Can God Know Our Free Choices?

A Senior Studies Report

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I. Introduction

Throughout the centuries there have been many controversies within the Catholic Church over a variety of issues. One of the longest running controversies is the issue of free will and divine sovereignty. In his book Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis states: "Why then did God give them free will? Because free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata - of creatures that worked like machines - would hardly be worth creating" (49). Although some argue that there is no free will, for the sake of time it will be assumed that Lewis is correct and there is free will. However, there still exists a problem, namely how divine sovereignty and free will, both of which can be cited in the bible, can both be true at the same time. Two views as to how to solve this riddle will be discussed: classicist view and foreknowledge view. While the classicists, who believe that God is the primary cause of all things, including people, hold that free choice and God's sovereignty are compatible by means of mystery, the followers of the foreknowledge view hold that while God knows what a person will do, He does not cause the person's free choice. After a brief description of each view, critiques from both sides will be mentioned, showing that the foreknowledge view is superior to that of the classicist view.

II. The Classicist View

The final outcome of the classicist view, which has names such as Thomas Aquinas and Bernard Lonergan as its followers, is

that the unity of free will and divine sovereignty is a mystery. Many aspects of God are involved in this view, including His simplicity, timelessness, omniscience, knowledge, omnipotence, immutability, and infinity.

One of the basic beliefs about God is that He is a simple being. What is meant by a simple being is that it is not complex in any ways in which natural things are said to be complex. In God, the various attributes are said to be one in the same. For example, if it is said that He is timelessness, and He is also omniscient and omnipotent, then His omniscience is timeless as well as His omnipotence. Also, there is no attribute that has priority over the others. His intellect does not have temporal priority over His will, nor vice versa. If God were not simple, then God would not be perfect, for a perfect being does not have parts, but is one (Denz 45).

Since God is simple, then he is immutable. Aquinas held that the best way to talk about the immutability of God is to call Him 'He Who Is.' This implies that God is Pure Act, for to have potency would mean that God could change (Kondoleon 296). What this entails is that God is not really related to the world; if He were, then He would be dependent on the world for something, namely knowledge. But to be dependent is to have the potential to change. God could have chosen not to create the world and it would not have made Him any less in Being (Kondoleon 294).

Another crucial attribute of God is His timelessness. If God is perfect, then He cannot change, for to change would imply that

He was not perfect. If God were inside of time, then He would be subject to time, and would change with it. To be able to visualize how this works, imagine a road with many cars on it. God would be off of the road, watching the entire road as well as all the cars. Regardless of where on the road they are located, He would grasp all of them at the same instant. Therefore, what is past, present, and future in a person's life, is always the present for God (Teske 287).

The timelessness of God is connected to many characteristics about His knowledge. Since God is simple and timeless, then His knowledge is also timeless. In other words, God knows everything that happens within time simultaneously. Within the timeless being of God, there are no successive acts of knowing. God does not first know one thing and then another. He knows all things at the same moment. What this implies for the omniscience of God is that He knows everything in the future as He knows all things in the past. For there is no past or future for Him; in God all things are simultaneously present to Him (Teske 288).

The omnipotence of God is also very closely interwoven with His omniscience, for what God foreknows, He wills. This can best be seen by using the idea of God as Pure Act, for this implies that He is the primary cause of all things. A problem that arises is that if God knows and wills every act that occurs, then every act would have to take place necessarily. This implies that there can be no free will. However, Bernard Lonergan, in his <u>De Verbo Incarnato</u>, answers that it is not by absolute necessity, but by conditioned

necessity that every act occurs (7). Conditioned necessity does not take away freedom, for it is simply the principle in which, given the antecedent, the consequence is conditionally necessary (Lonergan 4).

An explanation as to how this is possible comes from John F. X. Knasas in his Super God: Divine Infinity and Human Self-Determinism. He uses Aquinas' claim that divine infinity is the "container" for the perfection of all things, including created acts of willing. A free creature, therefore, can do and can do otherwise because both possibilities are contained in the divine infinity (200).

There is now a seemingly contradictory position that the classicists hold. On the one hand, God is the omnipotent and omniscient God whose will cannot be frustrated. In other words, all actions are caused [that is, conditionally necessary] including those actions of humans. God wills everything, including free choices. On the other hand, all humans possess free will. This is to say that free will is the power through which a person performs the free act. These human acts are contingent since, in a free will choice, one could really have done otherwise (Geisler 76).

The classicists use the term mystery, which can be defined as a truth which cannot be comprehended through human reason, in order to answer how these two claims about free will and sovereignty are compatible. Notice that this does not explain why they are both true. Revelation and rational argument establish that these two separate positions are true. The mystery lied in how

they can both be true (Denz 47).

III. Critique of Classicism

Although Classicism is a view that has been widely held by Christians, there appear to be two flaws in the view. The first of these difficulties has to do with the timelessness of God while the second has to do with the notion of mystery.

The claim that God is timeless can be derived from the claim that God is perfect. If a Being is perfect, then it cannot change. But if a Being cannot change, then temporal predicates cannot apply to it; for motion or change is the measure of time. In other words, temporal distinctions cannot apply to a Being that does not move. Therefore, since God is perfect, God is also timeless.

Bruce Reichenbach and Clark Pinnock protest the attribution of timelessness to God. They believe that the attribution of timelessness is inconsistent with the claim that God has created free creatures. If a creature is free, then at least some of her choices could have been otherwise. But timelessness and freedom in this sense (i.e. contingency) appear to be incompatible. The argument runs as follows. If God is simultaneously aware of all events (both past and future), then the future is just as unchangeable and determinate as the past. They are necessary results of God's timeless creative activity. It only *appears* to people who are in time as if the future is open and indeterminate. In reality, future events are just as unchangeable and necessary as past events. Hence, if all events are necessitated, then there cannot be free choices; rather, it must be an illusion. However,

free choice is *not* an illusion. Therefore, the notion that God is timeless must be abandoned (Pinnock 96).

The second problem with the classicist view has to do with its appeal to the category of mystery. In order to understand this problem, both what is meant by a mystery and the context in which the appeal to mystery is made must be recalled. A mystery is understood to be a truth which must be commonly accepted but whose possibility to understand cannot be grasped. It is a truth beyond human power to understand. People can be led to believe that it is true, but they cannot see how it can be true.

Now the classicists appeal to mystery in regard to the proposition that God is the cause of all things including human free choices. The classicists maintain that people must affirm this proposition. On the one hand, there is reason to believe that persons are free in the Libertarian sense of that term. These reasons are both philosophical and scriptural. On the other hand, people have reason to believe in God's specific sovereignty over all things, including free choices. These reasons are largely scriptural, but they may have an independent philosophical basis as well. Therefore, there is reason to believe both in specific sovereignty and in free will. However, from the fact that there is reason to believe that these two claims are true, it does not follow that it is actually understandable as to how they can both be simultaneously true; nor does it follow from the fact that people are not able to grasp this possibility that there is a decisive reason for abandoning these beliefs. Rather, what must be

acknowledged is that people are confronted by a mystery (a certain truth which is beyond comprehension).

But is it really legitimate to treat the relation between divine sovereignty and human freedom as a mystery? It is not legitimate if the proposition "God is the cause of free choices" is actually a contradiction. This is because mysteries must be truths, and contradictions cannot be true. However, as it will be pointed out, this proposition really is a contradiction. The idea of causation, which involves the notion of necessitation or determinism, is incompatible with freedom. A free choice is one which is uncaused. Therefore, it cannot be caused by God. Consequently, people cannot legitimately speak of the relation between divine sovereignty and human freedom as a mystery. It is, in fact, a contradiction which rationally requires there to be a modification either in their conception of God, or in their conception of freedom, or both (Reichenbach, "Response" 90).

IV. Reichenbach View

The foreknowledge view, which will now be called the Reichenbach view, after Bruce Reichenbach, basically states that God is the sovereign ruler who chose to make free beings. However, by making free beings, God has limited His own power, since free beings, if truly free, are the only ones who can make final decisions concerning themselves. All other free beings (including God), since they cannot make decisions for another, cannot react to a person's free decision until that decision has

been made. To look more specifically into this view, Reichenbach examines the aspects of God's sovereignty, omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, and providence. However, before addressing each of these, he first discusses what it is to be a free being.

In Reichenbach's view, a free person is one who could have chosen otherwise. To go further, each person's free act was "not compelled by causes either internal to himself (genetic structure or irresistible drives) or external (other persons, God) to act as he did" (102). If a person is compelled to think or act a certain way, whether by God or another person, then she is not free. Freedom can only come when one's decisions are not dependent on another.

If God's allowance of freedom signifies that God does not have control over everything, then what is to become of the sovereignty of God? According to Reichenbach, sovereignty does not mean that everything is controllable. Instead, it means that God can give people rules with which to live, and help them to live in that way. However, if there is to be true human freedom, then God's power is limited. The example that Reichenbach gives is that of a sovereign king. The king can force one to do certain acts, but cannot compel him to do the acts freely, for forcing implies taking away freedom. If, for example, by sovereignty a person means that God is the one who plans and wills everything, then God is no more than a novelist. The characters in a novel can have choices given to them and choices made by them. Furthermore, these choices could have been made otherwise. However, divine sovereignty of this type holds that it is the divine, or novelist, who made the choices

and decisions, not the characters. It is the divine who could have done otherwise, not the characters (Reichenbach, "God" 104-107).

Divine sovereignty leads to the subject of God's omnipotence. According to Reichenbach, there are two criterion for an omnipotent being: first, the being can do anything that is not contradictory or absurd; and second, "no being with greater power can be conceived" (107). By creating free human beings, God is limiting Himself; for to have control over everything would imply that there is not freedom. If people simply had minds that were manipulated by God in order to reach the ends that God desires, then how could they be free? Instead, people are free beings who can choose between good and evil. Reichenbach does, however, make a point to mention that it is possible for God to intervene and restrict our freedom. However, the more God interferes, the more our freedom is revoked. The more freedom people have, the more their moral actions belong to them (Reichenbach, "God" 107-109).

The next area that Reichenbach addresses, God's omniscience, is the main area that separates his view from that of Clark Pinnock ("God Limits His Knowledge"). Reichenbach claims that God, although dependent on other people's free will, does know future events. Opposite to this is Pinnock's view in which God does not know future events. The reason that Reichenbach's view of God's omniscience is more acceptable is that it is biblically based. A good example, as he points out, is Psalm 139, where it talks about God knowing who a person is, even before she is in her mother's womb. The one concern that many people have on this, is that if

God knows that a person is going to do something, then is it not true to say that the person could not have done otherwise, since God's knowledge of something cannot be wrong? This argument confuses the causes. God knows something because people cause it to happen. For example, if Denz were to wear his "Triple D" shirt today, God would have known yesterday (and 3000 years ago) that Denz was going to wear it today. However, if Denz would have decided to wear his white shirt today instead of the famed "Triple D," then God would have known that yesterday (and 3000 years ago) instead. So God's knowing of future events is dependant on the person's choice (Reichenbach, "God" 109-112).

Along with the issue of omniscience, Reichenbach addresses the aspect of God's eternity. The classicist views God's eternity as Him existing outside of time. Reichenbach claims that God has existed indefinitely back in time and will exist infinitely in the future. He is, according to this view, in time. It has already been described why this view is more desirable than that of the classicists. To this type of eternity, the classicists would argue that it makes God no longer a simple being. Reichenbach would respond by saying that while God's character (essence) remains the same (that is, his omniscience, goodness, lovingness, justness, etc.), his consequent nature (accidents) does change. As the people in the world change to each other and to God, so must God change in His relationship to them. The aspects of Him that make up His essence, by which God is defined, are to remain a constant (Reichenbach, "God" 112-115).

If God exists in time and limits His power, what is to be said of His providence? According to Reichenbach, providence, as applied to God, refers to the guidance and plans that God has for His people. Universally, God plans "to unite all things in heaven and on earth in Christ" (115, from Ephesians 1:10). Also, God has purposes for individuals, as in the cases of his calling the prophets and the apostles. As mentioned earlier, God can act in nature, intervening when He deems it necessary. However, if He were to intervene often, then a person would not be able to make rational judgment since there would be no constant law of nature. Also, God can act directly within a person. However, if God habitually does this, then people will not have as much free will. The most usual way for God's plan to be carried out is through persuasion. However, no matter how much God persuades someone, the final decision is up to that individual. She can accept or reject what God is trying to tell her. Of course, this means that sometimes God's plans are impeded. What this does is makes "provisions for the separation of the sheep from the goats" (118) in an ultimate judgment as indicated in Matthew 35:31-46. Therefore, God must change some of His individual plans to adopt to some choices that the free humans have made. This does not mean that God can forget about His plans being carried out, since people will make wrong decisions. It is through the death and resurrection of Christ that God may overrule the acts of people. Because of Christ, God can make people right through forgiveness, redemption, and grace (Reichenbach, "God" 115-118).

V. Critique of the Reichenbach View

When viewing the ideas held by Reichenbach, the classicists would find several features with which they would find difficulties. The two most obvious difficulties concern the simplicity of God, and the question of the responsibility for salvation.

One of the most striking features of Reichenbach's view is that it rejects the simplicity of God. As mentioned previously, the simplicity of God is the idea that He is not complex in any way. The various terms used to refer to God in fact refer to one and the same simple entity. God's knowledge is identical to His power, His goodness, etc. This idea is not a new one. The view that God is a simple being was held by the earliest Church Fathers, who regarded it as a truth already discovered by certain Greek philosophers. The idea is one of the most basic teachings of the Church. To go against this teaching would be to go against one of the longest traditions of the Church.

However, the fact that Reichenbach's position is anti-traditional is not necessarily a conclusive reason for rejecting it. What must be considered is the philosophical arguments for simplicity. The classicists do have philosophical reasons as to why God's simplicity is so important to uphold. The best way to grasp these reasons it to examine Aquinas' argument for the simplicity of God.

Aquinas' five ways of proving the existence of God yield five different names for God, each of which corresponds to a different

way. Thus, God is the Unmoved First Mover, the Uncaused First Efficient Cause, the First Necessary Being, the Infinite Good, and the First Intelligent Designer. From these names of God, Aquinas deduces a number of further conclusions about God's essence. Among the list of such entailments are the propositions that God is absolutely simple and that He is outside of time (Glenn 4-6).

In responding to Aquinas' claim about the absolute simplicity of God, Reichenbach would first point out that he is not denying that God is in some sense simple. He acknowledges that God's essence is simple in the sense that it is unchanging. As it was mentioned previously, the important aspects of God, such as His knowledge, goodness, will, intellect, and all other key aspects of God, are not changing. Reichenbach claims that God's accidents, especially when relating to the world, can and do change.

However, Reichenbach rejects Aquinas' notion of absolute simplicity. He would argue that what distinguishes himself from Aquinas is a fundamental difference in starting points. Aquinas uses metaphysical reasoning in order to arrive at the assumption that free will exists side by side with God causing all human events. He begins with his metaphysical claims about God and works his way from the existence of God through the aspects of God until he arrives at the conclusion that God must be the cause of all human actions (including thoughts). But because he also believes that humans have free will, and that they cannot comprehend how God causes free choices, he concludes that they must treat them compatibly as a mystery.

Reichenbach, on the other hand, uses the idea that humans have free will (in the libertarian sense) as one of the starting points of his view. If it is true that humans have free will, then it would be contradictory to say that God causes everything, for that would disallow libertarian freedom for humans. Furthermore, if God cannot cause everything, but is dependant on humans for something (namely the knowledge of their decisions), then He must stand in temporal relations to human events. However, existence in time and mutability in relation entail that God is not absolutely simple.

The second feature of Reichenbach's view that classicists have difficulties with is its treatment of salvation. Reichenbach's view seems to leave no room for people's dependance on God for salvation. It seems that people save themselves by their free choices. Since it is people that are responsible for their choices, and since God only reacts to these choices, the classicists find it difficult to see how it can be said that God saves people. After all, it is individuals and not God who make the appropriate choices.

Reichenbach would say that God cannot react to a person until he makes his decision. What the classicists say is that this entails that God merely reacts to these individuals. Thus, a person is saved if he does many good deeds or damned if he does not. However, this misinterprets God's role. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God is in a special way responsible for the salvation of His people. He has offered them forgiveness and redemption which they are not owed. It is up to free persons to

cooperate with that grace. Thus, people do have some role in their own salvation. However, it is God who has final control over the forgiveness of sins and the graces which He bestows on His people (Reichenbach, "God" 118).

VI. Conclusion

In the final analysis, it seems to come down to what are the basic steps of a person's theology. In other words, where a person begins when he comes up with his beliefs in God. Aquinas believed that an accurate theology rightly begins with metaphysical reasoning. Reichenbach argues that this way of theological thought would lead to contradiction and the absence of free will. Instead, he begins with the assumption that people have free will, then procedes from that point. Of course, there are strengths and weaknesses with each argument. However, what it comes down to in the end is where people wish to begin their theological thought.

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