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***Catholic Physics - Reflections of a  
Catholic Scientist - Part 38  
Free Will and God's Providence. - Part I:  
An Introduction to the Problem***



- ♦ 1200's
- ♦ Authority on physics, geography, astronomy, mineralogy, chemistry, zoology, and physiology
- ♦ "The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature"
- ♦ He understood that the Church is not opposed to study of nature
- ♦ Patron Saint of Scientists

# Free Will and God's Providence. - Part I: An Introduction to the Problem

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Matthew 18:21 (KJV)

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." Deuteronomy, 30:

"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." C.S. Lewis.

"Of course I believe in free will. I have no choice." Isaac Balshevis Singer, The Salon Interview 1987.

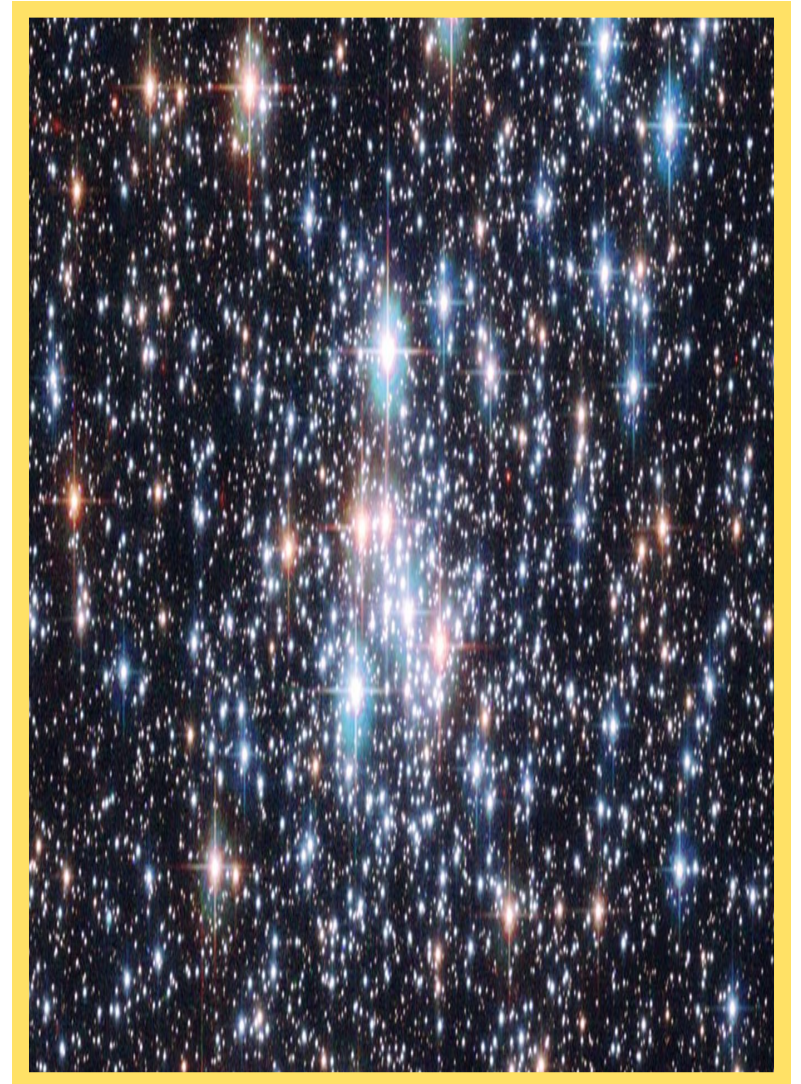
## INTRODUCTION

In the past decades we have seen outrage after outrage committed by religious terrorists, gangs, members of drug cartels--the murder of Christian, Jewish and Arab children, the rape of Christian nuns, the trafficking of women and girls, "knockout" beatings of whites, the teaching of hate. In this post I'll not discuss how these villains attempt to justify their acts on the basis of religion or deprived socio-economic status. Rather, I want to address the following questions.

Do the terrorists commit these deeds freely, as we understand Free Will?

If they do act freely, how is it possible, for us as Christians, to forgive them?

Whether or not their actions be free, is there a way to see this evil as compatible with or proceeding from God's Foreknowledge?



## REFERENCES

(I've been on a steep learning curve in this set of posts--there's a vast literature both on the web and in texts, and I'm only going to cite a very few of these that I've found particularly useful.)

Robert Kane, Reflections on Free Will and Determinism

John Martin Fischer, Robert Kane, Derk Pereboom, Manuel Vargas, Four Views on Free Will.

Timothy O'Connor, Free Will (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Eliezer J. Sternberg, My Brain Made Me Do It: The Rise of Neuroscience and the Threat to Moral Responsibility

Alfred Freddoso, Molinism

St. Augustine, On Grace and Free Will

The Block Universe of Special Relativity

Other references will be added in subsequent posts.

From a series of articles written by: Bob Kurland - a Catholic Scientist



There will be three posts which attempt to study these acts as a case study in terms of the general subject of Free Will and God's Providence.

The first (this one) will attempt to define the problem.

The second will rebut physicalist assertions that there is no such thing as free will and will therefore support the contention that we are morally responsible for our actions.

The third will discuss how free will is compatible with God's Foreknowledge and Divine Will, in a context provided by the Middle Knowledge of Luis de Molina (Molinism) and how this might enable us to "forgive" those who commit evil.

## THE PROBLEM OF FREE WILL

" 'Free Will' is a philosophical term of art for a particular sort of capacity of rational agents to choose a course of action from among various alternatives." Timothy O'Connor, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Timothy O'Connor's definition above of Free Will sets the stage for stating the problem, although one important adverb has been omitted from his definition: rather than "agents to choose" I would write "agents to choose freely". One might also add "after due deliberation and reflection".

What are the objections to Free Will as thus defined?

First, if the universe is deterministic, plays out according to set physical laws, there can be only one future and there can be no free choices. If, as special relativity suggests, that there is a particular past, present and future for each particular reference frame, so that all is encompassed in a block universe and everything is laid out before us, independent of our actions.

Second, if our genes determine our personality, character and intelligence, how can there be different ways for us to choose, and thus to be free?

Third, if, on the other hand, we are formed by economic and social circumstances that mold our morals and attitudes, what ethical options are then open?

Or, if as some would have it, the randomness of quantum mechanics governs our decisions, how can this randomness be reconciled with conscious deliberation and free choice?

Where is the entity within us, the soul, that can act freely?

#### THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE

"By His providence God protects and governs all things which he has made... even those things which are yet to come into existence through the free action of creatures" First Vatican Council, Dei Filius

As a Catholic, I believe in a transcendent, omnipotent and omniscient God. "Omnipotent" means God can do what He wills, all that does not contradict the laws of logic or of necessary truths--God can't and wouldn't make  $2+2=5$  or a four-sided triangle. "Omniscient" means God knows what has happened, is happening, and will happen. God is eternal, so that past, present and future (in any frame of reference) are in His ken. (Not all theologians agree with this last dictum.) Such is Divine Providence, God's omnipotence and His omniscience, including His Foreknowledge, the knowledge of the future.

Thus God knows whether I will do my daily prayer, sleep late and miss Mass tomorrow, get angry at the slow driver in front of me next week,...But if God does know all my actions, past and future, where is my freedom to do differently? Supposedly God has given me free will to choose, but if he knows what I will choose, am I truly free, even if I think I am? That is the problem of reconciling Free Will and God's Foreknowledge.

#### THE PROBLEM OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY.

If we do not have free will can we be held to be morally responsible for evil acts? Insanity--lack of knowledge of the moral implication of our acts--is a defense against murder and claims of "irresistible impulse" have been used to deny guilt.

The Catholic Catechism gives

"Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent."  
1857

The phrase "deliberate consent" implies a free will consent, so we might ask whether addiction, genetic predisposition, socio/psychological factors could be considered mitigating factors. The theologians are not in total agreement, but some do propose that addiction and other conditions negating free will mitigate the gravity of sin. Or, as the Jets proclaim to Officer Krupke in West Side story, "It's just our upbringing that gets us out of hand".

#### THE PROBLEM OF FORGIVENESS

So, what we have to examine in the next posts (Part 39) are:

Do those committing these acts have free will, i.e. do they commit them with "full knowledge and deliberate consent"? Does God know beforehand that these acts of terror will be committed? And, if so what does this say about God permitting evil and allowing free choice?

And, given the answers to those two questions, what does "forgiveness" mean, and how do we effect it?