

A CRITIQUE OF THOMAS FLINT’S POSITION ON THE THOMISTIC
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND
HUMAN FREEDOM, AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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Problems With Providence

The biblical doctrine of divine providence demands that God be in control over all things, yet human freedom seems to be a necessary condition for morality and other issues.¹ How can God’s sovereign will stand alongside human freedom? Thomas P. Flint offers three “basic types” of theories concerning divine providence: (1) Thomism, (2) Open Theism, and (3) Molinism. While favoring Molinism, Flint concludes that each has its advantages and its disadvantages.²

In a section titled “Abandoning Libertarianism,” Flint argues that “the Thomist position . . . shelters those who respond to our quandary by saying that it is the libertarian account of freedom, or at least the standard version of that account, that is causing our problems.”³ While Flint notes that “speaking of *the* Thomist alternative is a bit misleading, since it implies a degree of uniformity that simply does not exist,” he believes that the Thomist position denies what most

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

²Thomas P. Flint, “Divine Providence” in Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford, Oxford university Press, 2009), 262-85.

³Ibid., 266.

people would consider true freedom of will - namely, the libertarian view (which will be explained below).⁴

Nor is this simply a theoretical problem, for without libertarian freedom, it is argued, the problem of evil and moral responsibility becomes difficult to resolve. In the background of the philosophical issue of free will lies the ethical issue of moral responsibility. Flint notes in a discussion of libertarianism that “equally central . . . is the connection between freedom . . . and moral responsibility.”⁵ One’s freedom is often thought to be a necessary requirement for moral responsibility, and so any view denying man the former is said to be denying him the latter. This will have further implications in one’s answer to the problem of evil.

Flint devotes a fair amount of space to discussing how these related problems challenge Thomism - a position he eventually rejects due, at least in part, to these issues.⁶ I will argue below that the Thomist position actually meets Flint’s requirements for an acceptable notion of freedom, and that as such, Aquinas’s view is safeguarded from Flint’s specific criticisms. I will then turn to a brief consideration of how Aquinas’s view affects his understanding of the problem of evil.

Libertarian Freedom and God’s Sovereignty

According to Flint, the libertarian account of freedom is that “external determination of a person’s action (especially causal determination by some factor not subject to the person’s causal

⁴Ibid. (emphasis in original).

⁵Flint, 265.

⁶Ibid., 268-69.

control) is incompatible with that action's being free."⁷ This means that one's actions are the ones they "initiate and control."⁸ While more technical notions of Libertarian freedom have been suggested, for the purposes of this paper Flint's definition will be used.⁹ Thus, for any agent's action to be considered free in a libertarian sense it must not be determined by an external factor outside the agent's control. For an agent to be free, then, they must be capable of performing some actions that fit this definition.¹⁰

Because providence implies the complete sovereignty of God, it is seen to be incompatible with this notion of freedom. Flint characterizes the issue thus: "God performs certain free actions, and there's nothing we can do about them. We perform other free actions, and there's nothing he can do about them. . . . Increase divine free activity and the sphere for free human activities shrinks; magnify human freedom, and divine sovereignty and control wanes."¹¹ Thomists, Flint states, "concur in maintaining that the type of 'absolute metaphysical freedom'

⁷Ibid., 265.

⁸Ibid. David Burrell seems to agree when he writes that, "no action is free unless brought about only by the agent himself." (David Burrell, *The Possibility of an All-Knowing God* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986], 119). Miller sounds more compatibilistic when he describes libertarian freedom as obtaining "only when there are no external circumstances or persons preventing them from doing what they want to do." (Michael R. Miller, *In Defense of the Reconciliation of Divine Will and Human Freedom According to St. Thomas Aquinas* [Unpublished dissertation. Boston College, 2000], 37).

⁹R. C. Weatherford has "the theory about freedom that despite what has happened in the past, and given the present state of affairs and ourselves just as they are, we can choose or decide differently than we do—act so as to make the future different." "Libertarianism" in Ted Honderich, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹⁰It is admitted that "Libertarians disagree about many things" (Flint, 265), including the number of free actions an agent may be said to perform. For the present this can be ignored, for Flint is arguing against a position that is universal in its scope concerning human actions.

¹¹Flint, 266.

endorsed by most libertarians . . . cannot be sustained by circumspect Christians.”¹² It should be noted here that “absolute metaphysical freedom” was not part of Flint’s original definition of libertarian free will.¹³ The question remains then - does Aquinas’ position equate to an external cause that eliminates free will?

Libertarian Freedom and The Problem of Evil

Flint states that part of the concern over freedom for most libertarians concerns the problem of evil. “Equally central,” he writes, “at least for most libertarians, is the connection between freedom so understood and moral responsibility.”¹⁴ Flint argues that actions caused by external factors cannot be actions for which the agent is responsible and, further, that if we deny libertarian freedom then it seems we must also give up human responsibility (and the praises and punishments that go with it). Moreover, if we assign to God the true causality for committed actions, then “how can we possibly account for the presence, the amount, and the horrendous nature of evil in our world?”¹⁵ By elevating God’s causal power it seems the Thomists might be “belittling his moral grandeur.”¹⁶ If God is ultimately the cause of all things, can He be exonerated from the strict Libertarian’s criticism?¹⁷

¹²Ibid., 267.

¹³Flint gets the phrase from Hugh McCann, “Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will,” *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995). (Flint, 267n.12.)

¹⁴Flint, 265.

¹⁵Ibid., 268.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷This issue is not limited to Libertarian Christians. Atheist Michael Martin 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

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, however, 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.¹⁸

Aquinas expresses similar thoughts 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."¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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

persons." Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 368. Davies's response is that the question itself is the problem. God's goodness is predicated according to His metaphysical nature - not some standard by which He may be judged as morally good (see Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 80-86). This latter issue will not be taken up here as the moral responsibility problem remains in any case.

¹⁸Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Tr. Anton C. Pegis, James F. Anderson, and Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1956), 89.1.

¹⁹Aquinas, *SCG*, 89.2-3.

²⁰*Ibid.*

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.²¹

Although Aquinas believes that God “is the cause of our act of choice and volition, our choices and will-acts are subject to divine providence,”²² he 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 forms²³

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.²⁴

²¹Ibid., 89. 4-7. Contra those who argue like Origen 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.” (Origin, *Peri Archon*, III, I (PG, 11, col. 293). E.G., Norman Geisler writes, “God gives us the power of free choice, but we are responsible for exercising it. . . . He gave the *fact* of freedom, but we are responsible for the *acts* of freedom.” (Norman Geisler, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* [Bloomington: Bethany house, 2003], 548, emphasis in original). Note: Geisler cites *Summa Theologica* 1a.4.14 with regard to these statements, but this section does not exist. It appears that they are all from 1a.14.13.

²²Aquinas, *SCG*, 90.2.

²³Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, Tr. The English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1932), LXXII.

²⁴Aquinas goes on to argue for free will in man due to man’s likeness to God, viz., that a loss of good would go with a loss of free will (virtue, rewards and punishments, etc.).

Aquinas is also 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,

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.²⁵

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.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷

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.²⁸ 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

²⁵Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, Q.22, A.8.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

necessarily.” 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.”²⁹

While all this may seem difficult to hold to coherently, Aquinas does not believe God’s sovereign control, even when exercising causative control over free choices, to be problematic to human freedom:

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.³⁰

So God rules, sovereignly, through His active causation.³¹ 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.”³²

In fact, 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. Instead, God, according to Aquinas, actually guarantees human freedom by His act of creation. He is the first

²⁹Miller, 40.

³⁰Aquinas, *ST I.*, Q.19, A.8

³¹That is, God’s sovereignty is not merely a result of His knowledge (e.g., Norman Geisler), nor of His middle knowledge in choosing between possible worlds (e.g., William Lane Craig). See Geisler, 556 cf. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 563-65.

³²Ibid. 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).

cause that makes secondary causes *be* (and be 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.

The notion of secondary causality is crucial to understanding how Aquinas can have God and individual humans both acting as efficient causes of their actions. Aquinas believes that not only are secondary causes real causes, but that the divine will ensures the freedom of the human will. Aquinas states that the human will is a real cause even if it is not a first cause.

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 [a] cause of another need it be the first cause. God, therefore, is the first cause, Who moves causes both natural and voluntary. And just 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 the very thing in them; for He operates in each thing according to its own nature.³³

So, for example, if fire heats water it is truly the fire that causes the heating even if it is God who causes the fire's existence. Even though natural and voluntary agents are not first causes, they are real causes because their operation comes from their nature.

As already indicated, although secondary causes are real causes, it would be wrong to suggest that God's will does not play the primary role. Michael R. Miller notes that "Aquinas is of the opinion that taking away the order of cause and effect in created things suggests that God does not have the power to bestow active powers upon the things He creates – that is, to give them free and full natures or fully free natures. For Aquinas, God's true strength is revealed when created things act as real causes according to their natures."³⁴ Miller notes that "three important principles are often denied, forgotten or misunderstood: 1) God can move the human

³³ ST I.83.1.ad3.

³⁴Miller, 32.

will without coercion, 2) God's providence governs all, and 3) God operates in a manner completely different from humans."³⁵ It will be difficult to accept Aquinas' stated reconciliation between the divine will and human freedom without grasping these principles.

God Can Move the Human Will Without Coercion

Aquinas is in agreement with the libertarian position in some senses. For example, if someone is forced by an external cause to do something against their will then that person is not responsible for that action.³⁶ However, something can be voluntary and externally caused because not every cause must be a first cause. For example, my choice to drink a mocha is caused internally by me and, externally, by the drink.

Aquinas argues that if something is moved in accord with its nature, then such a movement is not violent, but natural or voluntary. "The movement of the heaven, for example, results from an extrinsic active principle, and yet it is not contrary to the natural disposition of the moveable subject, and hence is not a violent but a natural movement."³⁷ For example, a rock thrown upward is a violent movement, for rocks do not, by nature, move against gravity. Dropping a rock, however, does not make for violence, for the rock naturally moves to the lowest point.

In the preceding example, however, something was acting on the rock to begin with (otherwise it would have already been at the lowest point). Speaking more precisely, only the God who made the rock what it is can truly cause the rock to move without violence, for God is

³⁵Ibid., 36.

³⁶See Aquinas, ST 1-2.6.

³⁷Aquinas, SCG 2.30.13

the cause of its very nature. It does what it does because God made it what it is. Aquinas argues that the same is true of God's causality concerning the human will, for "as natural inclination in an inanimate thing, which is also called natural appetite, is related to its proper end, so also is the will, which is also called intellectual appetite, in an intellectual substance. Now, to give natural inclinations is the sole prerogative of Him Who has established nature. So also, to incline the will to anything, is the sole prerogative of Him Who is the cause of the intellectual nature."³⁸ In other words, the human will chooses freely because God made it a freely choosing thing. Thus, when He decrees that the will move He does not need to act on it violently (externally), for He is the (intrinsic) cause of its very nature.

Thus, the movement of the will is proper to God alone. "The only agent that can cause a movement of the will, without violence, is that which causes an intrinsic principle of this movement, and such a principle is the very power of the will. Now, this agent is God, Who alone creates a soul. . . . Therefore, God alone can move the will, in the fashion of an agent, without violence."³⁹ therefore, God alone can move the will without doing violence to freedom, for He is the first cause of the free will itself. Miller concludes, "God internally causes all humans to will and to will particular things, and yet that movement does not destroy human freedom because the human will is moved by its Creator toward what its nature naturally demands, that is to its good."⁴⁰

³⁸Ibid., SCG 3.88.4

³⁹SCG 3.88.6

⁴⁰Miller, 40.

God's Providence Governs All

It is not necessary to belabor this point as it forms the basis for the problem itself. Suffice to say that here Aquinas is clear that God's will is the primary cause of all that exists - even down to human free choices. How this can be true while humans remain free is made more explicit in the next point.

God Operates in a Manner Completely Different from Humans

Aquinas' doctrine of God insists that God is completely distinct from His creation. Indeed, "nothing is predicated univocally of God and other things."⁴¹ It follows that our complete comprehension of any explanation of God's nature or actions are going to fall short of the real thing. This should make us cautious against the twin errors of over-explanation or over-simplification. Miller states that "the Molinists and the Bañezians both lose their way when they try to supersede Aquinas, for both try to do too much when they offer detailed accounts of God's causality, thereby forgetting God's transcendence."⁴²

Further, we must be careful not to confuse our understanding of God with our understanding of our experiences in the finite world. In our experience free will is seen only in rational animals. Although the human will is a cause it cannot be a cause of another's free will. Likewise, all causes we see in nature are either necessary or contingent, but God's will enjoys a "privileged position over and above the order that governs creation. . . . God is not limited by

⁴¹SGC 1.32.4

⁴²Miller, 46n.50.

necessity or contingency, for He governs this distinction itself.”⁴³ So while we cannot conceive of the kind of causality that God exercises, we can discuss it in principle.

Now, Aquinas does argue that some acts are free because God not only wills that they happen, but that they happen freely:

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 has prepared contingent causes for them, it being His will that they should happen contingently.⁴⁴

Because this is the case, our actions are not subject to God’s determination in the sense that they receive necessity from it. Rather, the contingent intermediate cause makes the action freely willed by decree of God’s absolute will.⁴⁵ Thus God’s will determines how things come about because He orders all things, “including the modality of all causes.”⁴⁶

On this understanding, then, God’s will is not simply so powerful that it overcomes all opposition. If this were the case then no caused action could be free. God uses both contingent and necessary causes as instruments to achieve His desired end.⁴⁷ What occurs happens just as God wills it, but any choice involved on the part of the agent remains free because God willed it

⁴³Ibid., 100.

⁴⁴ST I.19.8.

⁴⁵SCG 3.90.9.

⁴⁶Miller, 52.

⁴⁷Aquinas’ examples often refer to instrumental causes even when illustrating contingent secondary causes, but that is to be expected since there are no natural examples of this sort of dual causality.

to be so.⁴⁸ 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 Human Freedom and Evil

The implication of Aquinas's view of divine sovereignty and human freedom on the problem of evil is that God is ultimately responsible for evil as its primary efficient cause but "God cannot stand in the same causal relationship to evil as he does to what he produces."⁴⁹ That is, the good things God creates (i.e., human beings) are the causes of evil, and God is the cause of the causer's being as well as the upholder of their actions, but this relation is not equivalent to that of the causer.

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 for evil to exist," and that therefore, "God can be said to have a causal role when it comes to moral evil since he makes sinners and keeps them in being."⁵⁰ 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."⁵¹ Aquinas's teaching on this matter will be discussed in more detail below.

⁴⁸As 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."

⁴⁹Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 92.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 96.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

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.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

It might be argued 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 effect not inasmuch as it is such, this ought not to be referred to the cause."⁵⁵ 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.

⁵²Aquinas, *On Evil*, Q.3, A.1 (104)

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid, Q.3, A.1 (105)

⁵⁵Ibid, Q.3, A.1 (106)

It might be argued 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."⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ Nor is the cause of the power to act to be confused with the use of that power to act.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹

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.

⁵⁶Ibid., Q.3, A.1 (105)

⁵⁷For example, see 1 Kings 22:22 or John. 13:27.

⁵⁸Aquinas, *On Evil*, Q.3, A.1 (108)

⁵⁹Ibid, Q.3, A.1 (106)

The Primary Source of Sin is Man

Aquinas lays the fault of sin squarely on man's shoulders. Dismissing 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."⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹

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 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.

⁶⁰Ibid., Q.3, A.3 (115)

⁶¹Ibid., 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.

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."⁶² This includes the actions of secondary causers. Because "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," Davies concludes that "the actions of creatures are, in a sense, always God's action."⁶³

Conclusion

Aquinas's position is certainly not without its difficulties,⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ Affirming human freedom at the expense of God's causative control is another.⁶⁶ Neither extreme is acceptable for Aquinas.

⁶²Davies, *Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 162.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 163-64.

⁶⁴Hartshorne's response to Aquinas's position is succinct if dismissive: "Don't laugh, the saintly theologian is serious." Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 12.

⁶⁵Some 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.

⁶⁶Molinists, 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.

Further, the answer to the moral responsibility challenge is not met by removing God from the direct causal process (contra Molinism), 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.”⁶⁷ 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.

While the Thomistic account may be difficult to understand, it seems to meet the conditions set forth by Flint for choices to remain free in the libertarian sense. The difficulty concerning God’s sovereign will and human free acts is solved in Aquinas by the dual efficient causality in operation when free creatures choose God’s determined ends in the manner in which He wills them to be chosen. Flint’s requirements for libertarian free will are not violated by the Thomistic position, for the agent is not being caused by an external factor for God’s causality is “built in” to the human free will as an interior mover.

If this is the case, then Flint’s major objections to the Thomistic position have been answered. Since he affirms that divine control over all that occurs is a non-negotiable element of a “sound doctrine of providence,” and that the solution to the providence problem requires that “God’s knowledge and control operate through creatures who enjoy full libertarian freedom,” it seems that the Thomist still has a voice in the debate.⁶⁸

⁶⁷Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 97.

⁶⁸Flint’s appeal to Molinism not only suffers from criticisms such as the grounding objection that he lists, but also that in light of God’s free choice to actualize this possible world and not another is still a causative act concerning free will since no contingent thing existed prior to creation.

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