objection assumes that if God cannot be resisted, then humans should not be blamed. In other words, like many non-Christians, Arminians, and inconsistent Calvinists, it adopts the unbiblical assumption that responsibility presupposes freedom. We have already addressed this false premise.

This other objection that I have in mind, related to the one about robots and puppets, attacks the analogy in verse 21. I have come across it in the writings of liberal theologians who reject the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, and also in conversation

⁹ As the following discussion of Romans 9 would imply, it is fine to use an analogy to illustrate God's control over his creation in a relative sense, but no analogy can absolutely represent God's infinite control over his creation. The error, therefore, is not in using an analogy to illustrate God's control, but it is in asserting or implying that the analogy *fully* represents God's power.

with several professing Christians. That is, they identify with the objection against divine sovereignty in verse 19, and they consider Paul's response in verse 21 fallacious. Paul writes, "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?"¹⁰ Against this, they exclaim, "But surely we are more than clay and pottery!"

In other words, they assert that Paul's response fails because his analogy is false. He likens humans to clay and pottery, but humans are more than clay and pottery, and therefore the analogy cannot explain how humans are held accountable under an absolutely sovereign God, one who can directly act on the mind to cause both good and evil. The challenge is directed at not only Calvinism, but Scripture itself. In reply, we will offer the following points.

First, the attack against verse 21 neglects the point that Paul is asserting. He does not claim that humans are exactly like clay and pottery in every way, but he is reminding his readers of the relationship between the creature and the Creator. In verse 20, he says that *the creature* has no right to "talk back," and in verse 21, he says that *the Creator* has every right to make whatever he wishes out of the creature. The truth of Paul's point does not depend on whether humans are exactly like clay and pottery, but on whether God is the Creator and whether humans are the creatures. Since God is indeed the Creator and humans are indeed the creatures, Paul's point in verse 18 stands.

Second, and this is related to the first, although Paul could point out that the objection falsely assumes that responsibility presupposes freedom, he does not explicitly do it here. However, he achieves the same effect by answering the objection from the perspective of divine rights versus human rights. The objection goes, "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" Paul answers, "God has the right to do whatever he wants with you, or to make anything out of you, and then still hold you accountable (see v. 22). But you have no right to talk back." This reply, of course, is contrary to popular Calvinism, which would tend to say, "God has the right to show mercy to whomever he chooses, but he merely passes by the reprobates, who have damned themselves." Instead, Paul's answer is that the creature has no right to talk back, but that God has the right to *make* some into objects of mercy and to *make* others into the objects of wrath.

Third, perhaps blinded by a humanistic indignation that man has been reduced to clay and pottery, the objection has forgotten about God. Outside of the analogy, it is true that humans are more than clay and pottery, but then God is more than a potter!

¹⁰ As a side note, Paul does *not* say, "God makes the noble vessels out of the common vessels," or "God *makes* the noble vessels, and *allows* the common vessels to make themselves," or "God *makes* some of the clay into noble vessels, and *passes by* the rest preexisting common vessels." No, instead, Paul says, "God *makes* the noble vessels *and* the common vessels out of *the same* lump of clay." Thus this passage offers definite support to unconditional active reprobation and supralapsarianism. It does not help to regard the "clay" as already sinful, since Paul says that God *makes* the common vessels out of it. He does not use passive terms like "permit" or "pass by." Reprobates do not make themselves. It is God who makes them, and he makes them *as reprobates*.

Now, an analogy is an analogy, and a successful one only needs to accurately make its intended point. Scripture is perfect, and Paul's inspired analogy is perfect for its purpose. It illustrates that the divine potter has the right to fashion the human clay into any type of vessel and for any purpose he chooses, and the creature has no right to protest against the Creator.

But an analogy remains an analogy – it does not intend to represent every aspect of the objects that it illustrates. By pointing this out, the objection seeks to protect human freedom. However, we cannot relax the analogy for one object without also doing the same for the other objects in the same analogy; otherwise, there would be a tremendous distortion between the relationship of these objects. So, if we must break away from the analogy to consider the true nature of man, then God must also break away from the analogy so that we can consider his true majesty and power.

Contrary to their expectation, once we relax the analogy, the situation becomes even less favorable for our opponents. Rather than preserving any human freedom, the full sovereignty of God is exposed, and all the limitations imposed upon the "potter" by the analogy are now lifted. And for the same reason already mentioned when we discussed robots and puppets, God has *much more* control over us than a human potter has over clay and pottery. By breaking the analogy, the objection moves to reclaim freedom for man, but instead it destroys all traces of human freedom and fully uncovers God's sovereignty, a creating and ruling power infinitely greater than any human potter can exercise over lumps of clay.

As for moral responsibility, we have already addressed the topic. The truth is that moral responsibility presupposes divine sovereignty and judgment, not human freedom, and the more sovereign God is, the more sure the judgment will be. The more control God has over all things, the more moral responsibility is established. Since divine sovereignty is absolute, divine judgment is therefore certain – because God is sovereign, there *will* be a judgment. God is sovereign and man is not free. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Without hesitation or qualification, we can boldly proclaim, "Our God reigns!"