

**VALERIE MACKAY****Divine sovereignty, personal freedom and indeterminacy**


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**Key Words:** Chance, control of events, creation, divine sovereignty, indeterminacy, personal freedom.

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In the last issue of *Science and Christian Belief*,<sup>1</sup> passing reference was made by Dr. Polkinghorne to Donald MacKay's ideas on 'personal freedom' and to their supposed origin in a 'Calvinist desire for too tight a control by divine sovereignty'. Dr. Polkinghorne was moving fast and it seems to me that two or three matters, which are separate, are telescoped into half a paragraph, with the result that a rather confusing and inaccurate impression is left of my husband's views.

**Room for Manoeuvre?**

The general context was the question, which Dr. Houghton had mentioned<sup>2</sup> in thinking of our Creator's relationship to his world, as to whether we need think of God as requiring room for 'manoeuvre'. A second and different question, to which Dr. Polkinghorne then moves, is that of human freedom: is there room for our freedom within what has been called 'the iron chain of cause and effect'? A third major problem, implied by the mention of Calvin, is the further theological one as to whether we can be truly free, if our Creator determines all.

The linking thought here, I take it, is the difficulty of envisaging 'room' for freedom—ours or God's—in situations which may appear to be, in one way or another, fully determined.

Initially it was to put the record straight on the question of human freedom that I took up my pen. Donald MacKay's thoughts on it did not in fact originate in a theological context but in a severely technical one, and anyone who cares to look again at his readable first paper on the subject<sup>3</sup> will see that he treated the matter strictly as a question of logic—a matter no more dependent upon one's theological predilections than is, say, Pythagoras' theorem. (We return to this in section 3 below.) But since Dr. Polkinghorne has intertwined these three questions, technical and theological, in the context of my husband's name, I feel some further sorting out is called for, and I will plunge in and deal first with the theological perspective which seems to be at the heart of the matter.

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1 *Science and Christian Belief* Vol. 1 (2), p. 126, (1989).

2 *Science and Christian Belief* Vol. 1 (1), p. 49, (1989).

3 *Mind* LXIX N. S. N. S. 40, p. 273, 1960.

I cannot claim to be a perfect mouthpiece for my late husband, but offer below a few extracts from his writings with some connecting remarks of my own. The extracts are drawn principally from my husband's Gifford lectures which Blackwell's are publishing in about August 1990. These contain much further material relevant to these topics.

And God said, let there be . . . and it was so.

Before him we are as grasshoppers; and yet He seems to encourage us to try—not too bumptiously—to form some images of the activity of Him who framed the stars. Why does He give us the words of Genesis if not to fill and support our minds with some sort of mental pictures of His unimaginable relationship to His creation?

And God said . . ., and God saw . . ., and God created . . . In this astonishing sequence we seem to be bidden to think of the creation as something spoken by God—rather like an utterance or a word: 'He upholdeth all things by the word of his power'. And of course over the years people have tried to do justice to such statements, at the same time as doing justice to their experience of the lawfulness of the natural world, or its wickedness, or the reality of human choice. All analogies have their limits, and I suppose one thing He expects of us is not to overpress the images he gives us at points where they are manifestly inadequate. The images of the Bible prod us to think big, and to think total about the Creator.

## 1. The Creator's 'Freedom'

Let us begin then with Dr. Polkinghorne's phrase 'too tight a control by divine sovereignty.' Certainly my husband held what some might call a strong view of God's sovereignty. He often quoted the text from Proverbs 'the lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.' He wrote, 'It seems to me biblically undeniable that God as Creator is sovereign in every twist and turn of every man's daily life.' But the word 'control' above was not his, and indeed he was vigorously opposed to the notion of 'control' as applied to a creator who is in some sense the Author of all that is. If Shakespeare lays down his pen while writing *Hamlet*, the population of Elsinor do not scamper about 'free of control'. And such thought is ludicrously inappropriate. Independently of Shakespeare Elsinor and all its events have no existence—and the same applies to any world held in being by a creator who speaks and it is so.

### *Divine 'control'?*

. . . The term 'theism' I will be using to refer to the idea that our world owes its being to a personal Author who is immanent in the events of our world, in the sense that if it were not for his continuing power as author, there would be no more events. . . .

It would be inept, I suggest, to speak of the divine author, so

conceived, as 'controlling' the random events in his creation—or for that matter any of the events in his creation. To control is to act under evaluation of the action. An author is precisely not an actor in his own creation. If you write a story about John and Mary, then you are not, as author, one of the actors in the story. You determine the contents of the story, but you don't control events in the story: you give being to the whole story. Your relation as the author, although determinative in an important sense, is quite different from that of controller. A controller is a denizen of the world created, with more or less power to select and determine form, by action within the world. Authors, by contrast, don't act. They utter and it is so.

So my first point about God-talk in relation to our world is that the sovereignty of an author is not to be confused with the sovereignty of a controller. It is a sovereignty, as we shall see, but it is not that of a controller. By the same token, the idea (put out by, for example, John Habgood and Bartholomew and others) that God doesn't control chance processes, but 'uses' them in the control of his world is, I suggest inept, if by 'God' we are talking of the Author. If God is the author of our space-time, then random processes are not the sort of thing that he has to 'use': He simply says, and they are. He doesn't use them to control anything else because as an author he hasn't got any controlling to do, he has merely uttering to do—he utters and it is: that's what a theistic concept of divine authorship, I believe, means.

Of unpredictable events whether deterministic or not, he wrote:

. . . If you are a theist at all, you see, your view is that the content of the author's drama, the author's space-time, is up to the Author. It is entirely up to him if he wishes some of the events to be events which inhabitants of the created world will recognise as 'random' and others as law-abiding. It is entirely for him to say what degree of coherence there is between events. But apart from his creative fiat, none of these events will take place, whether we classify them as random or not. Random events are no less within his creative sovereignty than events which we call law-abiding.

In my husband's view, therefore, God's 'freedom' and human personal freedom are not all analogous . . . God is Author, we are actors. God is not a force in the material world needing space to manipulate or control it.

## **2. On Personal Freedom**

Dr. Polkinghorne's teasing phrase 'an essay in squaring the circle' may leave the impression that my husband was trying to prove something impossible and abstruse. This is a pity since:

- a. he was in fact drawing attention to something within the everyday experience of all of us, and
- b. his purpose was not so much to prove that we have free will as to

scupper the argument one frequently hears that 'we are under an illusion in thinking that we have it.'

Perhaps I may tell a little tale to convey in everyday language and circumstance the flavour of what my husband was pointing to:

A child is departing to school for the first day of O-levels. Her mother says, 'Don't worry, you are sure to do all right.' Now the child can see that, on past showing, her mother and everyone else can reasonably hold that belief. She even knows, as she thinks wistfully ahead to the evening, that with a day of hard work behind her she may reach the state of being able to hold it herself. But the hard work has to be done first—of avoiding misreading questions, of choosing the most suitable ones, of bringing the right material to mind and getting it down in writing. At every stage there are innumerable possibilities of making a mess of things. For the candidate, until at least two thirds of the answers are safely transferred to ink on paper there can be no certainty about the results. To lean back and think, along with everyone back home, 'Relax, she is sure to do all right' would be a recipe for disaster. Momentarily this thought offers itself to her as something comfortable to cling onto, but as she sees that this will mean she will not work with the same degree of concentration, she weighs it as untenable for her and pushes it away. This belief, which could have a place in everyone else's head, must not be allowed in her own. Never had she felt quite so lonely.

We have here the essentials of a choice situation. Of set purpose a policy is selected and pursued.

### ***Logical Relativity***

The aspect of the situation to which my husband drew attention under the name 'logical relativity' was the odd fact that what detached spectators can (rightly) believe about an agent's future will in general be different from what the chooser and actor (rightly) thinks and believes about his or her own particular bit of the future. Indeed only if the actor holds to his or her lonely course in their minority of one, will the prediction that is valid for the majority work out to be the case. The actor, let us say, believes (as most of us do in innumerable circumstances of our lives) that the situation is open and the outcome 'up to me'. The detached spectators (granted, where necessary, a degree of insight known only to science fiction) base their prediction upon that situation and are able to see the outcome.

### ***'Freedom an Illusion'?***

The trap into which some people then slip is to say: Well, if all those spectators could rightly believe that genes, environment, circumstances, brain processes would lead to a certain outcome, then the agent in question ought to have been able to believe it too—and so was under an illusion in thinking that the outcome was still unclosed and up to them. This claim that the chooser was under an illusion implies that there was something else that she ought to have believed. But we have seen already that she cannot believe what everyone else believes or she will relax and do badly.

Indeed if *any* belief other than her present one (that the outcome is up to her) could somehow be injected into her brain, she would no longer be in the state on which the prediction which everyone else holds was based. Only with her present beliefs will she fulfil their expectations. So she is not under any 'illusion'.

### **3. On the Origin of the Logical Indeterminacy Argument**

Finally, was there any historical foundation for the phrase 'encouraged by a Calvinist desire' in connection with the above argument? Let me quote again:<sup>4</sup>

You might think that this was just the sort of argument someone who wants to believe in freewill dresses up to make it sound plausible. In fact, historically, I stumbled across it from a quite different direction. In the late 1940s a small group of scientists with a common interest in brain mechanics began to meet for informal discussions at the National Hospital in London. It called itself the Ratio Club, and A. M. Turing, Horace Barlow and some twenty others were members. Some of us were interested in electrical recording from the brain, and at one of our sessions (I think in 1952) I presented a curious paradox that I had stumbled across by asking what would happen if one were able to use what I called a 'cerebroscope' to study the workings of my own brain. It became clear that there would be one region of the brain which would not merely be unobservable by me, but which could not have a specification with an unconditional claim to my assent. All that I have been saying (about logical indeterminacy) follows from that.

#### ***The Logical Indeterminacy Argument***

As can be seen from the above, the matter was a logical one—though obviously not without theological overtones and implications. The essential point is that a system which is capable of embodying representations of states of affairs is going to be in trouble when it tries to make a representation of the part of its own embodiment that contains that representation. There must be part of itself of which it logically cannot make a representation. This is what my husband meant by describing as 'indeterminate' (for the agent and those in dialogue with him) the state of that part of an agent's embodiment.

It may be worth trying to spell out yet again what my husband was (and was not) saying about freewill. He took as a given our firm subjective conviction that we do at times make choices and decisions. What he was doing was dismissing the oft-repeated argument that, because cause and effect operates in the mechanisms of our brains, 'the firm subjective conviction that we have freewill' is 'an illusion'. A key move in that

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<sup>4</sup> This was part of a reply to a question in Glasgow in November 1986. Substantially the same account will be found in 'Choice in a Mechanistic Universe', *Brit. J. Phil. Sci.* 22, 275–285, 1971, where the indeterminacy argument is further spelled out.

argument is that if a belief is valid for one it is valid for all. By drawing attention to the fact that in the particular self-referring case of beliefs about oneself this is not universally the case, he showed the non-sequitur in that argument. To quote again:

It becomes useful to recognise what I have called a principle of relativity such that when the observer, the super-scientist, is correct to believe what he believes about your state of conditional readiness, we can then ask, what is it that you would be correct to believe about it? Because you certainly would not be correct to believe his story. And what he is correct to believe is not that there is 'room' in the sense of vague wishy-washy, indeterminate, random relations between prior and later events in his mental activity, but that there are quite precise, corresponding, correlated connections between the way he thinks, evaluates and chooses and the immediate future of his state of conditional readiness. In that sense then, we have not just an easy, neutral cohabitation of the deterministic outside observer's view and the voluntaristic agent's view. The two fit as neatly as hand and glove.

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