

A THOMISTIC CONSIDERATION OF NORMAN GEISLER’S POSITION
ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY,
HUMAN FREEDOM, AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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The Free Will Defense Concerning The Problem of Evil

Atheist philosopher Michael Martin states that The Free Will Defense (FWD) “in its simplest form can be stated as follows. Moral evil cannot be blamed on God, since it is the result of human free choice; consequently, human beings are responsible for moral evil.”¹ Martin is not satisfied with this response for any number of reasons, but his primary issue is that of the possibility of having human freedom in a world with little or no evil. His argument is in the form of a dilemma. Allowing for the assumption that human freedom is valuable, Martin believes that:

- (1) There are two models of human freedom: contracausal and compatibilist.²
- (2) Given the compatibilist model, God could have guaranteed little or no evil, but did not do so which weakens His goodness..
- (3) Given the contracausal model, God could not have guaranteed little or no evil, but would be weakened in some important sense to theists.
- (4) The contracausal model is false because God cannot be allowed to be weakened in some important sense to theists.
- (5) The compatibilist model is false because God cannot be weakened in His goodness.

¹Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 362.

²Contracausal freedom is the belief that “X is free to do action A = If X had chosen to do action A, then X would have succeeded.” Compatibilist freedom refers to the belief that “person P is not free to do Y when P’s choice is restrained by external factors or psychological blockages, and that P is free when P’s choice is not so restrained.” See Ibid., 366.

Martin notes that unless the theist is willing to give up God's sovereignty or foreknowledge (even in a weak sense of probabilistic knowledge), then God must be held responsible for the actions of His creation.³ Martin concludes from these and other problems with the FWD that because "the major point of the FWD is to show that evil in the world is consistent with the existence of an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God . . . the FWD fails."⁴

Popular evangelical author Norman Geisler sees human free will as the efficient cause of moral evil in the world. He writes that, "Free choice is the cause of the corruption of the good world that God made. One of the good things an absolutely good God made was the power of free choice. It is good to be free, but with that freedom comes the capability of actualizing evil."⁵ Geisler states the problem as follows:

- (1) God cannot do what is actually impossible.
- (2) It is actually impossible to destroy evil without destroying free choice.
- (3) But free choice is necessary to a moral universe.
- (4) Therefore, God cannot destroy evil without destroying this good moral universe.

It is impossible for God to do what is contradictory. . . . [God] can only do what is possible. But it is not possible to force people to freely choose the good. Forced freedom is a contradiction. Therefore, God cannot literally destroy all evil without annihilating free choice. The only way to destroy evil is to destroy the good of free choice. . . . Therefore, if God were to destroy all evil, he would have to destroy all good too.⁶

³Ibid., 388.

⁴Ibid., 368.

⁵Norman L. Geisler, *The Roots of Evil*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 2003). Ch. 4.

⁶Norman L. Geisler, *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 221.

Geisler's response to the moral problem of evil seems to rely heavily on the notion that human freedom is the efficient cause of evil. Martin would argue that if Geisler held to a compatibilist view of freedom, the argument would fail (at premise 2). Yet this account of freedom seems more in line with Geisler's thinking.⁷ How, then, does Geisler escape Martin's dilemma? As will be shown below, Geisler essentially limits God's causal activity in free will actions to His knowledge. This, Geisler claims, is the solution offered by Thomas Aquinas.⁸ This paper will call this claim into question and will argue that Geisler has misinterpreted Aquinas on this vital issue.⁹

Divine Sovereignty vs. Human Freedom

Few issues in Christendom divide theologians more than the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom. The Bible, it seems, teaches both that according to His omnipotence God is in control over all things, yet human freedom seems presupposed for morality and other issues.¹⁰ The problem of reconciling these two teachings has plagued scholars

⁷What Geisler calls *soft determinism*: "Soft determinism is sometimes called *compatibilism* [sic], since it is 'compatible' with free choice (self-determinism). Only hard determinism is incompatible with free choice or secondary causality of a human free agent." Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 197 (emphasis in original).

⁸This will be made clear below.

⁹Whether or not Aquinas escapes Martin's critique is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a good introduction to Aquinas' thought can be found in Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 89-97, 158-84.

¹⁰In some cases the Bible appears to teach both in the same passage (e.g., Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23, 38; 1 Pet. 2:8; etc.).

for centuries.¹¹ How can God's sovereign will stand alongside human freedom? Geisler lists the issue alongside the Trinity and the Incarnation as being "one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith."¹²

Geisler himself has engendered controversy over his proposed solution to the problem, claiming that God's foreknowledge of human free acts and His determination of them are one, and that therefore to even ask the question of which causes the other would be a mistake.¹³ In response to Geisler's proposed solution, James White notes that "it is somewhat startling that generations of Christian theologians could have missed such a simple truth and as a result have needlessly argued over the issue for centuries."¹⁴ While rhetorically moving, similar sentiments have been made by White's Roman Catholic critics concerning his stance on justification.¹⁵ The mere fact of continual theological wrangling is no argument against a position.

But White has more to say on the subject. Arguing that "it is not philosophy that leads the Reformed believer to his or her conclusions: it is biblical exegesis that does so," he blames Geisler's reliance on philosophy for his view on the issue.¹⁶ Statements like this have garnered

¹¹That this is the case will be assumed for the purposes of this paper as the issue is hardly obscure.

¹²Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999), 38.

¹³Norman Geisler, "God Knows All Things" in David and Randall Basinger, *Predestination and Free Will* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

¹⁴James White, *The Potter's Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2000), 57.

¹⁵E.g., "If the biblical position on justification is really so clear why did it take fifteen centuries for Luther to figure it out?"

¹⁶White, 38.

praise from his camp, but others criticize him for not recognizing his own philosophical issues. Geisler is likewise both applauded by fans and reviled by foes for his use of philosophy in answering the question.¹⁷ Given that opponents on both sides are using the same Bible and generally the same hermeneutic, philosophical differences may very well be the determining factor.¹⁸ Therefore they should be investigated carefully.

That Geisler relies heavily on the writings of Thomas Aquinas is no secret.¹⁹ While a detailed account of Aquinas's position is beyond the scope of this paper, what will be shown is that Geisler's understanding of Aquinas often does not seem to be in concert with Aquinas's express views. This will be demonstrated by a fairly detailed summary of Geisler's positions on God's knowledge in relation to His determinate will, and God's causation with respect to human free will. Then, Aquinas's position on the same issues will be briefly sketched and contrasted with that of Geisler.

Geisler on God's Knowledge and Will: "In Accordance With"

As early as 1982, Geisler introduced the idea that God's predestination is "in accordance with" human freedom, and also began to join the ideas of foreknowledge and determination.²⁰ He

¹⁷See reviews on Amazon.com of either book, or in White's book (also available at <http://vintage.aomin.org/TPF.html>).

¹⁸For a detailed account of the minimal differences between the hermeneutics of even more disparate theological positions see Douglas M. Beaumont, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatology: Preterism and Dispensationalism Compared" paper delivered at The Evangelical Theological Society Regional Conference Orlando, FL: 2004.

¹⁹See Norman Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 103-117.

²⁰Norman Geisler, "God, Evil, and Dispensations" in Donald K. Campbell, ed., *Walvoord: A Tribute* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1982), 103.

states that since God knows all that He “determinately foreknew” what was to come.²¹ Wishing to avoid any incursion into human freedom, Geisler opted to include God’s foreordination / predestination and human free will together with His knowledge. At this time Geisler did not go into whether God’s knowledge was causative regarding human acts, but if “since” is taken in the usual way of indicating causation, linguistically it seems that God’s knowledge of human free acts was the cause of his determining.

Geisler offered a more detailed account of his view in 1986 with the publication of the multi-view book *Predestination and Free Will*. Here Geisler argues for God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, and criticizes two views: that God’s predetermination is based on his foreknowledge, and that God’s predetermination is in spite of His foreknowledge. Geisler concludes that God’s predetermination is not based on His foreknowledge, but rather that God’s predetermination is in accordance with His foreknowledge (which Geisler describes as “*knowingly determining and determinately knowing*”).²² There are human free actions and God determined that they would be such.

Geisler then moves on to attempt a resolution to the problem of how a free choice can be determined. He argues that since God cannot be wrong about what He knows, and some things he knows are free acts, that makes them necessary from God’s standpoint but not man’s. Because of these two different perspectives, Geisler says, the alleged contradiction is removed. Some may still wonder, however, at how a determined act can be said to be free if it cannot be otherwise (a

²¹Ibid., 102.

²²Norman Geisler, “God Knows All Things” in David and Randall Basinger, *Predestination and Free Will* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 70 (emphasis in original).

standard libertarian view of freedom). Indeed, Geisler himself noted at the beginning of the chapter that Jonathan Edwards argument that “God is the First Cause of everything; therefore, God must be the cause of our free choices” was used “God to eliminate freedom.”²³

Geisler argues that free choices are those which are not forced and that God’s knowledge of a free act does not force that act. Here again, though, Geisler’s language sounds very much like God’s determination of a free act is simply based on His foreknowledge (as does the title of his chapter). Geisler repeats the same basic formula throughout. E.g., “God can determine through free choice with the same certainty that he can determine without it. An omniscient mind cannot be wrong. . . . if God is all-knowing, then he can know the future with the same certainty that he can know the past.”²⁴ In fact Geisler describes God’s knowledge as seeing the acts: “God *sees* what we are freely doing. And what he sees, he knows. And what he knows, he determines. So God *determinately* knows and *knowingly determines* what we are freely deciding.”²⁵ While this might be taken as mere metaphor, Geisler even speaks of God’s predestination *prediction*: “By His limitless knowledge God is able to predict the exact course of human history . . . including the names of persons generations before they are born.”²⁶

How do Geisler’s descriptions cohere with his previous criticism of the view that God determines based on His knowledge of future human actions? Geisler responds to the seeming inconsistency by noting that in God, who is a simple being, knowledge and will are one. Further,

²³Ibid., 63.

²⁴Ibid., 72-73.

²⁵Ibid., 73 (emphasis in original).

²⁶Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 13.

God is eternal; therefore, God does not “foreknow” anything - He “simply knows (not foreknows) what we *are* doing with our free choices.”²⁷ Thus, for Geisler, God does not base His determination on His foreknowledge because He does not *have* foreknowledge. God’s knowing and willing are one (Geisler’s “determinately knowing and knowingly determining”), and neither is “based on” the other.²⁸

Geisler on God’s Causation and Human Freedom: “Fact vs. Act”

While Geisler may have succeeded in removing the flawed idea that God looks into the future in order to know what people are freely doing, what of causation? Here again, Geisler criticizes two views before moving on to his own. After dispensing with indeterminism (that free acts are uncaused, which violates fundamental laws of causation), he moves on to determinism (the view that God causes through human choices). Geisler criticizes this latter view because it makes humans to be instrumental causes through which God (the efficient cause) works His will.²⁹ This, Geisler says, eliminates human freedom and causes problems for reward and blame, makes God the cause of evil, etc.³⁰

Geisler does not wish to remove God from the causal stream, however, and so proposes that while God is the primary efficient cause man is the secondary efficient cause. Geisler

²⁷Geisler, *Predestination and Free Will*, 73.

²⁸See *ibid.*, 67.

²⁹Aquinas himself uses instrumental causes as illustrations of his position, for even secondary efficient causes are indeed instruments of God’s will. The difference is that secondary efficient causes are not purely instrumental causes because they act internally according to their nature, while purely instrumental causes are acted *upon* by external forces. See Aquinas, *SCG* 3.89.5.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 74-77.

explains this with the formula “God is the cause of the fact of freedom, and humans are causes of the acts of freedom.”³¹ This makes God “responsible for bestowing freedom, but humans are responsible for behaving with it.” Geisler contrasts his view with one holding that “God both caused the fact of human freedom and he actually performs the acts of human freedom” which Geisler says makes humans into “puppets or robots.”³²

Geisler’s Consistency on These Two Positions

Geisler’s statements concerning his views presented above are consistent with his later writings. In his most specific work in relation to man’s freedom, *Chosen But Free*, Geisler makes many similar statements. He argues that God is not responsible for evil because “God made the fact of freedom; we are responsible for the acts of freedom. . . . God is the cause of the former, and we are the cause of the latter.”³³ Geisler later notes that “the creature, by means of the good power of free choice, is the first cause of evil.” Geisler’s arguments concerning God’s knowledge and will are repeated also: “God knows—for sure— precisely how we will use our freedom. . . . If God has infallible knowledge of future free acts, then the future is completely determined.” Geisler’s oft-repeated illustration follows the same lines: “God *knew for sure* (i.e., predetermined) that Judas would *freely* (i.e., with free choice) betray Christ.”³⁴

³¹Ibid., 79.

³²Ibid.

³³Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999), 23.

³⁴Ibid., 43 (emphasis in original). See the other premises in this argument and also further restatements of the same basic idea on 45 and 178-197.

Although the above points should not be belabored, in order to ensure proper context Geisler's *Systematic Theology* may be consulted.³⁵ Here Geisler strongly affirms God's sovereignty. Geisler begins his section on human decisions by stating that "God is in sovereign control of everything we choose, even our own salvation."³⁶ After citing several biblical texts to support this assertion Geisler explains what he means: "Even actions that the Bible declares as freely chosen by human beings are said to be determined by God in advance."³⁷ This is followed by the examples of Judas and Jesus used elsewhere.

While the above statements might sound stronger than those in previous works, they are tempered by Geisler's further explanations under "The Theological Basis for God's Sovereignty" where he again links God's knowledge (not will) to His control.³⁸ In fact, when considering God's omnipotence with regard to His sovereignty, Geisler explains only how God's sovereignty does *not* relate to human free acts.³⁹ Again, causation is missing from the discussion.

What is important to note here is that when Geisler speaks of God's will ("determining") in relation to human acts of freedom, it is always related to His knowledge - not His causation.⁴⁰

³⁵Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology Volume Two: God and Creation* (Bloomington: Bethany house, 2003).

³⁶Ibid., 542.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 543.

³⁹Namely, that free acts cannot be forced by God, which would be a contradiction.

⁴⁰James White sees this as well, noting that when Geisler "speaks of 'knowingly determining,' the *active* element is gone. 'Determined' here refers to the *passive recognition of the actions of free men*, not the sovereign decree that the action would take place . . . what geisler means is that God 'determines' what will take place *through* His perfect knowledge." (White, 59,

If this were not made clear by the statements above, Geisler clarifies his overall position when he writes “By ‘determined’ here we do not mean that the act is directly caused by God. . . . it is meant that the inevitability of the event was fixed in advance since God knew infallibly that it would come to pass. . . . God was only the primary remote cause. Human freedom was the immediate and secondary cause.”⁴¹ Finally, Geisler plainly states that “God can control by his omniscience, as well as by his causal power. As the next point reveals, God can control events by willing in accordance with his omniscient knowledge of what will occur by free choice. God need not make (or cause) the choice himself. Simply knowing for sure that a person will freely do something is enough for God to control the world.”⁴²

In summary, then, Geisler’s position is that God’s willing and knowledge are essentially one act that grants human beings (only) the ability to act freely, and, since His knowledge of what human beings do with their freedom cannot be wrong, these actions must come to pass. In this, Geisler believes, God’s sovereignty and human freedom are both guaranteed.⁴³ Further, it is clear that Geisler considers his position to be in agreement with that of Thomas Aquinas.

emphasis in original).

⁴¹Ibid., 44 fn. According to Geisler, this should not be taken to mean that free will is the efficient cause, for free will “is simply the power through which the agent performs the free act; . . . The efficient cause of a free act is really the free agent. (See *ibid.*, 176).

⁴²Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, 197.

⁴³Similar assertions are made, occasionally with differing emphasis, in other works. For example see Norman L. Geisler and Ron Brooks, *Come, Let Us Reason* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 172-77; and “Determinism,” “Free Will,” “God’s Knowledge,” and other related topics in *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*.

Geisler's Use of Thomas Aquinas

As indicated above, that Geisler considers himself a Thomist is fairly well known. His use of Aquinas to back up his above positions is seen in several of his writings. In *Predestination and Free Will*, for example, Geisler cites Aquinas when he writes, “the fact that the act of betrayal was necessary from the standpoint of God’s knowledge does not mean it was not free from Judas’s vantage point.” Geisler says that this is what Aquinas meant when he wrote, “things known by God are contingent because of their contingent causes [free choices], though the first cause, God’s knowledge, is necessary.”⁴⁴

In *Chosen But Free* Geisler again cites Aquinas and adds his own commentary. Here Geisler cites Aquinas when asserting his own view that “God knows—for sure—(infallibly) precisely how everyone will use his freedom. So, from the vantage point of His omniscience, the act is totally determined. Yet from the standpoint of our freedom it is not determined. God knows *for sure* what we will *freely* do.”⁴⁵

It is in Geisler’s *Systematic Theology* that his belief in the commensurability of his and Aquinas’ views comes through the clearest. Geisler cites Aquinas concerning how God controls

⁴⁴Basinger and Basinger, 72 (bracketed text in original [Geisler’s] text). Note that the passage actually reads “things known by God are contingent on account of their *proximate* causes, while the knowledge of God, which is the first cause, is necessary” *ST*, I.14.13 Obj.1 (emphasis mine). Miller notes the mistaken notion represented by this misstatement when he says regarding *ST* I.19.8 that there is an “error contained in the claim that what ‘God produces by necessary causes is necessary; and what he produces by contingent causes contingent.’ This claim is wrong because it suggests that the contingency of the final effect does not ultimately rest in God’s will, but in the contingency belonging to at least one of the final effect’s intermediate causes employed by God.” [Michael R. Miller, *In Defense of the Reconciliation of Divine Will and Human Freedom According to St. Thomas Aquinas*, unpublished dissertation (Boston College, 2000), 47.]

⁴⁵Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 178 cf. 45.

the future and yet humans remain free (that when something moves itself it is not precluded that it be moved by another), then adds his explanation: “That is, God gives us the power of free choice, but we are responsible for exercising it. Once again, He gave the *fact* of freedom, but we are responsible for the *acts* of freedom.”⁴⁶ Is this an accurate assessment of Aquinas’s position? I answer that it is not. In fact, Geisler’s position appears to be the exact opposite of Aquinas’s, for the very next sentence in the original passage reads, “And therefore it is not contrary to liberty that God is the cause of the act of free will.”⁴⁷

Even more interesting is the fact that Geisler often uses examples of sin to illustrate the fact that God can control human free acts without being responsible for them by only causing freedom but not its acts.⁴⁸ But in the very article quoted above, Aquinas’s states that “acts of sin come from God.”⁴⁹ Now Aquinas separates acts-of-sin from sin per se, but the fact remains that for Aquinas even acts of sin are caused by God. Nor is this the only time Geisler’s view departs from Aquinas’s.

⁴⁶Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 548. (Note: In both *Chosen But Free* and here, Geisler cites Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* 1a.4.14 several times with regard to these statements, but this section does not exist. It appears that they are all from 1a.14.13.)

⁴⁷Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*. Tr. Jean Oesterle (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), Q.3, A.2, R.4 (111).

⁴⁸Elsewhere Geisler sounds like the Molinists he criticizes when he suggests that “a God with infallible foreknowledge can sovereignly will to accomplish things through the free will He gives to His creatures. Just the fact that God infallibly knows what each creature will do with his freedom in advance is sufficient to assure that He has complete sovereign control over every event and the final outcome . . . otherwise he would not have willed to create such a world; . . .” (Geisler, *ST*, 556). Compare this to J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 563-65.

⁴⁹Aquinas, *On Evil*, Q.3, A.2, R.4.

Aquinas on Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom

That Aquinas sees God's causality even in free human acts is clear from several of his writings. In question 89 of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas discusses the movement of the will by God. He begins by noting the error of those who do not understand how God could move the human will without violence (a topic he dealt with in the previous chapter):

Some people, as a matter of fact, not understanding how God could cause a movement of the will in us without prejudice to freedom of will . . . say that God causes willing and accomplishing within us in the sense that He causes in us the power of willing, but not in such a way that He makes us will this or that.⁵⁰

This error sounds very similar to Geisler's formula. Aquinas goes on to use virtually identical language when he writes that, "it seems that there developed from this view the opinion of certain people who said that providence does not apply to things subject to free choice, that is, to acts of choice."⁵¹ To which Aquinas replies, "Opposition is offered quite plainly by the texts from Sacred Scripture. . . . we receive not only the power of willing from God, but also the operation."⁵² Seeming to anticipate Geisler's view down to his very wording, Aquinas continues:

Divine causality is not only extended to the power of the will but also to its act. . . . God not only gives powers to things but, beyond that, no thing can act by its own power unless it acts through His power, . . . Now, the being through whose power the agent acts is the cause not only of the power, but also of the act. . . . Therefore, God is for us the cause not only of our will, but also of our act of willing. . . . every movement of the will must be caused by the first will, which is the will of God. . . . God is the cause of every action . . . He operates in every agent. . . . He is the cause of the movements of the will.⁵³

⁵⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*. Tr. Anton C. Pegis, James F. Anderson, and Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1956), 89.1.

⁵¹Aquinas, *SCG*, 89.2-3.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³*Ibid.*, 89. 4-7.

Geisler's position actually sounds more akin to those of Origen, who argued that "God causes willing and accomplishing within us in the sense that He causes in us the power of willing, but not in such a way that He makes us will this or that."⁵⁴ Yet this is the very position Aquinas cites as error. Although Aquinas notes that God "is the cause of our act of choice and volition, our choices and will-acts are subject to divine providence," he is not opposed to human freedom.⁵⁵ In *Of God and His Creatures* Aquinas writes,

But that the will is a contingent cause comes of its very perfection, because its power is not tied to one effect, but it rests with it to produce this effect or that, wherefore it is contingent either way. . . . It belongs to divine providence to use things according to their several modes. But a thing's mode of action depends upon its form, which is the principle of action. But the form whereby a voluntary agent acts is not determinate: for the will acts through a form apprehended by the intellect; and the intellect has not one determined form of effect under its consideration, but essentially embraces a multitude of forms . . .⁵⁶

In other words, while the will's natural object is the good, finite goods cannot sway the will absolutely. Therefore, the will can direct the intellect to consider this or that good. In this is freedom preserved without positing a "neutral" will that, having no natural tendency, could never be moved to choose anything. Aquinas goes on to argue for free will in man due to man's likeness to God, the loss of good that would go with a loss of free will (virtue, rewards and punishments, etc.).

Aquinas is quite clear that God cannot force the will, for the voluntary and the violent are opposites. However, this does not mean that God does not move the will. He explains that,

⁵⁴See Origen, *Peri Archon*, III, I (PG, 11, col. 293).

⁵⁵Aquinas, *SCG*, 90.2.

⁵⁶Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, Tr. The English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1932), LXXII.

God can change the will with necessity but nevertheless cannot force it. For however much the will is moved toward something, it is not said to be forced to it. The reason for this is that to will something is to be inclined to it. But force or violence is contrary to the inclination of the thing forced. When God moves the will, then, He causes an inclination to succeed a previous inclination so that the first disappears and the second remains. Accordingly, that to which He induces the will is not contrary to an inclination still extant but merely to one that was previously there. This is not, then, violence or force.⁵⁷

Aquinas likens this to the way God can make a stone fall naturally simply by making it what it is. “If God were to subtract from the stone the inclination of its heaviness and give it an inclination of lightness, then it would not be violent for the stone to be borne upward.”⁵⁸ In the same way, “God can change the will because He works within it just as He works in nature. . . . every action of the will, in so far as it is an action, not only is from the will as its immediate agent but also is from God as its first agent, who influences it more forcefully.”⁵⁹ For Aquinas, God can change the will in two ways: “He does it merely by moving it. This occurs, for instance, when He . . . causes a man to want what he did not want before,” or when He acts upon the very nature which God gave the will when He inclines it to will something.⁶⁰ So God internally causes humans to will particular things, and yet this does not destroy human freedom because “the will is moved by its Creator toward what its nature naturally demands, that is to its good.”⁶¹

⁵⁷Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q.22, A.8.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid. This last way God moves the will can be perfect (as when the blessed behold God Himself) or imperfect. In these cases “the will is indeed inclined by reason of the additional form, but not necessarily.”

⁶¹Miller, 40.

Aquinas's Consistency on These Two Positions

While all this may seem difficult to explain coherently, Aquinas does not believe God's sovereign control, even when exercising causative control over free choices, to be contradictory.

The divine will imposes necessity on some things willed but not on all. . . . this happens on account of the efficacy of the divine will. For when a cause is efficacious to act, the effect follows upon the cause, not only as to the thing done, but also as to its manner of being done or of being. . . . it follows not only that things are done, which God wills to be done, but also that they are done in the way that He wills. Now God wills some things to be done necessarily, some contingently, to the right ordering of things, for the building up of the universe. Therefore to some effects He has attached necessary causes, that cannot fail; but to others defectible and contingent causes, from which arise contingent effects. Hence it is not because the proximate causes are contingent that the effects willed by God happen contingently, but because God prepared contingent causes for them, it being His will that they should happen contingently.⁶²

So God rules through His active causation. His sovereignty is not due to His foreknowledge but through His irresistible will. While it may be counterintuitive to put the two together, Aquinas believes that "From the very fact that nothing resists the divine will, it follows that not only those things happen that God wills to happen, but that they happen necessarily or contingently according to His will."⁶³

Aquinas believes that human freedom does not require independence from God, for He creates humans as free creatures and upholds that freedom in its very being:

Free will is the cause of its own movement, because by his free will man moves himself to act. But it does not of necessity belong to liberty that what is free should be the first cause of itself, as neither for one thing to be cause of another need it be the first cause. God, therefore, is the first cause, Who moves causes both natural and voluntary. And just

⁶²Aquinas, *ST I.Q.19*, A.8

⁶³Ibid. Michael R. Miller notes that, "Paradoxically, Aquinas argues that God's complete control of all things is the very reason why some things happen freely. This Augustinian-inspired solution argues, in short, that the contingent intermediate cause makes the final effect contingent, thanks to God's absolute will." (Miller, 50).

as by moving natural causes He does not prevent their acts 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.⁶⁴

Instead, God, according to Aquinas, actually guarantees human freedom by His act of creation. He is, the first cause that makes secondary causes free. In causing, God does no violence to our human free will, for it is by His existence that free will exists and takes the form that it does. Since God is, therefore, not an external agent working on the will with no act on the part of the willer, no violence is being done to freedom and the alleged contradiction is resolved.

Aquinas On Evil

The implication of Aquinas's view of divine sovereignty and human freedom on the problem of evil is that God is responsible for evil as its efficient cause but "God cannot stand in the same causal relationship to evil as he does to what he produces."⁶⁵ That is, the good things God creates (i.e., human beings) are the causes of evil, and God is the cause of the causers's being as well as the upholder of their actions, but His relation to their effects is not equivalent to that of the causers'.

The reason this is the case is that human beings alone are accountable for their sinful actions due to a defect in their wills. Brian Davies explains that this failure "can be traced to God as the efficient cause of all the real and the good which must be there fore evil to exist," and that therefore, "God can be said to have a causal role when it comes to mroal evil since he makes

⁶⁴Aquinas, *ST* I.83.1.

⁶⁵Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 92.

sinner and keeps them in being.”⁶⁶ While this is the case, “defective activity, or effects resulting from this, are properly and primarily ascribable only to the agent in whom the defect lies.”⁶⁷

Aquinas’s teaching on this matter will be discussed in more detail below.

The Primary Source of Sin is Not God

One can be said to be the cause of sin in two ways: that the action of a person is in itself a sin, or that the action of a person moves another to a sinful act. Aquinas denies that either can be the case with God.⁶⁸ Several reasons for this are given. One, the nature of sin itself precludes God’s fault. God’s actions always attain to the end to which they are directed, there is never a failure. Sin occurs when God’s will is not done, and as God cannot fail in what He Himself wills, sin cannot occur in relation to God’s action.⁶⁹ Second, God Himself is the greatest good and His creation’s ultimate good comes when it turns toward Him. This being the case, God will not turn His creation away from Him which would result in sin.⁷⁰ Aquinas concludes from these two arguments that God cannot be the cause of sin in any sense.

It has been argued by some that as God is the ultimate cause of all things, and that sin is a thing (rather than pure privation as in the case of evil), then God may be said to be the ultimate cause of sin even if only indirectly. Aquinas responds to this argument by stating that, “the effect of an effect, inasmuch as it is such, is reduced to the cause. But if something proceeds from an

⁶⁶Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 96.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Aquinas, *On Evil*, Q.3, A.1 (104)

⁶⁹Ibid, Q.3, A.1 (104)

⁷⁰Ibid, Q.3, A.1 (105)

effect not inasmuch as it is such, this ought not to be referred to the cause.”⁷¹ For example: a leg is caused to move by the power of the mind. However, a lame leg is caused to limp while moving not by the mind, but by a defect in the leg that results in actions not attributable to the causer. In like manner, the defects of the sinner’s will are not to be attributed to God who caused the sinner’s ability to will.

Others argue from Scripture that as it is God who inclines man’s will (i.e. Rom. 1:28), it is He who should be faulted for sin. Aquinas answers that in this sense God does not actively incline that will to sin, but rather concedes to the inclination of that sinful will “by withdrawing His support or not impeding them.”⁷² For instance, if a man were to suspend a ball over the ledge of a tall building his letting go might be said to cause the ball to drop when in reality it is gravity that causes the ball’s drop. That man only caused its *not falling*. In the case of the sinner, God’s allowance of that sinner to follow his sinful desires are not to be confused with His causing of those desires or the actions that follow from them. Permission is not to be confused with command (i.e. 1 Kings 22:22; Jn. 13:27). Nor is the cause of the power to act to be confused with the use of that power to act.⁷³ It has been further argued that in God’s withholding of grace from the sinner He becomes the cause of sin. Aquinas replies that the refusal of offered grace on the part of the sinner remains his fault, for God offers grace to all and it is only those who refuse who cannot partake.⁷⁴

⁷¹Ibid, Q.3, A.1 (106)

⁷²Ibid., Q.3, A.1 (105)

⁷³Ibid, Q.3, A.1 (108)

⁷⁴Ibid, Q.3, A.1 (106)

In brief then, Aquinas denies any culpability on God's part for the sinful actions of man based on the fact that God cannot sin by definition (as God cannot will and not will the same thing at the same time), and also that the ultimate end is God Himself (and He cannot deny Himself nor lead His creatures away from Himself). Thus, God is not accountable for sin.

The Primary Source of Sin is Man

Aquinas lays the fault of sin squarely on man's shoulders. Having dismissed both God and Satan as excuses for the sinful actions of men, he goes on to say that "it remains then that the effective and proper cause of a voluntary act is solely that which operates internally; but this can be nothing other than the will itself as the secondary cause and God as the first cause."⁷⁵ God, being the first cause, caused man's will - his ability to choose to sin. It is man, however, in his exercise of that free will, that causes his own sin.

Aquinas holds that human will is in itself good according to its nature. With regard to morality, however, human will is considered "neither good nor evil but is potentially good or evil." The fault that Aquinas finds in man's will is not, therefore, in its nature but in its proclivity to sin. While a defective intellect may result in the bad action of a will that intends toward good (but is confused as to what constitutes good), a faulty will can result in bad action due to its own disposition toward evil. And this defect in the will is found in the entire human race.⁷⁶

For Aquinas, then, the sin of man is the result of man's defective will and intellect. While the free will to commit an act of sin is caused by God, the sin is not. That is, while action

⁷⁵Ibid., Q.3, A.3 (115)

⁷⁶Ibid., Q.4, A.1 (168-169). Note that Aquinas writes that *as individuals* we are not blamed for Adam's sin, but as a race we are held accountable for the end toward which our sinful natures lead us as the result of his sin.

pertaining to sin is upheld by God, sin per se is not actively caused. It is a man's deficient will that causes his actions. Thus, while Aquinas acknowledges multiple secondary causes, it is clear that he locates the primary cause of sin in the will of man. Although it can be said of God that He is the first cause of the action of sin, man as the secondary cause is responsible for the sin itself.

It is important to note that even with the above qualifications to God's causal activity within human free actions, that for Aquinas nothing escapes God's providence. No events can come into being without the causal activity of God. Davies notes that "there cannot even be failure in created things unless they exist and unless they are what they are by virtue of God."⁷⁷ This includes the actions of secondary causers. Aquinas specifies that "God is the cause of everything's action inasmuch as he gives everything the power to act and preserves it in being and applies it to action," leading Davies to state that, "the actions of creatures are, in a sense, always God's action."⁷⁸

How then, if God is ultimately the cause of all things (whether considered as positive causal activity or negative allowance of failed secondary causal activity), can God be exonerated from Martin's criticism? He challenges the theist by stating that "in order for people to judge that God is good, in our sense of good, it is essential that there not be deep disparities between God's choice and that of morally sensitive persons."⁷⁹ Aquinas would say that the question itself is the

⁷⁷Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 162.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 163-64.

⁷⁹Martin, *Atheism*, 368.

problem. God's goodness is predicated according to His metaphysical nature - not some standard by which He may be judged as morally good.⁸⁰

Conclusion

Aquinas's position is certainly not without its difficulties,⁸¹ and attempts to go into much more depth than Aquinas did can easily lead into one or the other opposite extremes. Leaning to God's sovereignty at the expense of human freedom is one extreme, and there are many who have chosen this (admittedly more intuitive) solution.⁸² Affirming human freedom at the expense of God's causative control is another.⁸³ Neither is extreme is acceptable for Aquinas.

While the Thomistic account may be difficult to understand, it simply cannot be made to track with statements to the effect that "God causes the fact of freedom but humans cause the acts of freedom," especially if these are meant to explain God's efficient causality. Neither does Aquinas's view allow for God's sovereign will to simply be absorbed into His knowledge (however infallible that knowledge might be). Further, the difficulty concerning God's sovereign will and human free acts is not solved in Aquinas by appeal to one's perspective, but by the dual

⁸⁰See Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 80-86.

⁸¹Hartshorne's response to Aquinas's position is succinct if dismissive: "Don't laugh, the saintly theologian is serious." Hartshorne, Charles. *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 12.

⁸²Some Calvinists will contend that human freedom (in whatever sense it exists) can conflict with God's sovereign will (even if it will never win). See, for example, R. C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1994), ch. 2.

⁸³Molinists, for example, believe that God is not the primary cause of what free agents choose to do, but that God gives each agent the ability to choose, and creates the best world given His knowledge of what free creatures would do under certain circumstances.

efficient causality in operation when free creatures choose God's determined ends in the manner in which He wills them to be chosen.⁸⁴

Finally, the answer to Martin's challenge is not met by removing God from the causal process but by asserting that God is "wholly good as the source and pattern of all creaturely goodness, from which it follows that there are no standards over and against him in the light of which he must conduct himself."⁸⁵ Thus, God's goodness is unassailable with regard to moral evil that He allows to be committed by free human beings even as He forever remains the divine sovereign over all creation.

⁸⁴As Aquinas says in *ST* I.19.8: "The conditional statement is true that if God wills a thing, it comes to pass: and every true conditional statement is necessary. It follows therefore that all that God wills is necessary absolutely."

⁸⁵Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 97.

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