

Free will: a discussion of erasmus of rotterdam vs. martin luther

[Philosophy](#)



Erasmus of Rotterdam vs. Martin Luther

Erasmus Argument #1:

God gives no reason to live a pious life if free will is nonexistent and the fate of salvation has been predetermined. If even the lives of the “ most pious men are sinful,” God gives no merit to the actions of those being judged, making the judgment behind salvation pointless (Erasmus, p. 684). All of the “ warnings, precepts, threats, exhortations, and innumerable demands” put forth by Him also have no purpose behind them (Erasmus, p. 685). God would have no reason to demand one to struggle and contend for his eternal life if it was already determined prior to anything he had done. Free will must exist for man to act according to the way God intended him to and to earn his salvation.

Luther Rebuttal:

Men who live pious lives do so not for the sole purpose of salvation, but instead, because they know that this is the only way they can truly dedicate themselves to Him and His will. These men already understand that they have no power when it comes to whether or not they are saved, but it is God alone who makes that decision. These men “ fear God” and are “ humbled.” “ The rest resist this humiliation; nay, they condemn the teaching of self-desperation; they wish to have left a little something that they may do themselves (Luther, p. 701).” It is by giving up the thought of free will and dedicating oneself to Him that a pious life is achieved.

Erasmus Argument #2:

We cannot take credit for our “ good works,” nor can we take credit for our “ bad works (Erasmus, p. 687).” If free will does not exist, God must then place the ability to do the evil works in all men along with any good works. This would force God to have to punish his own works, which cannot be when considering “ what He does can only be the best and the most beautiful (Erasmus, p. 687).” It is a paradox to believe God rewards those who He places good in and punishes those He places evil in. Free will must exist in order for there to be a reason behind God punishing his own creations.

Luther Rebuttal:

Everything God does is just and has purpose behind it. It is by faith that we can believe God to be just and merciful when not allowing all to be saved. It is the “ highest degree of faith- to believe that He is merciful, who saves so few and damns so many.” God created us to be “ necessarily damnable (Luther, p. 701).” It is only by His divine grace and will that some are saved, not by our own free will.

Erasmus Argument #3:

God grants us the ability to be saved, but it is by free will that we take the necessary actions to receive this salvation. “ Grace is the principal cause, and the will is the secondary cause (Erasmus, p. 686).” It is up to man to accept the grace, through his pious actions and dedication to God, which is presented to him. By this statement, man also owes “ all his salvation to the reception of divine grace (Erasmus, p. 687).” God created free will for man to use, but all a man’s free will relies on God acting in him first. This idea leaves the door open for man to live his life for God with an actual purpose.

Luther Rebuttal:

The principal cause you speak of should be thought of as the only cause. Man can only act after God himself willed him to act. God performs all actions in us that lead to salvation. "When God is not present with us to work in us, everything that we do is evil, and that we of necessity do those things which are of no avail unto salvation (Luther, p. 702)." Free will in man is nothing but God's own will. God does not give man the power to act, unknowing of what he will do with his actions.

Luther Argument #1:

To be saved, a man must accept the fact that he alone has no control over whether he is saved or not. He must accept that it is up to God alone. A man must see and accept that free will has no role in his salvation. A confidence in oneself that he alone can influence his fate through free will means that he is not truly humbled by God as he should be. Those with a hope of being saved must be "humbled and brought down to nothing, [then] they might be saved (Luther, p. 701)." The removal of the idea of free will is the humbling needed.

Erasmus Rebuttal:

It is by free will that we see and accept that we have little control when it comes to His decision of our fate, and by free will that we still work towards salvation. It should not be that "one may expect with confident faith the reward of eternal life, not because his good works have merited it, but because it seemed good to the divine charity to promise it to His faithful." It is up to man "to adore His power in all things, to marvel at His wisdom, and to love His goodness everywhere (Erasmus, p. 684)." Man needs to

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understand how little he is in God's eyes and that he could not be saved on his acts alone, but that gives man no excuse to overlook the works he must perform himself to reach salvation.

Luther Argument #2:

God does not will in ignorance, but instead, " his knowledge is eternal and immovable (Luther, p. 698)." " He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His immutable, eternal, and infallible will (Luther, p. 697)." Free will cannot influence what God has already decided upon. All of his decisions are final. He makes no decision without seeing through that the absolute end of that decision is carried out. His will is what is always carried out, leaving no room for free will.

Erasmus Rebuttal:

God would not expect us to dedicate our lives to him if his decision on our salvation was predetermined. " Why does He wish to be prayed to endlessly for that which He has already decreed to grant or not to grant, since being immutable He cannot change his decrees (Erasmus, p. 685)?" God would not be just if he damned with impunity and chose to " condemn to eternal punishments those in whom He has not deigned to work good (Erasmus, p. 686)." To be just, God would need to bring every man into life with the equal chance of salvation. This equal chance is given through man's ability to have a free will, and through this free will man can satiate God's desire for a life of dedication.

Luther Argument #3:

God must always work in man first before man can perform any act leading to his salvation. “ It is not we ourselves, but God only, that works salvation in us, it must follow... that we do nothing unto salvation before the working of God in us (Luther, p. 702)...” God’s will in us what controls everything we do. All things happen through his will alone, proving there to be no free will. There is nothing man does of his own free will that God had not already known he would do.

Erasmus Rebuttal:

It is true that nothing can be accomplished without God’s grace, but the free will of man also matters in these accomplishments. “ All things have three parts, a beginning, a development, and a completion (Erasmus, p. 686).” The grace of God controls both the beginning and completion, leaving the development to free will. It is apparent that “ man owes all his salvation to the reception of divine grace,” but he must first live his life piously to accept this gift that which was made available to him through divine grace.