

Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom:

The Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas

A Senior Studies Report

Submitted to the Faculty  
Of Saint Meinrad College of Liberal Arts  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Nathaniel Christian Calhoun

May, 1996

Saint Meinrad College

St. Meinrad, Indiana

- I. Introduction
- II. St. Thomas's view of analogy
  - A. The names of God as different from man
  - B. The infinite nature of God
    - 1. God as non-material
    - 2. God as not in time
- III. St. Thomas's thought on causality
  - A. The proper effects of God
  - B. The proper effects of man
- IV. St. Thomas's thought on the divine will
  - A. The participation of the divine will
    - 1. God's will as free
    - 2. Freedom as a perfection
      - a. Knowledge of freedom
      - b. Necessity of freedom
  - B. The efficacy of the divine will
    - 1. Necessity of the divine will
    - 2. Infallibility of the divine will
    - 3. Frustration of the divine will
- V. God's causality of the created act
  - A. God as act
  - B. Creature as potency
- VI. God's causality of the created free will
  - A. Causation as different from coercion
  - B. Created free will as dependent on God
- VII. Conclusion

The problem of reconciling the concept of human free will with the concept of an omnipotent and omniscient God may be thought to be a theological matter, but it is at least as relevant to philosophy as it is to theology. To be sure, not all philosophers admit the existence of both the freedom of the human will and an all-knowing universal cause, but for those that do, the problem is critical. Chiefly, I will be treating the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas on this subject, trying to determine the internal consistency of his position and its agreement with philosophical principles.

For St. Thomas, understanding how human acts can be at once free and caused by God requires an understanding of how we must think and talk about God, namely, analogically. I will begin, therefore, with a brief discussion of St. Thomas's view of the role of analogy in our knowledge of God.

Concerning names predicated of God, St. Thomas explains that such names are applied differently to God than to men. For if we say that a man is wise we intend 'wisdom' to refer to some perfection distinct from his essence, "whereas, when we apply it to God, we do not mean to signify anything distinct from his essence or power or existence(Lagrange 4)." The quality of being wise, as applied to a man, is a perfection of which we have understanding based on experience of our own intellectual activity, but to speak of God as wise leaves this perfection infinitely beyond our experience and

understanding. "Hence no name is predicated *univocally* of God and of creatures...but in an analogous sense"

(Lagrange 4). Despite this, we must recognize the real similarity that exists between these perfections in God and in man. The names we give to God and man are not merely equivocal; they are analogous. "This means that they denote things essentially different between which there is a certain proportion (Lagrange 5)."

This is important because the divine attributes which concern us in this paper, namely, efficacy and foreknowledge, are only distinct as conceived of in the human mind. There exists no real or formal distinction between any of the divine perfections as they are in God or as he sees them in himself. Thus, as Cajetan says, all formal concepts are fused into one and likewise elevated to make one formal concept, "*the Deity*," the one concept "containing *eminently* what is implied in each concept...*formally*, as the concept of light includes the concept of calorific energy (Lagrange 7)." Even by our imperfect knowledge, the divine perfections are necessarily found to be actually and implicitly contained within each other; God is simple (Lagrange 8). Having established this, it makes sense to say that the foreknowledge and providence of God, whose every perfection is included without real distinction in his simple unity, consists in a single act, by which he knows and creates everything whatsoever.

If it is true that God is perfect, without limitation, then we must be able to say of him that he is infinite, and an infinite being is indivisible, without parts either actually or potentially, for anything that has parts contains limitation, inasmuch as the parts are not identical to the whole nor to each other and therefore lack some being; otherwise they would not be parts. Such an entity is "not" infinite. Note that we do not apprehend God as infinite, for this is clearly beyond us, and that our knowledge of God is largely gained by rational consideration of negative propositions about God. Since God has no parts, then He is not in space because this would necessarily involve some material quality, and materiality entails parts. It follows also that God, being infinite and immaterial, is changeless and thus, not in time. Change entails limitation since something lacks being that it had at one time or acquires being that it did not previously have (Pontifex 25). Since God is infinite, there is no being which He lacks or can lack. Furthermore, anything in time changes since it cannot remain in existence at each moment in time but only passes through them. That is to say that a being always has a certain position in space and time. Once a moment passes, it cannot ever exist at that same set of space-time coordinates again, and consequently it lacks the being of every moment except the one it occupies. As St. Thomas makes this argument he says "Time is the measure of only

those things that are moved (Clark 140)," and his support is found in Aristotle's Physics, IV, which states that time is the measure of motion.

What is implied by an unchanging, infinite God about human freedom and divine providence? To begin with, it must be true that, if God is not in time, he does not come to know things as they happen but that he knows them from eternity. (How he knows events in time will be discussed later.) As regards the "foreknowledge" of God, the word is really a misnomer. Foreknowledge implies antecedence in time, but for God, who is not in time, there is no past, present, and future distinct from one another. So we can speak of God's seeing our future acts not in his future but in his "eternal present," meaning that God creates time and sees it, in some way, as complete, not unfolding. Still, it is impossible to speak adequately of God as "being" outside of time.

As God is absolutely simple, he can have no knowledge which is separate from his whole perfection. He does possess knowledge in the sense that he possesses every finite perfection which does not require a finite subject, e.g. wisdom, which can be possessed by an infinite or a finite subject but not courage, which requires a mortal subject. He does not possess knowledge as a particular the way humans do but as indistinguishable from his simple, infinite, perfection. The problem of God's knowledge is not a special problem in itself but rather a

part of the larger problem of understanding how God contains every finite perfection which can be attributed to an infinite subject, in a simple, infinite perfection. By examining this idea we can see that the difficulty of reconciling God's providence and man's free will is not whether or not God knows the future free acts of man; for knowledge of future events, which do not exist for God as future but for us, does not change the freedom of the agent. If we look deeper we will find that the real difficulty is essentially that of explaining how God can be the cause of the act of the created free will. In other words, how can we be free if God is the cause of everything?

In answer to this question let us begin by examining St. Thomas's thought on universal causality. Man is a cause, if not the sole cause, of his own operation and its effects. To deny this is contrary to the goodness of God, saying that he did not impart to his creatures that critical share of his being which is created causality. The created act, such as the act of burning by fire, is not independent of God but exists rather as a participation of God's being, as a possession of God, completely dependent on him (Farrelly 158); yet the creature itself does exist as distinct from God. St. Thomas captures this relation in the following analogy.

Every creature is related to God as the air to the illuminating sun. For as the sun is luminous by its nature but the air becomes luminous by participating light from the sun, not however by participating the nature of

the sun, so only God is being by his essence  
...but every creature is being in a  
participated way(Farrelly 159).

Man's causation and being are participated perfections and thus caused by God.

In addition to being the source of these perfections, God causes the creature's operation by "conserving in being its nature and powers." Should the formal cause of a thing cease to exist, that thing would not only cease to be what it was but would cease to exist at all(Farrelly 160). Similarly, no creature can be the cause of its own being as its proper effect, "for if it were it would be cause of itself." It is only as the cause of *the coming to be* of its effect or operation that a creature functions, for only God has being as properly his own(Farrelly 161). God is the extrinsic cause of all creatures-extrinsic in the sense of being a cause which is independent of the creature's essence and existence. This is necessarily the case if the perfections of creatures are not caused by them but are participated of God.

Building upon what has already been said, I will now begin discussing the will of God as understood by St. Thomas. The main ideas which apply to the divine will are freedom, necessity, and efficacy. How these apply to man will be discussed later along with the contingency of man. St. Thomas says that the principal object of God's will is his own goodness, and it is because of his goodness that he wills what is distinct from himself. Since his



goodness is incapable of being multiplied, he has bestowed it upon the many creatures "through likeness (to himself) by a kind of participation." This participation is most evident in the case of the created free will, without which none of our actions would be specified by our own intellect but only by God's.

Here I am not attempting to explain why God creates. I am rather making the important point that his goodness is the principal object of his willing, that we are a secondary object, and that his divine goodness is the reason for his willing. It is important for the reason that since God is free, making freedom a perfection, it is best that we be free in order for God to greater manifest his goodness and perfection. Also, God may at times cause some effect by a single act, or his will might be fulfilled by the concurrence of many contingent events, which, though capable of failure, produce the desired result infallibly. Thus the will of God could proceed and produce its results in creation without freedom, or the same could happen with the freedom of creatures. The latter involves a higher degree of good, since it reflects God in us more perfectly.

How do we know that we are free, and is freedom necessary for the fulfillment of God's plan? St. Thomas says that people have freedom, and this is known by the exercise of choice between various courses of action and by the choice between action and refraining from action.

In addition to this he asserts that freedom is a prerequisite of deliberation and inquiry into matters such as this one. If this were not true then our so called deliberation and even our false belief in freedom would be the result of necessity(Davies 175). Though we are free, it is not his view that all things that act do so in freedom; for when any created thing is determined by some other created thing acting upon it, it is not acting freely. This is in accord with God's providence, and since he acts in everything, creatures are not free as independent from him but because he is making them free(Davies 176). Our freedom is necessary in the sense that it exists as willed by God from eternity as part of human nature, and its necessity is not absolute, i.e. incapable of not being, as only God's is, but natural "from one of its intrinsic principles"(Clark 291).

God must be conceived of as free, though freedom need not result in the capacity to choose evil. We often infer from freedom choices which are temporal. Applying this to God would then cause us to think that God makes choices in time as men do. This is not the case, according to St. Thomas; so what is meant by God's freedom? St. Thomas says this:

That God has free choice is evident from this: The end of his will, his own goodness, is naturally willed, and he wills all other things ordered to this end; but the latter, strictly speaking, are not necessarily willed...because his goodness is without any need for the things ordered to it, and he can manifest his goodness appropriately in a variety of ways. So, just as with us, he decides freely to do this or

that...

It is unarguable that God is unimpeded, and since he is the first cause, whose essence and existence are one, his action is also uncaused by any external force.

The true meaning of God's freedom is more fully understood when we look at the notion of necessity. As St. Thomas says, God wills all things as ordered to his own goodness, but not of necessity. Since God has created out of a desire to "express the value of his infinite goodness and his love of this goodness" and not on account of any need outside himself, "his will to create is wholly free (Farrelly 219)." That God is free, however, does not entail that man is free but that it is possible that man is free.

Necessity applied negatively to God's will helps to explain his freedom. In a positive sense God's will is of necessity from himself. He is the source of his own necessity, or rather he is identical with it. This does not contradict his freedom since his necessity is not from outside of himself. God's will is also of necessity from eternity because God is simple and consists in the one act. All that exists is willed by God from eternity and in that sense could not be other than it is. This may sound like hard determinism, but since the act of God is neither impeded nor imposed from any external source it is free (Pontifex 37); furthermore, this sense of necessity does not preclude the possibility of freedom in creatures.

God's will is infallible, by virtue of the fact that all things are brought about by his will. God creates out of love for his own infinite goodness, and he wills all things directed to himself as their end "insofar as the divine goodness may allow other things to participate in it (Clark 158)." God's will is achieved infallibly by his salvation of the elect and just sentencing of the reprobate for the sake of his own uncreated goodness. Now the question arises whether the antecedent divine intention of the good free act in man is frustrable.

It is said that God's will can be thought of as antecedent when it is active prior to human response and consequent when it follows upon human response. This way of characterizing his will must be viewed analogically, since God is not in time and all that he does consists in a single eternal act. What we are concerned with here is not a chronological order but a logical one. St. Thomas says that the damnation of those souls who act contrary to their salvation is willed by God consequent upon their sin (Clark 157). This makes logical sense to a Christian, but of what nature is the divine intention for the good free act? Is it infrustrable? St. Thomas says that it is not, that the sin of the rational creature is the result of the frustrable intention of God for the good free act of the rational creature. This answers another question about his view on the nature of the permission of God for

man to sin, specifically that God's permission of sin does not necessitate sin(Farrelly 224).

Farrelly discusses how St. Thomas explains the frustration of God's will. It seems that we come to knowledge of the nature of the uncreated divine intention in the same way that we discover other divine attributes, namely, "through the created effects of God." Through our experience of the act of the free will and its created cause, we can "induce the nature of God's antecedent divine intention that it take place" as long as such an induction does not contradict God's perfection. This is true since the divine will, in harmony, is guided by the divine wisdom, and "we can learn the order of things as the divine wisdom has established them through the things of the world." It is by our experience of the natures of creatures that we know that such things are the result of the divine wisdom and imposed upon the world by the divine will(Farrelly 225). Further, regarding the reason for sin, St. Thomas speaks about the "nature of the rational appetite, the proper object of which is the good presented to it by the intellect." This appetite, or will, acts according to the good presented to it, which does not nor appear to fulfill its desire ultimately. It is therefore within the power of the will, given it through the causality of God in the object presented, to freely act in response. That is to say that prior to the act of the created free will, God's premovement and predetermination,

enacted through the good object presented to it, is frustrable and capable of being rejected(Farrelly 226).

Within the works of St. Thomas there are some texts that seem to contradict what has just been stated. For some, his doctrine, derived from his interpretation of revelation, that "predestination was an absolute divine intention for the salvation of the individual rational creature" clearly makes it impossible for salvation to come partly from the "concurrence of many causes that are contingent and able to fail in gaining their effect(Farrelly 226)," as he says in *De Veritate*.

Another of his teachings says that if God moves the rational creature to act, then he moves him such that it is impossible for him to not to act. St. Thomas does affirm the causality of God in all things as the universal first cause, but the former statement does not distinguish God's premovement from his concurrence with the created free act. It could be restated in a way that brings it more clearly into agreement with the rest of his thought, as follows: God infallibly causes us to act in simultaneous accord with our free choice which is also caused by God. God does not will any evil act, but his permission of the choice for a lesser good and actuation of our potency to act are a necessary condition of our freedom. God cannot permit what he does not cause, for it is not by a mere concurrence with the created free will in eliciting the act that God causes it. Rather his

causation extends to the creature as act to potency. St. Thomas writes, "the power of the instrumental cause is acquired by the instrument by this very fact that it is moved by the principal agent"(Farrelly 166). In order for this to happen, God's movement through his instrumental cause must have a natural priority to the reduction of the created potency to act. This means we are moved to act by a "*physical or existential premovement*" of God and not merely by a simultaneous concurrence. God as principal agent produces his effects causing the instrument to cause some effect proper to itself, and that which is proper to the instrument is the free choice of some good(Farrelly 167).

Taken alone, the just quoted passages certainly make it possible to interpret St. Thomas as saying that man acts only by the antecedently infallibly efficacious will of God, but that would imply that God wills evil. Even more difficult to resolve is the problem of whether God predestines us antecedent to his foreknowledge. This is where the Molinists diverge from the Thomists. Molina taught that God knows man's actions through *scientia media*, a comprehensive knowledge of what each man would do in each set of specific circumstances. Both Thomists and Molinists understand predestination as an *absolute* divine intention that a free creature reach heaven such that the predestined are incapable of failing. Molinists teach that this predestination is subsequent upon God's

foreknowledge, because this is the only way to account for man's freedom. Thomists teach that predestination is antecedent to his foreknowledge, because this is the only way to account for God's causality. St. Thomas's explanation of divine causality and human freedom is consistent, and when it is placed beside his notion of predestination it is clear that St. Thomas teaches that God foresees free good acts not "as preceding predestination but as infallibly following it." In this God show prudence by affecting the means only after establishing the end(Farrelly 10).

What has been said concerning the first causality of God entails that he causes not only those acts which are a result of the choices of creatures for the greater goods but also those which result in lesser goods, or what would be considered evil. This does not appear to be a contradiction, since the notion of willing is not necessarily included in the notion of cause. We do cause our own actions, as St. Thomas said, by the choice which is ours, but God would not be the first cause if he were not the cause of our free acts as well as that of the free will by which they are accomplished. Again, he says that not only does God cause what we do and what is done throughout the universe but he does so in the way that he wills, i.e. in accord with each beings nature.

Our free will is the cause of its act, but it does not of necessity have to be the first cause of its act. God is the first cause, who moves both natural and voluntary causes. And just as by moving natural



causes He does not prevent their acts from being natural, so by moving voluntary causes *He does not deprive their actions of being voluntary; but rather is He the cause of this very thing in them*; for He operates in each thing according to its own nature that He has given it (Ia, q.83,a.1 ad 3um).

The divine will does not coerce the human will but causes in it the mode of its acts. It begins by moving the created will to its final end, the universal good, and then to some particular good(Lagrange 356). There exists within this picture of the divine free will and the created free will a mystery. It is clear from St. Thomas that we know God to be the primary cause of our freedom, for if the will determined itself independent of God, the former would resemble the latter univocally. As Lagrange puts it, "we cannot therefore see *how* God *suavely and firmly* moves our liberty to determine itself, but we see that if He could not move it He would cease to be the universal cause"(Lagrange 358).

The distinction between necessary and contingent effects is essential here. As was mentioned earlier, similarly, "the will of God cannot fail; but in spite of that, not all its effects are necessary; some are contingent"(Davies 177). God wills both what he determines directly of necessity and what is contingent and hence undetermined by him, our free choice. St. Thomas would say that our actions are free when there is nothing outside of us in the world forcing us to move a certain way. Freedom cannot mean independence from God.

Solutions to this antimony have been proposed by many thinkers. Banez offered an answer that rested upon the basic principle of God's primacy. Molina began with the fact of man's freedom. St. Thomas has been thorough in neglecting neither of these fundamental truths, though it is with God that he begins (following, of course, recognition of his own freedom). This is necessary, as we learn from physics. Things move themselves and others in accord with their natures. Further, nothing has motion without having been moved. So it is with the human will and intellect. The intellect does not move without the recognition of the end by the will, whose nature and proper activity is the free pursuit of the universal good. After seeing its end, the will proceeds to move the intellect toward the attainment of that end. The same is true of the will itself. It must be moved, first by God and then by its free choice, i.e. cooperation with or resistance to the divine will. It is also the case that the created free will and the divine will act in harmony, not as though they were opposed but in such a way that "God's controlling providence and his causality by grace within man's will is the source and condition of man's achievement of true freedom"(Farrelly 310).

Aquinas, Thomas. An Aquinas Reader. Ed. Mary T. Clark.  
New York: Fordham UP, 1972.

Davies, Brian, O.P. The Thought of Thomas Aquinas. Oxford:  
Clarendon Press, 1992.

Farrelly, Dom. M. John, O.S.B. Predestination, Grace and  
Free Will. Newman Press: Westminster, 1964.

Garrigou-Lagrange, Rev. R., O.P. Vol. 2 of God: His  
Existence and His Nature. Binghamton: Vail-Ballou  
Press, 1936.

Pontifex, Mark, O.S.B. Vol. 22 of Twentieth Century  
Encyclopedia of Catholicism, Freedom and Providence.  
New York: Hawthorne, 1960.

