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HUMAN AGENCY IN BIBLICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: IMAGE, COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES, CHOICE, AND THE LIMITS OF CONSEQUENCE

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Abstract

This study seeks to clarify the nature and boundaries of human agency within biblical anthropology. It examines how the imago Dei and the communication of certain divine attributes ground the human capacity for genuine moral choice, while simultaneously establishing why finite agents cannot determine the severity, scope, or ultimate outcomes of those choices. Human agency, remains structurally incapable of determining, controlling, or foreseeing the ultimate magnitude, severity, and scope of their actions' consequences (Jere 4:18;17:10; Ezek 36:19). The argument proceeds through close theological and exegetical analysis of primary biblical texts (Genesis 1–4; Deuteronomy 30:19; selected wisdom, prophetic, and New Testament passages), integrated with classical Christian sources (Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin) and standard systematic distinctions between communicable and incommunicable attributes (Berkhof, Grudem, Horton, Hoekema, Erickson). Contemporary philosophical accounts of agency and free will are engaged only insofar as they illuminate or corroborate the biblical-theological claims. The study establishes that human agency is grounded in the imago Dei through the impartation of divine communicable attributes—such as rationality, moral discernment, and volition—which distinguish humans from other earthly creatures as accountable moral agents. However, this capacity for choice is bounded by five structural limits of finite creaturehood: epistemic finitude, systemic complexity and interdependencies, the postlapsarian disordering of the will, the overriding nature of divine providence, and the intrinsic moral structure of creation. Consequently, an asymmetrical relationship exists between an agent's ability to initiate a choice and their inability to control or master its downstream

results. The capacity for choice is a genuine gift of the imago Dei; sovereignty over outcomes belongs exclusively to the Creator. This asymmetry is not a defect but a constitutive feature of creaturely existence. It preserves both authentic human responsibility and the integrity of divine governance, calling agents to exercise freedom with humility, urgency, and trust rather than presumptuous control. However, the paper argues that the inability to determine outcomes is not a defect or failure of the created order, but a constitutive feature of finite creaturehood under sovereign divine providence. This structural asymmetry properly maintains human moral responsibility without encroaching upon divine governance, demonstrating that human agency is real and morally weighty, yet strictly non-sovereign.

Keywords: Human Agency, Scripture, Anthropology, Imago Dei, Choice

Introduction: Human Agency in Biblical Anthropology

Biblical anthropology begins with the declaration that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27). This foundational text establishes both dignity and limitation. The *imago Dei* is not a claim of ontological equality with the Creator but of analogical participation. Humans alone among earthly creatures are addressed by God, given dominion as stewards, and endowed with capacities that reflect, in finite mode, certain divine attributes traditionally termed communicable.

Communicable attributes—those that God shares in limited measure with creatures—include knowledge, wisdom, rationality, moral goodness, holiness, justice, and the capacity for relational love and free response. Incommunicable attributes (aseity, infinity, immutability, omnipotence, omniscience in the absolute sense) remain exclusively divine. Systematic treatments of the divine attributes routinely distinguish these categories and locate human reason and will within the communicable sphere. The breath of God (Gen 2:7) is the narrative expression of this sharing: life and capacities are received, not self-generated. Consequently, humans become the only earthly moral agents capable of deliberating between good and evil, right and wrong, obedience and rebellion.

Genesis 2:16–17 presents the first explicit moral alternative: permission regarding every tree except one, accompanied by a clear warning of death upon disobedience. Deuteronomy 30:19 intensifies the same structure in covenantal form: life and death, blessing and curse are set before the people, and the imperative “choose life” presupposes real alternatives and real accountability. These texts establish that the capacity for intelligent decision and moral choice belongs to the created constitution of humanity. The image includes the ability to recognize the good, to weigh options, and to act voluntarily.

Yet the same anthropology insists that this capacity does not extend to control over the severity or degree of consequences. Several interlocking reasons account for the asymmetry.

First, the metaphysical structure of creaturehood precludes absolute causal self-determination. An agent who does not sustain his or her own existence cannot unilaterally determine the full range of effects that follow from any act. Consequences are realized within a network of secondary causes ordered by the primary cause. Plantinga’s free-will defense articulates a parallel constraint even for divine action: God cannot determine free creatures to choose only the good without thereby removing their significant freedom (Plantinga, 1977). Finite agents stand under a stricter version of the same logic. They can initiate; they cannot encapsulate or exhaust the causal field.

Second, epistemic limitation is intrinsic to finite minds. Knowledge of good and evil in the Genesis narrative is acquired through disobedience, yet even that knowledge remains partial. Agents can know the moral quality of an act and some proximate results; they cannot survey the historical, relational,

and spiritual ramifications across generations. The narrative progression from Genesis 3 to Genesis 4 illustrates the point: the immediate effects of the first disobedience (shame, fear, blame-shifting) are followed by further unforeseen developments in Cain's life. The agent owns the choice; the unfolding of consequence exceeds foresight.

Third, the Fall disorders but does not annihilate agency. Calvin's discussion in the *Institutes* (Book 2, Chapter 2) is instructive. Prior to the Fall, humans possessed the freedom "to be able not to sin." After the Fall, the will remains voluntary—humans are not coerced from outside—yet it is bound by sinful inclination. Freedom of choice persists in the sense of voluntary action; freedom from the power of sin does not. Even in this disordered state, the agent remains accountable for choices, as Genesis 4:6–7 demonstrates in the divine address to Cain. Responsibility attaches to the act of choosing; determination of the full weight of consequence does not.

Fourth, moral evil arises precisely through the misuse of the shared capacity for choice. Genesis 3:1–6 portrays a deliberative process: the serpent's question, the woman's evaluation of the fruit as good for food, a delight to the eyes, and desirable for wisdom, and the subsequent taking and eating. The text presents the act as intelligent and voluntary, not as compulsion. Genesis 4:6–7 similarly frames Cain's impending violence as a matter over which he "must rule." Both narratives treat the choice of wrong over right as deliberate. The agents ignore or suppress the known warning in favor of competing goods. In that sense, the choice for evil is a deliberate act that brackets or discounts the announced consequence. Yet the subsequent narrative makes clear that the actual shape and severity of the outcome—exile, alienation, mortality, the crouching power of sin—exceed what the agents calculated or controlled. Deliberation does not equal mastery of results.

Fifth, humans alone among earthly creatures share in the communicable attributes that make moral agency possible. Animals act according to instinct and conditioning; they do not deliberate about the good as such or stand under moral command. Angels, though moral agents, are not the focus of the terrestrial creation narrative. The *imago Dei* therefore marks humanity as the unique earthly locus of rational and volitional participation in divine communicable attributes. John Paul II, reflecting on the biblical text, noted that the image includes "those spiritual faculties which are distinctively human, such as reason, discernment between good and evil, and free will." This uniqueness intensifies both dignity and responsibility. It also intensifies the tragedy of misuse: the very capacities that enable right choice enable its refusal.

The deliberate character of wrong choice does not, however, confer power over consequence. When agents choose against known good, they do so within the limits already enumerated. They can intend an end; they cannot guarantee that the end will obtain in the form or degree they desire, nor can they prevent unintended collateral effects. The biblical narratives consistently show agents surprised or overwhelmed by the magnitude of what follows their decisions. Consequence remains under divine determination even when the choice itself is genuinely human.

In light of this anthropology, the original claim holds: humans possess an inherent capacity for choice grounded in the *imago Dei* and the sharing of communicable attributes, yet they remain permanently incapable of determining the full positive or negative outcome of any choice. The capacity is gift; the limit is creaturely. Agency is real and morally weighty; sovereignty over results is not. This asymmetry preserves both human responsibility and divine governance, and it supplies the theological rationale for the limits of agency articulated above.

The Limits Of Agency: Human Choice And The Indeterminacy Of Consequence

Human beings possess an inherent capacity for choice, yet the ultimate outcomes of those choices remain permanently beyond their control. This tension defines the boundaries of human agency. In

the light of biblical anthropology, humans are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27). The breath of God enabled humans to share in God’s communicable attributes, thereby affording them the opportunity to think rationally, make intelligent decisions, and choose rightly between good and evil, right and wrong (Genesis 2:16–17; Deuteronomy 30:19). Human beings possess an intrinsic ability to deliberate and select among alternatives, yet the final unfolding of those selections remains subject to forces beyond individual control. Human agency is marked by a profound asymmetry between the power to initiate actions and the severely limited ability to foresee, control, or determine their ultimate consequences. However, humans possess the real capacity to deliberate and to elect one course of action over another. Yet, they remain structurally unable to fix or even fully foresee the ultimate moral, spiritual, and material outcomes that flow from those elections. This limitation is not accidental; it is constitutive of finite existence. Nevertheless, humans do not possess the power to determine the severity or degree of the consequences that follow from wrong choices or decisions. This essay examines why human beings have the ability to choose and why they lack the power to determine outcomes, situating the discussion within biblical anthropology, classical Christian theology, and contemporary philosophical reflection on agency. It argues that the limits of human agency are not defects of the created order but constitutive features of finite creaturehood under divine providence.

The consequences that befall every human being as a result of choices made against the will of the Creator—choices that failed to align with the character and nature of God—ushered in an unprecedented catastrophe beyond human control. This reality demands serious and conscious consideration. On this basis, we turn to a closer examination of biblical anthropology. This field rests on a rich historical and scriptural foundation for understanding human existence on the earth. At its heart lies a profound tension: humanity is endowed with genuine moral agency, yet remains subject to an ultimate sovereign order that lies entirely beyond human control. Genesis affirms that through the breath of God (*neshamah*), human beings were created in the *imago Dei*, receiving a finite, analogical share in God’s communicable attributes—rationality, moral discernment, volition, and the capacity for relational love. Equipped with these spiritual faculties, human agents possess the genuine capacity to make real, morally accountable choices that can align with the righteous character of their Creator.

However, a fundamental structural asymmetry exists within creaturely existence. While God communicated moral and rational attributes to humanity, He retained His incommunicable attributes—absolute omniscience, omnipotence, and ultimate sovereignty. As a consequence, human beings possess the genuine freedom to initiate moral action, but lack the power, foresight, or sovereignty to govern the magnitude, scope, or severity of the consequences that follow.

When human conduct diverges from God’s holy character through idolatry, injustice, and covenant unfaithfulness, the resulting fallout generates moral and historical catastrophes—such as personal bitterness, exile, and multi-generational scattering—that far exceed human calculation or control. The agent initiates the rebellion, yet remains utterly powerless to limit, manage, or repair the resulting harvest. This paper demonstrates that the capacity for moral choice is a real gift of the *imago Dei*, rendering humanity impeccably accountable for its actions. Yet, when choices depart from divine design, the catastrophic outcomes that follow demonstrate that while human agency is real, ultimate sovereignty over the consequences of human conduct belongs exclusively to the Creator.

Human beings stand uniquely among the creatures of the earth as moral agents. Endowed by the Creator with a finite share in His communicable attributes—rationality, moral discernment, volition, and the capacity for relational response—they alone possess the structural capacity to recognize the good, weigh alternatives, and elect a course of action. This capacity, rooted in the *imago Dei* and the breath of life (Genesis 1:26–27; 2:7), renders human choices real, accountable, and, when aligned with the divine character, morally justified. Yet the same gift that confers genuine agency

simultaneously exposes a profound and permanent asymmetry: while humans initiate moral acts, they possess no sovereignty over the magnitude, scope, or ultimate harvest of the consequences that follow.

When human conduct diverges from the holy character and will of God, the resulting fallout is neither arbitrary nor merely natural. It is the just outworking of a moral order established and governed by the Creator. The agent owns the choice; God alone determines the severity of the judgment. This constitutive limitation—real freedom of election without mastery of outcome—lies at the heart of biblical anthropology and explains why personal bitterness, national catastrophe, and multi-generational scattering repeatedly overwhelm those who rebel against the covenant. Through an examination of **Jeremiah 4:18**, **Jeremiah 17:10**, and **Ezekiel 36:19**, this study illustrates how prophetic scripture exposes this tragic disparity: human agents own their choices, but divine providence alone determines the ultimate shape, intensity, and historical weight of their harvest

These three prophetic texts bring this asymmetry into sharp focus. Jeremiah 4:18 declares that Judah's own conduct and actions have brought upon the nation a piercing, bitter punishment whose scale exceeds human calculation. Jeremiah 17:10 affirms that the Lord alone searches the heart and mind and apportions recompense according to deeds, calibrating outcomes by divine omniscience rather than human foresight. Ezekiel 36:19 presents Israel's dispersion among the nations as divine judgment measured precisely by their conduct and actions—choices the people initiated, consequences they could neither limit nor reverse. Together these passages illustrate the paper's central thesis: the capacity for moral choice is a genuine gift of the image of God, yet choices that fail to align with the Creator's character generate catastrophes whose final shape remains permanently under divine determination. The following analysis examines these texts in turn, then synthesizes the anthropological principle they reveal and the parallel—real yet strictly limited—between human moral capacities and the communicable attributes of God.

Jeremiah 4:18 (NIV) “Your own conduct and actions have brought this on you. This is your punishment. How bitter it is! How it pierces to the heart!”

This verse directly attributes national catastrophe (invasion, desolation, and the bitter piercing of judgment) to Judah's own conduct and actions. The people chose paths of idolatry, injustice, and covenant unfaithfulness—choices that failed to align with God's holy and just character. The consequences (military defeat, exile, and deep personal/ national anguish) far exceeded any human calculation or control. The agents initiated the rebellion; they did not and could not determine the severity, scope, or generational reach of the resulting disaster. The text underscores the paper's central asymmetry: genuine human agency produces real moral acts, yet the ultimate magnitude of the harvest remains under divine determination.

Jeremiah 17:10 (NIV) “I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.”

God alone searches the hidden springs of motive and intention, then apportions outcomes according to the moral quality of human conduct. Choices made against the Creator's will—rooted in the disordered heart—are fully known to God and fully accountable. The “reward” (or recompense) is not negotiated by the agent; it is administered by the One who alone possesses exhaustive knowledge and sovereign justice. This verse illustrates why finite agents cannot master the consequences of their choices: the full moral and historical weight is calibrated by divine omniscience and providence, not by human foresight or power. Catastrophe that follows rebellious conduct is therefore both just and beyond the agent's ability to limit or reverse.

Ezekiel 36:19 (NIV) “I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions.”

The scattering of Israel among the nations is explicitly presented as divine judgment measured by their conduct and actions. The people chose idolatry and moral defilement; the outcome—exile, dispersion, and national humiliation—was executed by God according to the moral order He had established. The agents owned the choices; they did not control the geopolitical, social, or spiritual severity of the resulting catastrophe. The verse reinforces that human agency initiates the trajectory, while divine governance determines the ultimate shape and intensity of the consequences.

Taken together, these three texts illustrate the paper’s thesis: the capacity for moral choice is a genuine gift of the *imago Dei* through communicable attributes, yet choices that diverge from the character and will of the Creator generate consequences whose severity, scope, and final shape lie permanently beyond human control. The resulting catastrophes (personal bitterness, national exile, multi-generational scattering) are not defects in the created order but constitutive features of finite agency under sovereign providence.

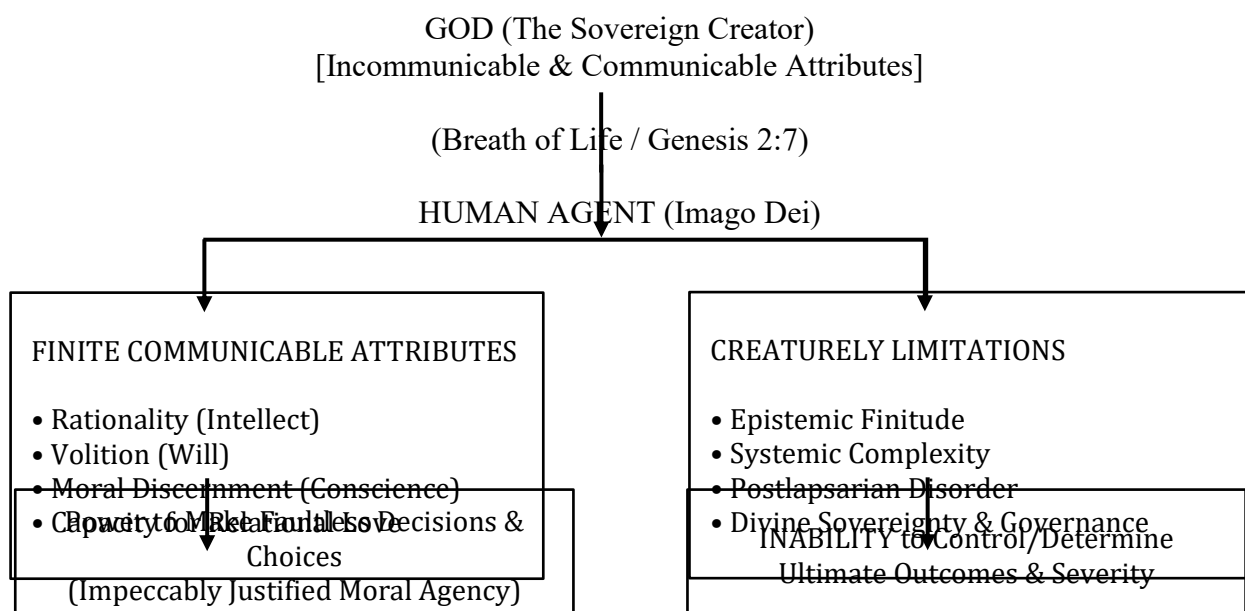
Synthesis

Across all three passages, a clear biblical principle of anthropology emerges: human beings possess genuine moral agency to choose, but they have zero sovereignty over the magnitude or severity of the consequences that follow. When human choices fail to align with the holy character and will of the Creator, the resulting fallout disrupts the moral fabric of creation. The human agent is left shocked, overwhelmed, and completely unable to govern or heal the unprecedented catastrophe brought about by their own hands.

Parallel between Human Conduct and God’s Communicable Moral Attributes

Biblical anthropology (Genesis 1:26–27; 2:7) teaches that the breath of God imparted to humanity a finite, analogical share in certain divine communicable attributes—rationality, moral discernment, volition, and the capacity for relational response. These attributes equip human beings alone among earthly creatures to recognize the good, weigh alternatives, and elect. Because the image includes these capacities, humans are *structurally capable* of decisions, choices, and judgments that can align with the moral character of the Creator.

The paper's framework clearly defines how human moral agency operates, why humans are impeccably justified in making faultless decisions, and why they remain accountable:



1. The Divine Source: The Breath of God and the *Imago Dei*

Human beings are not autonomous self-creators. Through the **breath of God** (Genesis 2:7), humanity received an analogical sharing of God's **communicable attributes**—such as rationality, moral discernment, holiness, righteousness, and volitional capacity.

2. The Foundation for Faultless, Justified Decisions

Because human agents are endowed with these divine attributes, their capacity for choice is real and morally robust:

- **Intellect & Rationality:** Enables humans to comprehend moral commands, weigh options, and deliberate on the good.
- **Moral Awareness & Conscience:** Enables humans to distinguish right from wrong in alignment with God's character.
- **Volition (Will):** Enables voluntary, uncoerced election of one path over another.

Thus, human agents are equipped with everything necessary to make **faultless, morally upright decisions** that align with God's nature (e.g., God's call to "choose life" in Deuteronomy 30:19). Because humans possess these spiritual faculties, God is **impeccably justified** in holding humanity fully accountable for their actions.

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3. The Structural Asymmetry: Choice vs. Sovereignty Over Outcomes

The parallelism between human action and divine attributes breaks sharply at the boundary between *initiating an act* and *mastering its outcome*:

- **Incommunicable Attributes Remain God's Alone:** Attributes such as absolute omniscience, omnipotence, and ultimate sovereignty were **not** communicated to humanity.
- **Creaturely Finitude:** Because human agents lack omniscience and omnipotence, they are subject to epistemic limitations, systemic interdependencies, and the moral architecture of creation.
- **The Asymmetry:** Humans possess genuine freedom of choice (grounded in communicable attributes), but **sovereignty over consequences belongs exclusively to God**.

When human conduct diverges from God's moral attributes, the resulting moral catastrophe pierces human history beyond their capacity to foresee, manage, or repair—making Christ's redemptive work the sole divine intervention capable of absorbing those catastrophic consequences

The parallel is therefore real but strictly analogical and limited:

- God's moral attributes (holiness, justice, goodness, truth) are infinite, essential, and unchanging.
- Human moral capacities are finite, derived, and (after the Fall) disordered.
- When human conduct aligns with the received attributes—when reason rightly discerns, the will rightly elects, and the heart rightly loves—the resulting decisions are morally justified and “faultless” *relative to the light given and the capacities conferred*.
- The capacity itself is a gift of the *imago Dei*; it renders humans' accountable moral agents. It does not confer sovereignty over outcomes, omniscience of consequences, or independence from the moral order God has woven into creation.

Thus, the same endowment that makes genuine, responsible, and (when rightly exercised) faultless choice possible also establishes the structural limits of agency. Humans can initiate choices that either reflect or contradict the divine moral character they analogically share; they cannot determine, control, or fully foresee the severity, scope, or ultimate harvest of those choices. That determination belongs exclusively to the Creator. The three prophetic texts illustrate precisely this constitutive asymmetry: real agency grounded in the image, real accountability, and real catastrophe that remains permanently beyond human mastery.

Biblical Anthropology and the Imago Dei: Humans as Moral Agents Sharing Communicable Attributes

Biblical anthropology begins with the declaration that humanity is uniquely created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27). This affirmation distinguishes human beings from all other creatures. The imago Dei is not merely a formal status; it entails the bestowal of certain capacities that reflect, analogically, the character of the Creator. Classical Reformed and broader Christian theology has long distinguished between God’s incommunicable attributes (aseity, immutability, infinity, eternity) and communicable attributes (rationality, will, moral sensibility, relational capacity, creativity, and dominion). Only God possesses these attributes infinitely and essentially; humans receive them finitely and derivatively (Grudem, 1994; Horton, 2011).

The communicable attributes equip human beings for moral agency. Rationality enables deliberation; will enables election among alternatives; conscience and moral awareness enable discrimination between good and evil. Genesis 2:16–17 records the first explicit moral command and the accompanying alternative: obedience yielding life, disobedience yielding death. Deuteronomy 30:19 intensifies the language of choice: “I have set before you, life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life.” These texts presuppose that the human agent is capable of genuine election. The capacity is not illusory; it is grounded in the divine image.

Augustine of Hippo articulated the prelapsarian condition with precision: before the Fall, humanity possessed both the ability to sin (*posse peccare*) and the ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*). After the Fall, the will is wounded and inclined toward sin (*non posse non peccare* in its own strength), yet the formal capacity for choice remains (Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIV; *On Free Choice of the Will*). Thomas Aquinas similarly located free will in the rational appetite, which is moved by the intellect’s presentation of the good yet remains undetermined by any particular finite good (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 83). Both thinkers insist that the image is not erased by sin; it is distorted. Humans remain the only earthly creatures who are moral agents in the full sense—capable of understanding moral claims, responding to them, and being held accountable.

No other creature shares this suite of communicable attributes in the same degree. Animals act according to instinct and conditioning; they do not deliberate about the moral quality of their actions or stand under covenant obligation. Angels are moral agents of a different order, but Scripture presents them as already confirmed in holiness or rebellion; human beings alone occupy the unique position of being created for covenantal relationship in history, with genuine temporal freedom and the possibility of redemption. The imago Dei therefore establishes both dignity and responsibility: humans are the only moral beings who share, by creation, in God’s communicable attributes of rationality, will, and moral awareness.

The Capacity for Choice: Grounded in the Image and Confirmed by Revelation

The ability to choose is not an autonomous self-creation but a gift of the Creator. Because humans bear the image, they are addressed by God as subjects capable of response. The divine command in Genesis 2 and the summons in Deuteronomy 30 would be unintelligible if the addressees lacked the

power of election. The entire biblical narrative—from the call of Abraham to the prophetic appeals to Israel, from Jesus’ invitations to discipleship to the apostolic exhortations—presupposes that human beings can and must choose.

Philosophical reflection corroborates this biblical claim without exhausting it. Contemporary accounts of agency emphasize the capacity for reasons-responsive choice, the ability to act for reasons rather than merely being caused, and the experience of alternative possibilities (Kane, 2002; O’Connor, 2002). Belief in free will, even at the folk-psychological level, centers on the perception that one could have chosen otherwise (Monroe & Malle, 2010; Feldman, 2017). Biblical anthropology supplies the ontological ground that secular accounts often leave unspecified: the capacity exists because the Creator has conferred it as part of the image.

Yet this capacity is finite. It is exercised under conditions of limited knowledge, limited power, and (after the Fall) disordered desire. The freedom is real but not absolute. It is the freedom of a creature, not the freedom of the Creator. The Creator alone determines ends with certainty; the creature chooses means and intermediate ends under uncertainty.

Five Limits of Human Agency

The limits of human agency can be enumerated under five interrelated headings. Each limit is both philosophical and theological, and each is attested by Scripture and by classical Christian reflection.

First limit: Epistemic finitude. Human agents never possess exhaustive knowledge of the causal chains their choices set in motion. Even the most carefully considered decision is made under conditions of incomplete information. Proverbs 16:9 states, “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.” James 4:13–15 warns against presumptuous planning that fails to acknowledge “If the Lord wills.” Thomas Aquinas observed that divine providence extends to contingent events precisely because human knowledge cannot secure them (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 22). The agent chooses; the full set of consequences remains opaque. This is not a contingent deficiency that better technology might remove; it is structural to creaturely existence. Even freely chosen features of our lives can, because of epistemic limitations, yield unanticipated consequences (Talbot, 2009).

Second limit: the Complexity and Interdependence of created systems. Individual choices intersect with the choices of countless other agents and with natural processes that operate according to regularities the agent does not control. A single decision—marriage, vocation, political allegiance, moral compromise—ripples through social, economic, and ecological networks whose interactions exceed any individual’s comprehension or mastery. Ecclesiastes repeatedly underscores the frustration of human striving amid inscrutable patterns (Ecclesiastes 8:17; 9:11). Modern complexity theory merely restates in scientific idiom what biblical wisdom literature already knew: the web of consequences is denser than any finite mind can map.

Third limit: the Residual Effects of the Fall. Original sin does not annihilate the capacity for choice, but it disorders the will and introduces a bias toward self-preference. Augustine’s mature anti-Pelagian teaching insisted that after the Fall the will is free yet captive (*liberum arbitrium captivatum*); only grace liberates it (*liberum arbitrium liberatum*) (Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*). Consequently, even when an agent intends good, the execution is often compromised, and the consequences of prior disordered choices accumulate in ways the agent cannot simply cancel. The severity of consequences is therefore not calibrated solely by the intensity of the present choice; it is conditioned by a history of disordered agency that no individual fully masters.

Fourth limit: Divine Providence and Sovereignty. Scripture consistently subordinates human agency to divine governance. Genesis 50:20 records Joseph’s theological interpretation of his

brothers' evil choice: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." Proverbs 19:21 and 21:1 affirm that the Lord's purpose stands and that even the king's heart is in the Lord's hand. Aquinas maintained that everything happening from the exercise of free will is subject to divine providence; free acts are included under providence as particular under universal cause (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 22, a. 2). Human agents choose; God orders the outcomes according to purposes that transcend the agent's intention. The agent therefore cannot determine either the moral quality of the final result (from the standpoint of the divine economy) or its temporal severity.

Fifth limit: the intrinsic Structure of Moral Reality. Moral consequences are not arbitrary penalties attached by an external will; they are the natural outworking of the moral order itself. Sin is not merely a legal infraction but a disruption of the relational and teleological order of creation. The "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23) is both forensic declaration and ontological description. An agent may choose the act; the agent does not invent or control the moral grammar that renders the act destructive. The severity of consequences is therefore written into the fabric of reality by the Creator, not negotiated by the creature. This limit is especially clear in the Deuteronomic blessings and curses and in the New Testament's teaching on sowing and reaping (Galatians 6:7–8).

These five limits—epistemic finitude, systemic complexity, the residual effects of the Fall, divine providence, and the structure of moral reality—collectively demonstrate that while the capacity for choice is inherent, the determination of ultimate consequences lies permanently beyond the agent's control.

Why Humans Can Choose but Cannot Determine Outcomes

The ability to choose is a direct implication of the *imago Dei* and the communication of rational and volitional attributes. God addresses humans as responsible subjects; responsibility requires the power of election. Without that power, the biblical categories of obedience, disobedience, faith, repentance, and judgment would collapse. The capacity is therefore both gift and vocation.

The inability to determine outcomes follows from the same anthropology. Humans are finite, dependent, and (after the Fall) disordered. Finitude entails limited knowledge and power; dependence entails subordination to the Creator's governance; disorder entails the inability to secure even the goods one intends. Providence does not negate agency; it situates agency within a larger teleology. The agent is responsible for the choice; the outcome remains under the sovereign disposal of God, who alone sees the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10).

Philosophically, this position is compatible with a non-deterministic understanding of free will that nevertheless rejects absolute libertarian autonomy. The agent is the source of the choice in a morally relevant sense, yet the causal and providential networks that carry the choice forward are not under the agent's jurisdiction. Contemporary discussions of agency and responsibility rightly distinguish control over the action from control over all downstream effects (Waller, 2019). Biblical theology supplies the deeper reason: the distinction is grounded in the Creator–creature difference.

Humans as the Unique Moral Beings Sharing Communicable Attributes

Only human beings among earthly creatures are addressed by God in covenant, held accountable for moral choice, and destined for everlasting communion or separation. The communication of attributes is therefore not a vague resemblance but a specific endowment that enables moral responsibility. Rationality allows the discernment of good; will allows the election of good or evil; relational capacity allows covenantal response. Animals lack this endowment; they are not summoned to "choose life." Angels, though moral, are not the focus of the redemptive history that unfolds on earth. Human uniqueness consists precisely in being the image-bearing creature placed in history with genuine temporal freedom and the possibility of redemption through the Second Adam.

This uniqueness intensifies both dignity and vulnerability. Dignity arises from the shared attributes; vulnerability arises from the limits of agency. The same capacities that enable genuine moral life also expose the agent to the possibility of catastrophic misuse whose consequences exceed the agent's power to repair. The Cross of Christ is the ultimate demonstration that only divine agency can absorb and overturn the consequences that human agency cannot control.

Human Agency, the Imago Dei, and the Indeterminacy of Consequence in Biblical Anthropology

Biblical anthropology begins with the declaration that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27). This foundational assertion distinguishes human beings from every other terrestrial creature. The breath of God (Genesis 2:7) animates the human form and, more importantly, communicates certain divine attributes that enable rational thought, moral discernment, and volitional choice. Louis Berkhof, in his systematic treatment of the divine attributes, distinguishes carefully between the incommunicable attributes—those that belong to God alone, such as aseity, infinity, and immutability—and the communicable attributes that God shares, analogically and in finite measure, with His image-bearers. Among the latter are knowledge, wisdom, holiness, righteousness, love, and freedom of will.

Because these attributes are communicable, human beings alone among earthly creatures are moral agents. Animals act according to instinct and appetite; humans deliberate, evaluate alternatives against a standard of right and wrong, and elect. Genesis 2:16–17 places before the first man a clear prohibition accompanied by a stated consequence: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” The command presupposes the capacity both to understand the prohibition and to choose obedience or disobedience. Deuteronomy 30:19 intensifies the same pattern: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life.” The imperative “choose” is addressed to beings who possess the structural freedom to respond.

Yet the same texts that establish the capacity for choice simultaneously withhold from the human agent the power to determine the severity or the full scope of the consequences that follow. The prohibition in Genesis 2 names death as the outcome of disobedience, but the narrative of Genesis 3 reveals that the actual outworking of that death—spiritual alienation, relational fracture, bodily mortality, and cosmic disorder—exceeds anything the human agents could have calculated or controlled. The choice was theirs; the magnitude and the multi-generational reach of the result were not.

Anthony Hoekema, in *Created in God's Image*, argues that the image of God is both structural and functional. Structurally, human beings possess rationality, morality, and volition; functionally, they are called to exercise those capacities in responsible dominion and in obedient relationship with God. The structural endowment makes choice possible; the functional calling makes the agent accountable. Nowhere, however, does Hoekema or the biblical text itself grant the agent sovereignty over the final disposition of the act. The agent remains a steward, not a sovereign.

Millard Erickson develops a similar distinction. He notes that the moral likeness to God enables human beings to recognize and respond to moral norms, yet that likeness is analogical, not identical. Finite agents therefore operate with limited knowledge and limited power. They can choose the act; they cannot legislate the weight of the sanction that the moral order, under divine governance, attaches to the act. Wayne Grudem likewise affirms that genuine human freedom exists within the larger framework of divine sovereignty. God ordains that certain choices will produce certain classes of consequences, but the precise intensity, timing, and secondary effects of those consequences remain under His determination, not the creature's.

This asymmetry is further illuminated by the narrative of the fall and its immediate aftermath. In Genesis 3:1–6 the serpent questions the divine command, the woman deliberates, and both the woman and the man elect to take and eat. The text presents the choice as deliberate. They are not coerced; they are not ignorant of the prohibition. They choose contrary to the known will of God. Genesis 4:6–7 extends the same pattern to Cain: “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.” Cain is addressed as a moral agent capable of ruling over the impulse to sin. When he refuses, the consequence—fratricide and exile—follows with a severity that Cain neither intended nor controlled. The deliberate character of wrong choice does not, however, confer upon the agent the power to measure or mitigate the resulting evil. To choose wrongly is to ignore or to discount the stated consequence; it is not to master that consequence. The agent may suppress awareness of the threatened outcome, may rationalize the act, or may hope that the threatened result will not materialize. None of these psychological maneuvers alters the objective order in which the act is embedded. The consequence remains external to the agent’s will.

Human uniqueness as the sole earthly moral being follows directly from the doctrine of the image. No other creature is addressed with commands that presuppose moral understanding. No other creature is summoned to “choose life.” The communicable attributes—particularly rationality, moral sensibility, and volitional freedom—equip humanity alone for this vocation. Animals may display remarkable cognitive capacities, yet they do not stand under moral law in the same way. Angels, though moral, are not earthly image-bearers in the sense of Genesis 1. Human beings occupy a distinctive ontological and ethical space: capable of genuine choice, yet incapable of determining the full harvest of that choice.

The reasons for this incapacity are theological and anthropological. First, the determination of consequence belongs to the moral Governor of the universe. To grant creatures the power to fix outcomes would be to transfer sovereignty. Second, human knowledge is finite; exhaustive foresight would require omniscience, an incommunicable attribute. Third, the interconnectedness of the created order means that any single act reverberates through systems the agent neither comprehends nor controls. Fourth, the formation of character and the unfolding of history occur across time spans that exceed any individual lifespan. Fifth, divine justice and mercy operate according to purposes that transcend the immediate intentions of the creature. Thus, the capacity to choose rightly between good and evil is a genuine gift of the *imago Dei*, while the inability to determine the severity of consequences is an equally genuine limitation of creaturehood. The two together define the moral situation of humanity: responsible yet dependent, free yet finite, able to elect yet unable to dictate the final shape of what has been elected. This is the biblical anthropology of agency.

Conclusion

The tension between the capacity for choice and the indeterminacy of consequence is not an accidental defect or tragic failure of human existence; rather, it represents a constitutive, God-ordained boundary of finite creaturehood under divine providence. Biblical anthropology grounds the genuine reality of human moral choice in the *imago Dei* and the finite sharing of divine communicable attributes. The same anthropology, together with the doctrines of providence, the Fall, and the moral order of creation, accounts for the limits. Humans choose; God alone determines the ultimate issue of those choices. Recognition of this boundary is the beginning of wisdom: it cultivates humility in planning, seriousness in moral decision, and confident trust in the God whose purpose cannot be thwarted. The limits of agency are therefore not a counsel of despair but an invitation to responsible freedom exercised gratefully under the sovereignty of the Creator.

Yet, this same framework—fortified by the realities of creaturely finitude, the Fall, systemic complexity, and sovereign divine governance—demonstrates that the ultimate harvest of any choice

remains permanently beyond the agent's jurisdiction. Humans genuinely choose, but God alone determines and orders the ultimate outcomes.

Recognizing this asymmetry is the foundation of true theological wisdom. It demolishes the illusion of human autonomy and the hubris of self-determination, cultivating a necessary humility in human planning and an urgent serious-mindedness in moral decisions. Ultimately, the limits of human agency do not surrender the creature to fatalism or despair; instead, they offer a compelling invitation to embrace responsible, morally accountable freedom that rests safely beneath the sovereign grace, wisdom, and overarching governance of the Creator.

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