

*Divine Sovereignty
and
Human Freedom*

A Senior Studies Report

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The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relation between Divine Sovereignty and human freedom within the framework of Thomistic metaphysics. St. Thomas espouses the position that God has specific sovereignty. That is, He is said to be the cause of all things. At the same time, Thomas argues that human beings are truly free. That is, there are occasions when it is correct to say that someone could have done otherwise. Consequently, Aquinas is committed to the position that God is the cause of human free choice. On the face of it, this claim sounds contradictory. The burden of my paper is to show that it is not a contradiction. The paper is divided into three parts. First, I provide an account of Thomas' position based upon the work of his contemporary expositor John Knasas. I then discuss certain weaknesses within Knasas' position. Finally, in the third portion of the paper I try to show how these weaknesses can be overcome. I argue that the key to a satisfactory account lies in his analyzing the notion of "God's permitting will."

I argue for the Classical view because of its consistency with metaphysical knowledge and its consistency with Sacred Scripture. My premise for this harmonization is the definition from St. Anselm that God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. Operating from this assumption, I claim that it is greater to cause all things than not to cause all things.

Furthermore, I claim that it is greater for God to create finite beings that are free than to create finite beings that are not truly free. If God is not the cause of all things then He is not the greatest thing that can be conceived. Furthermore, if He created finite creatures to be mere robots, He has not created that which would be greater. It would be greater for finite creatures to love and serve their creator from their own free choice rather than through coercion.

I have argued strictly from the metaphysical point of view. However, I also want to acknowledge the Scriptural references to both divine causality and free will. In support of free will, consider John 3:16 which states, "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life" (The New Jerusalem Bible). This implies that we have free choice. Another strong reference to free choice can be found in Deuteronomy chapter 30. "Look, today I am offering you life... or death. If you obey the commandments of Yahweh your God,... you will live and grow numerous. But if your hearts turn away,... you will most certainly perish" (The New Jerusalem Bible). This passage explicitly indicates that we are indeed free. Then regarding sovereignty, consider Job 42:2, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted" (New International Version

Study Bible). Moreover, Psalm 135:6 reads, "the Lord does whatever pleases Him, in the heavens and on the earth..." (New International Version Study Bible). These passages clearly indicate that God does indeed cause all things.

The claim that God causes all things and that rational, finite creatures are truly free seem as though they contradict each other. However, I have shown that there is metaphysical evidence clearly pointing to the truth of both of these two statements. There is Scriptural evidence that also indicates that God causes our free choices. Furthermore, if this assertion is not true, then God is not that than which nothing greater can be conceived. In saying this, I am not claiming to understand how they can both be true. However, I am claiming that they are both true. Scripture says that our ways are not God's ways and our thoughts are not God's thoughts. In my estimation, this is Scriptural evidence that indicates that there are mysteries which we must accept. One such mystery is the co-existence of Divine Causality and human freedom. However, the sum of this paper is not merely to show that Christians accept both of these propositions. Rather, the greater purpose of this paper is to propose an understanding of how these two propositions can be true. Let us begin by considering John F. X. Knasas' interpretation of Aquinas in the article "Aquinas: Prayer to an Immutable God".

Knasas writes his article in response to Lewis Ford's challenge to classical theism's view of prayer. Ford claims that the classical view on prayer is inconsistent with its views on other matters. He claims that prayer is basically either petitionary or adoration in nature. Ford says that petitionary prayer is inconsistent with theistic omniscience. He attacks prayers of adoration on the grounds that they are an egotistical demand by God (Knasas 196, 197).

In a response to these charges, Knasas turns to Thomas Aquinas. Thomas defines predestination as God's ordering of a rational creature to eternal life. Within this ordering, God grants us things on the condition that we ask, just as trees grow on the condition that the rain falls. This ordering is part of God's will. Knasas says that we are God's friends and, indeed, we are his intimate lovers. It is for this reason that God wants us to fulfill our desires on the condition that we ask. Therefore, prayer is a necessary part of our salvation. However, Knasas emphasizes that prayer is a secondary cause. To say that it is a primary cause is to deny the belief that prayer is God's own gift. Apparently, he believes that this denies free-will. Now let us consider his reasoning (Knasas 197-201).

The function of the will is to choose what seems to be the most good for the agent. Therefore, God can make a

good obvious to an agent so that they will freely choose to follow God's will. Hence, God's will is accomplished, and the agent's free-will is left intact. Thomas explains this by saying that motion exists in an agent. However, the cause of the motion of an agent cannot primarily be the agent itself. There must be an unmoved mover. In developing his account of this Unmoved mover, Knasas turns to Joseph Owens' interpretation of Aquinas. Owens is looking at Thomas' understanding of "esse". He affirms that without esse there would be nothing. Therefore, esse is actual. On the other hand, Owens interprets Aquinas as saying the esse is also received. He finds the dual status very important for the assertion of esse's cause. Being received, esse must have a cause prior to the agent possessing it. One cannot cause one's own possession of esse. Therefore, God is the unmoved mover because He gives motion its esse. This establishes that God is the primary cause but not the only cause. Existentially, God has caused the whole of the activity. However, by its nature, activity is the action of an agent. The agent possesses its responsibility for the activity. This raises the following question: how can God be the first cause without interfering with an agent's free-will (Knasas 204-208)?

Knasas answers the preceding question by saying that God lacks no excellence. Therefore, the universal

perfection of action is contained within God. Since, God can move an agent's will, and since other perfections are contained in God, the agent can choose to act in accord with other perfections within God's will (this locution will hereafter be referred to as "P"). Even though these acts are caused, they do not infringe upon free-will. And this brings us back to the original problem. How can acts be both truly caused by God and remain free-acts? In the remainder of the article, Knasas appears to answer all such questions by referring to "P". God does move us to an action that is still within His will. Nonetheless, we can still do otherwise (Knasas 209-214).

Knasas is now in a position to answer Ford's objections about prayer. Aquinas says that God will grant salvation on the condition that one asks for it. When one sees the good of salvation, and when he sees that it is to be freely chosen, one will eagerly pray for salvation. Again, "P" determines that God is unchanged by our prayer. In regard to adoration, Knasas says that perfect adoration is the conforming of one's will to God's, and again this is explained by "P". This adoration is not an egotistical act by God. For us to conform our wills to God's will is adoration. It is also the means by which we are saved. Therefore, this act of God is not an egotistical act. Rather, it is an act of God's love for His creatures (214-221).

I now want to consider an objection to Knasas' position. Let us begin by considering a hypothetical situation. There is a man who freely decided to go for a walk. Given that he freely decided, it is implied that he could have done otherwise. For example, he could have taken a nap. In this situation, Knasas claims that there is no contradiction in the idea that God has freely caused the man to take a walk. There are certain attributes of God which explain why there is no contradiction. First, we must understand that God is simple. This means that any one of God's attributes is identical to all of God's other attributes. For example, His omniscience is identical to His omnipotence. Second, we must understand that God is infinite. That is, we must not take the qualities of finite beings and apply them to God. Third, we must understand that God is perfect. This is to say God lacks no good. Whatever can be conceived as good can be found in God in its fullness. Fourth, we must understand that God is pure being. It was previously stated that any good is found in its fullness within God. However, God does not contain being. Rather, He is being. Fifth, we must understand that God is the cause of the existence and goodness of every finite object. We can infer from these claims that God has within Himself all the perfections found in finite creatures, and He causes all the perfections within finite creatures. Furthermore,

the perfections found in finite creatures are different in degree from how they exist within God. This latter distinction allows us to examine more closely the man's choice to go for a walk.

Following Knasas, we must conclude that the man's choice to walk was caused by God. However, it is still a free act. It is free because God contains within Himself the goodness of the man walking and the goodness of the man's choice not to walk. Because God is a perfect cause, a cause containing all perfections, He can bring about choices while preserving the reality of the alternatives that make such choices free or contingent." Knasas says that the causation of free choices is possible because it is causation by an infinite being. But all of our experience is of finite action. That is why we cannot comprehend such a causation.

But this line of thought appears to subject us to a devastating objection. Just because a possibility is within God, it does not necessarily follow that the possibility will be actualized. Whether a possibility is actualized depends upon the conditions which are found within the mover. Among the conditions which we have ascribed to God are immutability and indefectibility. In other words, what God wants to come to pass and only what He wants to come to pass will actually come to pass. Therefore, the fact that there are real alternatives in

God does not guarantee that our acts are free. It only guarantees that God could have caused other actions.

We need to draw a clean distinction between what is "logically contingent" and what is "causally contingent". For a possibility to be logically contingent, it is conceivable that another possibility could have been actualized. However, the same cannot be said of a causal possibility. For true freedom would indicate that one could act otherwise under precisely the same causal conditions. The fact that God contains other logical possibilities will have no bearing upon my freedom. For there to be another possibility within the cause does not necessarily mean that the possibility could be actualized. That depends on God's causal activity. Hence, Knasas has not effectively resolved the apparent contradiction between our freedom and God's causality. We need to supplement Knasas' argument with further premisses from Thomas' account of causality.

Let us begin anew by returning to the definition of free choice. A free choice is one in which the choosers could have chosen otherwise. Such a choice is not free unless all other conditions are the same. And included in the "all other conditions" is God. Therefore, if we say that God acts otherwise as we act otherwise, then the criterion for "all other conditions being the same" has not been met. Therefore it would not be a free choice.

The point is that however we act, God is not changed. Because of God's infinity, He is not changed by what occurs within the finite, created order. That is, whenever a perfection that is contained within God is realized by a finite creature, God is not changed by this realization.

Given this thesis about the unchangeability of God's will, let us now consider the Thomist definition of inresistibility. Thomas asserts that sin is an offense against the will of God. And finite creatures do sin. Therefore, the will of God is resistible and it does not infringe upon the will of finite creatures. What, then, are we to make of the notion of "inresistibility"? Thomas claims that eventually the sinner will make a return to God whether it be through God's beauty or through God's just punishment. It is in this sense that God's will is inresistible.

The fallacy in the previous objection is its commitment to the position that God has either ordained every finite action, or He has not ordained every finite action. If this assumption is true, it would be difficult to hold on to the idea of finite freedom as we understand it. What is needed instead is an understanding of the Thomist notion of "permission". To permit is to avoid taking certain steps to insure the actualization of a possibility. It is not taking certain steps to prevent

the actualization of a possibility. With regard to sin, God takes steps neither to insure its actualization, nor to prevent its actualization. Since God is omnipotent, if He willed that there would be no sin, there would be no sin. But since God is perfectly good, He cannot will there to be sin. However, there is sin. Therefore, God permits sin. And, according to St Thomas, it is good that He permits sin.

We can now see how God's causality can co-exist with the freedom of finite creatures. God "freely wills" us to "freely choose". Therefore, it is impossible for us not to freely choose. However, God does allow (permit) us to freely choose not to do His will. To see this point, consider the example of a young man who is discerning his vocation. God could truly be willing that the young man become a priest. But the man may choose instead to marry his high school sweetheart.

When God is permitting something, he is permitting something not to happen. What God causes is everything actually existent in the choosing of X (a free choice), that is, the very act of and positivity of the finite choosing. Yet, a different choice could have been made. Hence, by choosing X, a not-choosing was made for some alternative. Further, contained within not-choosing is not-being. And since God is pure being, God could not be the cause of this not-choosing. Therefore the

responsibility and the freedom of the act is contained within the finite chooser. To grasp this point, consider an analogy with the "dead-man" switch on a train. As long as the dead-man switch is closed, the train and the engineer will move toward the destination which is desired by the master. However, if the engineer ceases to keep the switch closed (a choice not to do something) then the train will not arrive at the desired end of the master. In other words, the engineer is allowed to stray from the right path even though this is not the will of the master.

In the final analysis, I cannot support any position which does not fully affirm God's causality. All such positions seem to me to go against both metaphysical evidence and against Divine Revelation. Likewise, I cannot affirm a position which denies the reality of human freedom. Both of these positions must be maintained by serious theists. On the other hand, I do acknowledge that there seems to be a real tension in holding such a position. However, as Scripture says, God's ways are not our ways nor His thoughts like our thoughts. Divine Sovereignty and human freedom are a locus of mystery. Nonetheless, a mystery must be reasonable. Even though we cannot fully understand how human freedom can co-exist with God's causality, we must affirm it because it appears to be the most reasonable position. I find Knasas'

*account supplemented by a theory of Divine Sovereignty to
be a plausible way of resolving what appears to be a
contradiction.*

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