

Free Will Is Impossible Under Classical Theism

LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

One of the most potent philosophical challenges to traditional Christianity — and one that Latter-day Saint apologists have used offensively against classical theistic traditions — is the argument that classical theism's doctrines of absolute divine omniscience, omnipotence, and creation *ex nihilo* render genuine human free will logically impossible. If God knows every future action infallibly, has the power to alter any circumstance, and created every soul from nothing with complete foreknowledge of its destiny, then human "choices" appear to be predetermined — not genuinely free. This document examines the strongest form of this argument, surveys the major philosophical responses, and articulates the distinctive Latter-day Saint position on divine knowledge, human agency, and the nature of God.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The argument against free will under classical theism proceeds through several interlocking claims:

- 1. The foreknowledge-freedom dilemma:** If God infallibly knows at time T₁ that a person will perform action A at time T₂, then at T₂ the person *cannot* do otherwise than A — for if they did, God's knowledge at T₁ would have been wrong, which contradicts infallibility. If a person cannot do otherwise, they are not free. Therefore, infallible foreknowledge and genuine freedom are logically incompatible.
- 2. Creation ex nihilo compounds the problem:** Classical theism holds that God created everything from nothing — including every human soul. If God created each soul knowing exactly what it would do, experience, and become, then God is the author of every sin and the designer of every damned soul. The creature cannot bear moral responsibility for a nature it did not choose and outcomes its Creator foresaw and chose to instantiate.
- 3. Omnipotence and providence:** If God is omnipotent and governs all things by His providence, then every event — including every human "choice" — occurs either by God's active will or by His permissive will. In either case, the event is ultimately determined by God's decision to create this particular universe with these particular outcomes, rather than a different one.
- 4. The Calvinist endpoint:** Consistent application of these doctrines leads to theological determinism — predestination, unconditional election, irresistible grace. Calvinism is not an aberration of classical theism but its logical conclusion. Many classical theists resist Calvinism but struggle to articulate how, given their premises.
- 5. The moral stakes:** Without genuine free will, praise and blame are meaningless. Eternal reward and eternal punishment for actions that were foreknown and effectively determined by the Creator

constitute cosmic injustice. The entire moral framework of Christianity — sin, repentance, judgment, grace — collapses without libertarian free will.

6. **The problem of hell:** If God created a soul *ex nihilo*, knowing infallibly that it would be damned, then God deliberately created a being for the purpose of eternal suffering. This is morally monstrous and incompatible with a loving God.

This argument is philosophically formidable. It represents one of the deepest tensions in Western theology, debated since Augustine and Pelagius in the 5th century.

3. Biblical Response

Scripture Consistently Assumes Genuine Human Choice

The Bible's moral framework is built on the assumption that human beings make real choices with real consequences:

- **Deuteronomy 30:19** — "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life." The command to "choose" is meaningless if the outcome is already determined.
- **Joshua 24:15** — "Choose you this day whom ye will serve." A genuine choice is presupposed.
- **Ezekiel 18:23, 32** — "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?" God expresses a genuine desire for the wicked to repent — which is incoherent if He determined their wickedness.
- **Matthew 23:37** — "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" Jesus expresses a desire that is frustrated by human free choice. Under classical theism's strong view of sovereignty, God's will cannot be frustrated.
- **1 Timothy 2:4** — "Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." If God wills all to be saved but not all are saved, then either God's will is frustrated (incompatible with classical omnipotence) or human beings have genuine power to resist God's will (genuine free will).
- **James 1:13-14** — "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed." Moral responsibility is placed squarely on the individual.

The Biblical Concept of God's Knowledge May Not Require Exhaustive Deterministic Foreknowledge

Several biblical passages present God's knowledge in terms that are difficult to reconcile with absolute, exhaustive determinism:

- **Genesis 22:12** — After Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac: "Now I know that thou fearest God." The phrasing suggests a genuine discovery, not a confirmation of what was already infallibly known.

- **Exodus 32:14** — "And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people." God changes His course of action — language that is difficult under strong immutability.
- **Jeremiah 26:3** — "If so be they will hearken, and turn every man from his evil way, that I may repent me of the evil, which I purpose to do unto them." The "if" presupposes genuine contingency.
- **Jonah 3:10** — "God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them."

These passages demonstrate that the Bible's own portrait of God is more complex and dynamic than classical theism's static, fully-determined model.

4. Early Christian/Historical Evidence

The Patristic Debate

The tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom has been contested since the earliest centuries of Christianity:

- **Irenaeus** (*Against Heresies* 4.37.1-6, c. 180 AD): Strongly affirmed libertarian free will. "God made man a free agent from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God."
- **Origen** (*De Principiis* 3.1, c. 230 AD): Argued extensively for free will, insisting that God's foreknowledge does not cause events: "It is not because God knows that something will happen that it happens, but because it is going to happen that God knows it."
- **Augustine** (*On Free Choice of the Will; City of God*): Defended both free will and divine sovereignty but introduced the concept of predestination that created lasting tension. His later anti-Pelagian writings moved toward a stronger determinism that influenced Calvin.
- **John Damascene** (*An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 2.25-30, c. 730 AD): Maintained the Eastern Orthodox position that divine foreknowledge does not cause or determine human actions. "God knows all things beforehand, but He does not predetermine all things."
- **Thomas Aquinas** (*Summa Theologica* I, Q.14, A.13; Q.19, A.8): Attempted to reconcile divine omniscience with free will through the concept of God's timeless, eternal "now" — God does not *fore*-know but simply *knows* all events in an eternal present. This is sophisticated but has been challenged by modern philosophers (notably William Hasker and Dean Zimmerman) as not genuinely resolving the problem.

The Reformation Divide

- **Martin Luther** (*The Bondage of the Will*, 1525): Denied libertarian free will entirely. Human beings are either ridden by God or by the devil; they do not choose their rider.
- **John Calvin** (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.21-24): Taught double predestination — God actively elects some to salvation and reprobates others to damnation, unconditionally and irresistibly.
- **Jacob Arminius and the Remonstrants**: Pushed back against Calvinist determinism, arguing for conditional election based on foreseen faith — but still within the classical theistic framework of

exhaustive foreknowledge.

The history demonstrates that this tension is not a Latter-day Saint invention but a genuine, unresolved problem within classical Christian theology.

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

Agency as a Foundational Doctrine

Latter-day Saint theology places human agency at the center of the plan of salvation:

- **2 Nephi 2:14-16** — "Wherefore, the Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other."
- **2 Nephi 2:26-27** — "And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon... Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh... And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life... or to choose captivity and death."
- **D&C 93:30-31** — "All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence. Behold, here is the agency of man."
- **D&C 101:78** — "That every man may act in doctrine and principle pertaining to futurity, according to the moral agency which I have given unto him, that every man may be accountable in the day of judgment for his own sins."
- **Moses 4:3** — Satan's plan was rejected precisely because it sought "to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him." Agency is so central that a plan to remove it was the cause of the cosmic rebellion.

Intelligences Are Co-Eternal with God

The most distinctive element of the Latter-day Saint solution is the denial of creation *ex nihilo* for human souls:

- **D&C 93:29** — "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be."
- **Abraham 3:18** — "If there be two spirits, and one shall be more intelligent than the other, yet these two spirits, notwithstanding one is more intelligent than the other, have no beginning; they always existed, they shall have no end."

Because intelligences are co-eternal with God and were not created *ex nihilo*, God is not the author of their essential nature. God organized and shaped spirits from pre-existing intelligences, but He did not create them from nothing. This eliminates the strongest version of the determinism objection: God cannot be blamed for creating defective beings destined for damnation, because He did not create the fundamental intelligence that constitutes each individual.

God's Omniscience Is Compatible with Genuine Freedom

Latter-day Saint theology offers multiple frameworks for understanding how God's knowledge relates to human freedom:

1. **Foreknowledge without causation:** God can know what free agents will choose without that knowledge causing their choices — just as a historian who studies past events thoroughly can know what happened without having caused it. Knowledge does not entail causation. Origen articulated this position in the 3rd century.
2. **Open theism elements:** Some Latter-day Saint thinkers (notably Blake Ostler) have argued that God's omniscience may not include exhaustive foreknowledge of free choices — that God knows all that is knowable, but genuinely free future choices may not be "facts" until they are made. This is consistent with D&C 93:30 ("All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself").
3. **God's knowledge is dynamic, not static:** Unlike classical theism's timeless, immutable God, the Latter-day Saint God exists within time and can interact dynamically with genuinely free agents. God's knowledge can include contingent knowledge — knowledge of what free agents will probably do, based on perfect understanding of their character — without requiring deterministic foreknowledge.

The Premortal Council and Genuine Choice

The Latter-day Saint doctrine of the premortal existence provides the most robust framework for meaningful moral agency:

- **Abraham 3:22-28** — God presented a plan. Christ offered to be the Redeemer. Satan proposed an alternative. Spirits chose which plan to follow. One-third of the hosts of heaven chose Satan's plan and were cast out. This was a genuine, consequential choice made by free agents.
- The premortal choice demonstrates that agency precedes mortality — it is not something granted at birth but something inherent to intelligence itself.

The Problem of Hell Is Resolved

Classical theism faces the devastating objection that God creates souls *ex nihilo* knowing they will be eternally damned. Latter-day Saint theology resolves this:

- **No creation ex nihilo of souls:** Intelligences are co-eternal with God. God did not choose to create beings He knew would be damned.
- **No eternal hell in the classical sense:** D&C 76 describes degrees of glory (celestial, terrestrial, telestial) — all of which are kingdoms of glory. Even the telestial kingdom "surpasses all understanding" (D&C 76:89). Outer darkness is reserved only for sons of perdition who have a perfect knowledge and then deny it — an exceedingly narrow category.
- **Agency is preserved even in judgment:** Each person receives the kingdom suited to the degree of glory they are willing to receive. Judgment is not arbitrary election but the natural consequence of free choices.

6. Key Scriptures

- **2 Nephi 2:14-16, 26-27** — Agency is foundational; human beings are "free to choose"
- **D&C 93:29-31** — Intelligence is co-eternal with God and cannot be created or made; "here is the agency of man"
- **Moses 4:3** — Satan's plan rejected because it destroyed agency
- **Abraham 3:18, 22-28** — Intelligences are eternal; premortal council involved genuine choice
- **Deuteronomy 30:19** — "Choose life" — genuine choice presupposed
- **Joshua 24:15** — "Choose you this day whom ye will serve"
- **Ezekiel 18:23, 32** — God desires repentance — incoherent under determinism
- **Matthew 23:37** — Jesus's desire frustrated by human choice
- **1 Timothy 2:4** — God wills all to be saved (not all are — implying genuine freedom)
- **James 1:13-14** — Moral responsibility placed on the individual
- **D&C 76:89-92** — Degrees of glory; no eternal hell for the vast majority
- **D&C 101:78** — Moral agency given so each may be accountable
- **D&C 121:41-44** — God's power operates by persuasion, not compulsion

7. Responses to Common Objections

"If God doesn't have exhaustive foreknowledge, He isn't truly omniscient."

Omniscience means knowing all that is knowable. If genuinely free future choices are not "facts" until they are made (because they are contingent on free agency), then they are not objects of knowledge — and not knowing them does not limit omniscience. God can still know all possibilities, all probabilities, the character of every agent, and every consequence of every possible choice. This is a robustly omniscient God — just not a deterministic one. This position is articulated by philosophers such as William Hasker, Richard Swinburne, and (within LDS thought) Blake Ostler.

"The LDS view makes God too limited."

The LDS view makes God genuine rather than abstractly absolute. A God who interacts with genuinely free agents, who can be surprised, grieved, and delighted by real choices, is a more personal and morally meaningful God than a God who already knows every outcome and merely watches a predetermined script unfold. The "limitation" is a feature, not a bug — it is what makes divine-human relationships authentic.

"Isn't this just Open Theism? That's a minority view."

Some elements of the LDS position parallel Open Theism, but the LDS framework is broader and rests on additional distinctive doctrines (co-eternal intelligences, embodied God, premortal existence, degrees of glory) that Open Theism does not share. Additionally, the fact that a view is a minority view does not make it wrong. Trinitarian Christianity was a minority view in the 1st century.

"Classical theists have solved this problem — Aquinas's 'eternal now,' Molinism, etc."

These are sophisticated proposals, but each has recognized difficulties:

- **Aquinas's "eternal now"**: If God sees all events in an eternal present, those events are still fixed from the human temporal perspective. The problem is relocated, not solved. William Hasker's critique in *God, Time, and Knowledge* is particularly forceful.
- **Molinism (middle knowledge)**: Posits that God knows what every possible free agent would do in every possible circumstance, and then chooses which circumstances to actualize. Critics argue this still makes God the ultimate determiner of outcomes — He chooses the world in which specific people make specific choices and are damned for them.
- **Compatibilism**: Redefines "free" to mean "acting according to one's strongest desire" rather than "ability to do otherwise." Many philosophers (and most ordinary people) find this redefinition unsatisfying — it calls determined actions "free" by linguistic fiat.

"If intelligences are co-eternal with God, then God is not truly sovereign."

God remains sovereign in all the ways that matter: He organized the cosmos, established the plan of salvation, provided the Atonement, and governs by wisdom, love, and persuasion (D&C 121:41-44). Sovereignty exercised over genuinely free agents through persuasion and love is more morally admirable than sovereignty exercised over puppets through control. The scriptures describe God's power as operating "by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned" (D&C 121:41) — a description that presupposes subjects who can resist but choose not to.

"This undermines God's ability to guarantee His promises."

God's ability to fulfill His promises does not depend on determinism. A God with perfect knowledge of every agent's character, unlimited power, and infinite wisdom can navigate the choices of free agents to achieve His purposes — just as a master chess player can win against any opponent without controlling their moves. God's promises are guaranteed by His character and power, not by predestination.

8. Conclusion

The argument that classical theism's omniscience and omnipotence make free will impossible is philosophically serious and has generated centuries of unresolved debate within traditional Christianity. The Latter-day Saint tradition offers the most robust solution to this problem in all of Christian theology. By affirming that intelligences are co-eternal with God (D&C 93:29) and not created *ex nihilo*, that agency is the foundational principle of existence (D&C 93:30-31; Moses 4:3), that God operates within time rather than outside it, and that judgment results in degrees of glory rather than binary heaven/hell, Latter-day Saint theology preserves genuine libertarian free will while maintaining a meaningful, powerful, and personal God. The classical theistic alternatives — Thomistic timelessness, Molinism, compatibilism — are philosophically sophisticated but each faces recognized difficulties. The

LDS framework avoids the deterministic implications that have plagued Western theology since Augustine, resolves the problem of hell, and provides the metaphysical grounding for the moral seriousness of human choice that the gospel requires.

Further Reading:

- [Agency – ChurchofJesusChrist.org](http://ChurchofJesusChrist.org)
- [FairLatterdaySaints: God's Foreknowledge and Free Will](#)
- Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Attributes of God*
- David Paulsen, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and (William) James," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*
- William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*