

EDITORIAL: FREEDOM CONFERENCE SPECIAL EDITION

Nicola Hoggard Creegan
New Zealand Christians in Science

Many thanks to the editors of *PJTR* for the opportunity to guest edit this issue of the journal on behalf of New Zealand Christians in Science. Thanks especially to Christa McKirland who supported and participated in the NZCIS Freedom Conference at Maclaurin Chapel in February 2022. There we had two days of interesting offerings from multi-disciplinary perspectives on the issue of freedom, widely defined in theology, philosophy and the sciences. This issue of *PJTR* features four of those papers. They all cover new ground, not being simply re-hashings of old arguments around free will or otherwise. I would highly recommend each of them, with their different styles and modes of argument. Three are from New Zealand based scholars and the fourth is by a PhD candidate at the University of St Andrew's, Drew Everhart, who nevertheless raises the important issue of corporate responsibility, something we should understand particularly well in New Zealand where Treaty considerations are routinely incorporated into public discourse. Yael Cameron's paper is on the Southern Ocean and the freedom of the animal in relationship to God, another concern very relevant to our South Sea location in the world. Christa McKirland interacts with the sciences of psychology, parsing the paradoxes of autonomy and relatedness relative to other persons and to God. And John Owens takes seriously the difference that agency makes in the overall problem of freedom.

I have long been interested in the problem of freedom. I grew up around behaviourists and read B.F. Skinner early, and disagreed with him in an incoherent way. But reading Jonathan Edwards and Friedrich Schleiermacher in graduate school I was amazed that they essentially argued in a similar way about freedom: there is no break in the web of causality, libertarians were wrong to say we were radically free, but nevertheless, we were responsible because we were agents.¹ Their arguments were modern in the sense that they were looking at ordinary language patterns. What do we mean when we talk of freedom? But they also interacted with the science of the day and, especially in Edwards' case, with the work of Newton on causality. They were not primarily defending God's freedom or our depravity as was sometimes the case in free will arguments involving God. They could, however, see that the embrace of randomness was not going to work for freedom: in that way lay madness. Their arguments have relevance even today when we are more inclined than ever to play the quantum card as the way out of a deterministic universe.

Since then, I became convinced that compatibilism is not really coherent, or at least is insufficient. But also, that there is deep paradox at the heart of all arguments about freedom. We minimize concerns in

¹ See Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); Schleiermacher, *On Freedom*, trans. Albert L. Blackwell, vol. 9, Schleiermacher: Studies-and-Translations (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1992).

areas of causality, autonomy, community, or responsibility as we see fit for the sake of cognitive ease and coherence. I was also convinced that agency was indeed a code for something different about the freedom of humans or even indeed sentient creatures in general. Freedom, in other words, had something to do with agency and self-determination or self-mastery, rather than just the parsing of the grammar of choice and different future possibilities.

Nevertheless, humans feel the burden of freedom *in* choice. Having to act in ignorance of the future is a source of anxiety, as well as gift. Elizabeth Johnson makes clear that this is the kind of freedom Jesus must have had because it is so essential to being human.² And courts of law, parents and authorities hold people responsible for choices, when it is deemed they acted contrary to moral law, or when they should have been able to anticipate the repercussions of their actions.

But we know that in spite of our anxiety, neuroscience now shows us how little consciousness and deliberation is a part of ordinary decision making. This was unknown in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And nobody can deny that neuroscience tells us what should be obvious anyway, that we do an awful lot on automatic pilot. Everyone does. For this reason, increasingly, secular neuroscientists are coming out as determinists all over the place.³ They still think dangerous people should be taken off the streets, but not held responsible. I would concur that there is indeed a lot of behaviour which we have to admit is beyond our control, and even conscious knowledge. Habits of thought and prejudice are embedded early through language itself, the culture and the family. More basic reactions are genetically determined and common to the species. Confabulation seems to come easily to most of us in certain contexts and states. Dreadful circumstances, toxins in the water, dysfunctional and oppressive communities over generations, bad throws of the genetic die, or even gut bacteria can push the balance away from normal. We all inherited a basic human nature which crossed the species boundary, with propensities to cooperation, altruism, hyper-co-operation and socialization, and with accompanying potential to either heroism or atrocity. The context and community matter, as well as agency.

And in spite of neuroscience we are not just complex machines. In spite of brain science, I think we are very far from understanding human consciousness. And it is good to step back and say, as the flatlanders had to, look it is possible to go from A to B, even though we don't know how.⁴ Thomas Pinker reminds, us that we deny all freedom at a huge cost, and that the common human intuitions around freedom must be taken seriously.⁵ Freedom may be like movement in three dimension for Flatlanders. We can see it is possible, but we can't understand it. We can nevertheless see indirectly that human consciousness/mind is not a machine, and we can get glimpses of this in all manner of different disciplines and lenses.

² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1996)

³ See for instance, Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (London: Penguin, 2017), 568; Sam Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

⁴ Edwin Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (New York: Dover, 1992/1884).

⁵ Thomas Pink, *Free Will, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 68.

One of the big discussion points around freedom is the way in which freedom and autonomy seem to be defined against each other, but science and further reflection shows us they are in fact deeply related. Communities do seem to either free us or bind us, as per the binding and loosing of the Gospel of Matthew (Matt 16:19). Several of this issue's papers speak to this paradox.

Andy Everhart asks are we our brothers' keepers? In other words, given the very real sense in which identity and formation and cognitive development are social and corporate, how can I be said to be autonomous enough to be responsible? Everhart flips this argument on its head, arguing that corporate belonging does not eliminate a degree of personal autonomy; rather autonomy grows out of cognitive skills acquired through shared attention and belonging. They are mutually enhancing, even though often defined against each other. Furthermore, we are responsible to help create the conditions of virtue in those in our care.

Christa McKirland, who did her PhD at the University of St Andrew's and is now teaching at Carey Baptist College in Auckland, starts with the psychology of Basic Human Needs Theory, which advocates for both autonomy and relatedness as non-reducible basic human needs, and she extends the latter to relationship to God. In this context, she argues that a second-personal relationship with God is a human need, partially enacting the telos of humanity, and the definition of flourishing and freedom, which is union with God. But God, properly understood. The freedom and autonomy of God, she argues makes the relationship with God more genuine and more beneficial than the sense of an attachment to a God who *must* relate to us, or is angry with us or distant from us.

And John Owens, who has long taught at the Roman Catholic seminary in Auckland, covers a huge amount of ground in a few pages, elegantly articulating the dilemmas around our intuition that we (and other animals) are agents and not just collections of molecules, and that freedom, when it comes, can feel as inevitable as its opposite, the "bondage to sin" (Rom 6:20). In these arguments it is accessing an adequate vocabulary that helps, in this case, the discourse around self-reflection, agents "settling things," moving into "personal life," seeing truth as a whole, and moving towards the completion or telos of one's life. In the end, he argues for and shows the gap between the agent and the collection of molecules is real, in spite of the ever-present worry that the materialists have all the bases covered. But he too emphasizes the importance of other persons in an individual's awakening *into* freedom.

The last paper, by Yael Cameron takes us into an imaginative journey in another related direction—the agency and perhaps freedom of the animal relating to God. In a short and powerful essay, she reflects on Rilke's poem, *Duineser Elegien*, imagining the whale to be more free and more directly related to God than are we, in our angst ridden, self-absorbed lives. The poem, and Yael's essay achieves the goal of upending and questioning our self-importance and superiority, arguing implicitly that animal sentience, especially amongst a handful of intelligent social creatures, might be profound in ways we have lost—echoes of fallenness, perhaps. And echoes, too, of Auden's lament in Europe on the brink of war: "Went down

the harbour and stood upon the quay/ Saw the fish swimming if they were free.”⁶ However we understand freedom a renewed relationship to nature and its creatures (and through nature to God) can only improve our often narrow perspectives, and our relationship with God and other humans.

Nicola Hoggard Creegan

Guest Editor of *The Pacific Journal of Theological Research*

⁶ W.H Auden, “Refugee Blues,” in *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957* (London: Faber& Faber, 2003).