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Father Nicanor Austriaco

Colloquium on Science and Religion

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Can Human Beings Truly Be Considered Free?

Human freedom of will and choice is an important and highly valued power in our society. As humans, we would naturally assert that we are free to think, choose, and act as we wish, with full autonomy. However, is this the case? Some would assert that when we consider the nature of God and the mode of His knowledge, it seems impossible that we act freely. God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent; He knows everything that was, is, and will be, and all power resides in Him. How can our human choices and actions be considered truly free in a world where God already knows how we will act? Doesn't His foreknowledge of what we will do, in effect, predetermine our actions? We must first grapple with the true definition and nature of God's mode of knowledge, as a transcendent, omniscient being; if His mode of knowing is truly transcendent, unconstrained by time and space, then perhaps his foreknowledge does not necessitate our future actions. Additionally, it was God Himself that imbued humans with a nature containing free will. If we are to live according to our natures, fulfilling our purpose and our end, then an exercise of a truly free will is essential; there is a stronger tie of free will to causation than there is free will to foreknowledge. We can see the effects of free choice in the existence of evil in our world, which necessarily is not a creation of God but a byproduct of human choosing that which is not God or his will. It is His Love for us, however, that necessitates that we possess a free will, and in freely loving Him back we most fully fulfill our nature as human beings. Thus, I would assert that we do have free will, irrespective of God's

foreknowledge, and it is through proper exercise of free will that we may achieve our ultimate end of union with God in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Who or, even, *what*, God is, is no trivial consideration. It remains that we, as finite, limited human beings, cannot fully know or understand God in this life. Through divine revelation and much theological study, humans have attempted to attune their thoughts and conceptions of God so that we may know Him to the best of human ability. Indeed, scholars have employed the disciplines of philosophy, theology, and metaphysics in order to offer a cohesive idea of who and what God may be. We believe that we may ascribe some faculties to Him, including omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. Omniscience refers to the “all-knowing-ness” of God: “an omniscient being can entertain no false propositions, and be unaware of no true ones” (McCall 503). Put another way, an omniscient being “knows all future events perfectly, including the free, moral choices of human beings” (Picirilli 260). Omnipotence refers to the “all-powerful” nature of God, and omnipresence refers to his presence everywhere, unlimited by time or space. A chief implication of God’s omniscience is the notion that God knows everything that has been, is, and will be. In this light and at this juncture, it is imperative to define a key aspect of God’s omniscience. Hereafter, the definition of omniscience will necessarily include the condition that this faculty of God’s exists outside of the constraints of time and space; God is a transcendent being, and thus transcends limitations such as time and space (we can also understand Him as omnipresent in this way). We can, therefore, consider God thus: “If in God there is no time or succession but only the eternal present, then... God sees past and future events all together as present. There is nothing past or future to God, although he sees events in creation as past or future in relation to other events” (Pontifex 32).

The transcendent, omniscient nature of God being thus established, attention can now be turned to a consideration of the concept of human freedom. In order to discuss human freedom and the implication of God's role in human freedom, freedom, as it is understood here, must first be defined. According to Mark Pontifex, O.S. B., freedom means "the absence of constraint or hindrance; it implies that some force or tendency is seeking to exert itself, and that nothing is preventing it from doing so" (Pontifex 9). Man is free in the sense that he can choose between two or more courses of action, without direct influence or compulsion by an external source. In this regard, we can consider a man free to the extent that he can exert his individual powers of thought, emotion, and/or action; freedom in each of these aspects presupposes a freedom of will that allows for freedom in choice. It is imperative that man be capable of freely willing and choosing the activities of those faculties (of thought, emotion, and action), for reasons that will be discussed subsequently. And what, exactly, is free *will*? According to Augustine, "willing is a movement of the mind, no one compelling either for not losing or for obtaining something" (Berthold 49). Put in other terms, free will is "the ability to exercise rational control over one's volitions" (Berthold 47). This conception of free will is highly valued, for we, as humans, desire that we may exercise our freedom of choice and action in order to act independently to shape our futures as we wish.

We can also understand free will by virtue of our nature as human beings. It must be stated that God created all creatures of this earth, and created them with particular natures. Human beings he uniquely created with a rational soul, and from this rational soul arises our intellectual activity and ability to reason. As Thomas Aquinas would claim, "intellectual operations, namely, the formation of universal concepts, judgments, and reasoning, are the activities of the intellective soul alone... they are inherent in the substance of the soul alone"

(Klima 172). The soul requires a power whereby, as its own subsistent and inherent being, it exercises its own activity: This power is called the understanding or intellect. As can be seen, in designing human beings with a self-subsisting soul, he endowed them with intellect, or the human mind – the power by which the soul exercises its activity. The activity of the soul is, in fact, the will. In creating humans with a soul and intellect, God granted them the ability to make conscious, rational, and independent decisions – free decisions – based on the power of the soul, which is the will. It is evident in the story of the Fall of Man in Genesis that free will is inherent in human nature: God created Adam and Eve with wills that were free to choose to turn away from Him and disobey His command. “The doctrine of the church commits us to belief in free choice, in indeterminism of some kind,” for we believe that humans were created with individual souls and intellects, the ability to reason, and the ability to choose freely (Pontifex 81).

Additionally, our conception and definition of free will must include that it is not compelled by outside forces, for “one’s free will is not truly free unless it is autonomous; and if it is not, then one cannot be held responsible,” and we know from Church tradition and doctrine on sin, penance, and hell that humans are, indeed, responsible for their actions (Berthold 17).

Given what has previously been discussed regarding God’s omniscience, it stands to reason that God knows all actions of our will prior even to our own knowledge of them. The question arises then, how does God fit into this picture of our free will? In a world where God knows past, present, and future all at once – knows our actions before we even consciously think to act – can we still consider ourselves and our actions free? Or does this foreknowledge of God necessitate or predetermine our course of action, thereby limiting our freedom of will and choice?

Some would assert that, yes, God's foreknowledge is, in fact, incompatible with the idea of human free will and that the existence of one (foreknowledge or free will) effectively nullifies the existence of the other. Scholar and author John Shook insists that "If God's divine knowledge must be justified knowledge, then humans cannot have the 'alternative possibilities' type of free will" (Shook 141). The principle behind the idea of alternative possibilities states that humans are free only if they were capable of doing other than they have done; literally, there are alternative possibilities to any given choice. The idea that God's knowledge requires justification necessitates that there are no alternative possibilities for the acting human, since God can know only "hard facts." The distinction between hard and soft facts consists in the idea that "hard facts are fixed while soft facts need not be fixed" (Fisher 58). There exists a defense of the compatibility between God's foreknowledge and human free will, known as the Ockham defense, that utilizes this distinction between hard and soft facts. The Ockhamist would state that "God's prior belief about my present activity is a soft fact about the past and hence not fixed; my freedom is thus preserved" (Fisher 58). Shook, however, believes that any sort of knowledge requires justification for that knowledge, and the justification for God's foreknowledge would consist in Him knowing only hard facts, or those occurrences that actually are and will be. No "soft facts" exist in this case.

Shook purports that it is not a matter of a hard fact/soft fact consideration of God's omniscience, but rather a matter of hard fact/no fact, i.e. there are only hard facts, the things that certainly will be, and God can know only those facts. He employs the use of logic to demonstrate his point:

1. If person P freely chooses action A at time T in situation S, then for all relevantly similar worlds and at all times in those worlds prior to T, it is possible that P instead does not-A at T in S,

- This takes the form, if PF (P freely chooses A at T in S), then PNA (for all similar worlds and at all times in those worlds prior to T , it is possible that P instead does not- A at T in S)

2. If not- PNA then not- PF (from 1).

3. If there exists some possible world, that is relevantly similar to the actual world, in which an intelligent being justifiably knows prior to T that P does A at T in S , then in all possible worlds relevantly similar to the actual world, P does A at T in S .

- This premise has the form, if IJK (there exists some world relevantly similar to the actual world in which an intelligent being justifiably knows prior to T that P does A at T in S), then $PWPA$ (in all possible worlds relevantly similar to the actual world, P does A at T in S).

4. If in all possible worlds relevantly similar to the actual world, P does A at T in S , then it is not the case that for all relevantly similar worlds and at all times in those worlds prior to T , it is possible that P instead does not- A at T in S .

- This premise has the form if $PWPA$, then not- PNA .

5. If IJK , then not- PNA (from 3 and 4).

6. If IJK then not PNA (from 2 and 5) – If there exists some possible world, that is relevantly similar to the actual world, in which an intelligent being justifiably knows prior to T that P does A at T in S , then P does not freely choose A at T in S .

(Shook 146-147)

This long, perhaps at first confusing, excerpt is necessary to show the exact logical progression of a theory, such as Shook's, which asserts that divine knowledge on God's part negates the possibility of freely choosing alternatives in a given situation. He arrives at Proposition 6, which presents his main assertion that "if God is an omnisciently intelligent being, then it is not the case that person P freely chooses action A at time T in situation S ... no one has the free will of alternative possibilities" (Shook 147, 157).

A position such as Shook's can also be termed "fatalism." "Fatalists hold that there is a fixity to the temporally nonrelational or 'hard' facts of the past. That is, they could not be

different from what they are” (Feinberg 103). It could be argued that because there is a fixity to events of human action, God knows exactly what we will choose, and this knowing effectively negates our ability to choose otherwise. Essentially, God’s prior knowledge of what I am going to do tomorrow thereby necessitates that I do such, and therefore my free will – to choose other than that which He knows – does not exist. These assertions operate on the belief that we are not free if our future actions are necessary. But are they necessary? And does this fixity of past and future events really result in the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom?

I would assert that it does not. And while I appreciate the attempt to describe God’s knowledge through soft facts, I do not believe this is the proper way to go about defending the compatibility between foreknowledge and human freedom. I would argue that the issue lies not so much in an incorrect conception of facts or the fixity of history, but rather in a misconception of God’s mode of knowing and omniscience. The misconception is “based on a faulty understanding of what it means for the future to be certain... [and] there is nothing about the certainty of the future that is in conflict with the ability of human beings to make free, moral decisions” (Picirilli 260).

We may consider the two modes of knowing the nature of events, as certain or contingent. A certainty is an event that absolutely will occur. A contingency is “anything that really can take place in more than one way... it must not be the inevitable or unavoidable”; knowing an event as contingent consists in recognizing its capability to have multiple outcomes. In light of these definitions, it can be asserted that:

“The free acts of morally responsible persons are contingent, and that this freedom to choose does not contradict certainty. Certainty relates to the factness of an event, to whether it will be or not;

contingency relates to its nature as free or inevitably caused by some other force... [we] are saying, therefore, that the same event can be both certain and contingent at the same time” (Picirilli 262).

It is the case that some events can transpire in two or more ways, and are therefore contingent, yet God knows which of the two ways will actually occur, and his knowledge is therefore certain. Some events are necessary, or *must* occur and allow no other possibility due to causation by an external force. Does the fact of God’s certain knowledge, in effect, necessitate the way in which an event will occur? Can events be known as certain without being necessary?

To consider this possibility, we must first understand what Thomas Aquinas says when he states that objects are known according to the mode of the knower. In *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, Rudi Velde asserts that, “The divine intellect knows temporal beings in his own, atemporal, eternal way, which we cannot understand or express.” However, “it does not follow that [past, present, and future] exist tenselessly and determinately” (111). God knows everything that will be, but He does not cause them to be the way they will. He causes them to *be*, but he does not cause their secondary agency. God created a free world of particular creatures, and by His nature they are allowed to be as they will.

It would seem that those who insist on the incompatibility between God’s omniscience and human free will have not fully considered the mode of God’s knowing. It is not that God knows, in the past, what will happen in the future and thus all future events are predetermined and necessitated to happen as He foresaw them. As has been previously established, time does not exist in God: “God is considered to exist *atemporally*, outside the framework of time, rather than *sempiternally*; i.e., at every moment... He stands outside time rather than within it, and cognizes the world *sub specie aeternitatis* [under the aspect of eternity], not in a successive

manner from one instant to another” (McCall 503). The kind of knowledge that God possesses “accords with the tenseless, temporally definite propositions that are the object of that knowledge” (McCall 503).

It is now necessary to consider the particular relationship between the knowledge of an event and the “factness” of that event. It stands that “the truth of empirical propositions supervenes on events, but events do not supervene on true propositions” (McCall 503). The idea of supervenience in this case is contained in the idea that “the truth... of propositions depends on what occurs in space and time, but what occurs in space and time does not depend on what propositions are true” (McCall 502). Consider the following analogical illustration: “We [as humans] can know past events, and know them as certain. At the same time, the certainty lies in their factness, and our knowledge of them affects that factness in no way at all. The knowledge issues from our awareness of the facts” (Picirilli 263). Our human knowledge of past events is both true and certain, but that knowledge has no bearing on the necessity or determinism of past events; it is never the knowledge that determines event factness, but rather factness that determines the knowledge. In this way, a rough parallel can be made: “Just so, God foreknows everything future as certain,” and indeed, “the knowledge *per se*, even though it is *foreknowledge*, has no more causal effect on the facts than our knowledge of certain past facts has on them” (Picirilli 263). It must be kept in mind that it would not do to say that God knows the future as we know the past, for God’s mode of knowing is not akin to our mode of knowing. However, our knowledge of the past can serve to illustrate that there exists no necessitation or determinism in events due to knowledge of them; it is not the knowledge of an event that gives the event its factness, but rather it is the factness of an event that allows for knowledge of said event. To offer a more realistic example originally proposed by Robert Picirilli, suppose I were

to travel tomorrow and encounter a fork in the road; I could choose the path either to the right or to the left. If I am going to choose the right path, I can choose it freely, it is certain that I will, and God knows this fact as certain. However, it is equally as true that if I am going to choose to take the left path tomorrow, I am going to choose it freely, it is certain that I will, and God knows, with certainty, that I will. My freedom in choosing either path is not hindered by the fact that whichever I choose will be a certain choice and will be known by God with certainty.

If we can understand God's existence and mode of knowledge as outside the constraints and limitations of time and space, and also can hold that a knowledge of events does not necessitate their factness, then we can absolutely argue that God's omniscience and human free will are, indeed, compatible. "God knows all future events and the openness of the future is not compromised thereby" (Picirilli 259). As Molina would put it "God knows what happens in the world *because it happens*, rather than the other way around" (McCall 505). The fatalist, incompatibilist argument consists in the fact that fatalists have turned this covariance ("truth depends on being, whereas being does not depend on truth") on its head into an "odd, asymmetric dependence: it is true *because* God knows it's true" (Garrett 294).

I would posit that the question of whether or not humans possess free will is not so much a matter of reconciling free will with God's omniscience and foreknowledge but rather a matter of reconciling the concept of free will with God's causation.

It necessarily follows that we examine the way in which God created the world and its creatures, particularly human beings, and the way in which He acts in the world. Essentially, we must first consider the four types of causality: material, efficient, formal, and final. Material cause refers to the nature or material of an object; efficient cause is that which causes an object to be, not be, or change; formal cause refers to *why* something is what it is; and final cause is the

purpose or aim, the final goal, of an object. (Dodds 5). When we think of God's action in the world, we must think in terms of His causality: God gives being to each thing (efficient cause), He allows for creaturely agency, and "is the final cause of each creature" (Dodds 8). Two imperative conclusions follow from these assertions: Firstly, that we are subject to the Divine Providence of God, since our temporal existence is a direct participation in His Divine Existence (*esse*), and secondly, union with God in the Kingdom of Heaven is the ultimate goal for human beings, and we are ordered in such a way as to achieve this highest fulfillment of our humanness.

To address the first account, of God's efficient causality, we must first establish that God is pure existence, or pure *esse*, and the fact of our temporal, material existence shows a direct participation in God's atemporal, divine existence. All creatures of this world were created by Him and share in His existence and as such, He is creatures' efficient cause. Additionally, we cannot be any way other than that by which He has created us (as rational, ensouled beings *with a free will*) and thus we must act according to our natures, i.e. we must exercise our free will. It is necessarily also asserted that God must let beings act according to their natures. So is God limited? To a degree. God created everything that *is*, including the laws of the universe, and He cannot violate these principles and laws because it would, in effect, be violating His very own nature. In creating a world of creatures with particular natures, God accepted natural limitations to His action in the world: He is limited insofar as he would be defying His nature. Essentially, as the first agent of all beings, God cannot act in such a way as to violate the nature of these beings, for He would be violating His own nature. Understood in this way, it is now evident that God gave human beings a free will that He cannot deny or violate.

We must now turn to the second notion, of God being human beings' final cause. The final cause is that for which a thing was created, and refers to the final end or goal of that thing.

Up until this point, I have denied the existence of determinism in the sense that since God knows our actions, we are predetermined to act as He knows and therefore lack free will. Here, however, I will admit that a form of determinism – causal determinism – *does exist*. If we accept that God is our final cause – our ultimate end and purpose – then we accept that, through His creation of us, He has in a sense *predestined* us for this end. Ultimately, “God gives [created beings] motion, moves them, by calling them home. In a manner proper to each species, God intends their perfection. Since perfection is ultimately in God, God is the end or goal of every creature” (Raitt 190). What is meant by “end,” here? “Aquinas tells us that an end is something cognized as good” (Williams 200).

It is the case that “the object of the will is an end and a good, [and] it follows that all human actions are for the sake of an end,” and additionally “the will’s natural object is happiness”; it follows that every choice we make is a choice for some *perceived* good or happiness for the individual (Williams 199, Raitt 190). (Even if the choice itself is or results in evil, the individual chooses such because it contains some perceived good for him or her.) Additionally, we have established that we cannot violate our nature as human beings. It can, therefore, be seen that insofar as human beings must act according to their nature and possess free will, they will always act with some sort of good or happiness as their object. God is the ultimate Good, and union with Him is ultimate happiness. The will therefore, is naturally inclined to choose God, who is Good. This shows that “the end towards which created things are directed by God is twofold; one.... Is life eternal that consists in seeing God which is above the nature of every creature... The other end, however, is proportionate to created nature, to which end created being can attain according to the power of its nature” (Aquinas 125). We can thus understand how God predestined us in a particular way to achieve our two-fold end: Free will

allows us to act in a manner that fulfills our nature, and if we freely choose God and follow His commands by exercise of this free will, we will achieve union with Him.

If we must argue for the limitations of our free will, we may view the limitations in this way: We must act according to our nature, and our nature is inclined to choose the good. This is the only conception I can think of in which the will is not free, in that it is compelled to choose the good. But this limitation is inherent *in our nature* as human beings. And I would assert that, as such, this is a mild limitation, if one at all. The will can still be considered free in that it may choose between alternative possibilities, whether or not those possibilities actually include the ultimate, real Good, God.

In regards to predestination and providence, we may now understand the existence of each. Predestination exists not so much in the sense that our actions and choices are fixed necessities in time, but rather we are destined from creation to fulfill our ultimate end, union with God. Additionally, since all creatures participate in existence, divinely given, they are subject to the divine providence of God. As Aquinas asserts in the *Summa Theologiae* “The causality of God, Who is the first agent, extends to all being... hence all things that exist in whatsoever manner are necessarily directed by God towards some end” (Aquinas 122). Providence and predestination refers to the matter of God designing us with the most self-fulfilling end of reaching heaven, and bestowing upon us the grace necessary to achieve that goal. The issue here, however, is that God has imbued rational creatures (humans) with freedom of will, and as such, allows for those creatures to choose to turn away from God and *not* fulfill their intended end.

It also follows that, from this view, that we can understand the existence of evil in our world. Despite our being made in and for the good, our free will allows us to act contrary to this

good, and defy God's pure intention and will. Aquinas puts it thus: "God makes all the free things that do *as* they do, instead of doing otherwise as is in their power, by their *own* understanding. So God does not make Adam sin. But God makes the sinning Adam, the person who, *able* not to sin, does." (Davies 76). The concept of evil in a world where a fully good, omnipotent God exists is difficult to reconcile. We ask why God would allow such evil to persist if He is, in fact, entirely good and loving. But we must hearken back to what has previously been established, that God makes things *as* they are; and as they are, they are able to act in a way contrary to His will. Thomas Aquinas explains that "evil is the corruption of a nature, not a nature itself... [evil] signifies the absence of the goodness a thing should have" (Velde 143). It is also said that God creates a perfect world, and this world necessarily includes created "things" of inequality – corruptible and incorruptible things – and corruptible things by their nature are able to experience some evil degradation in the form of corruption. The original evil was caused by Adam's free choice to turn away from God, which in turn caused a disordered disposition of human nature. And thus, by this disordered disposition, "man is fallen and thoroughly depraved," and is subject to make evil choices due to perversion of reason or by sway of others who would act in evil ways; "He is therefore capable of no good apart from the help of God to enable him" (Picirilli 261).

But an underlying question may remain for the reader – *why* must a human have free will? Yes, it may be contended that God creates all beings with a particular nature, the particular nature of human beings affords them freedom of will, and so both human and God must not violate this freedom of will; this logical progression does indeed defend the compatibility of God's omniscience and free will. But if the capacity for free will and choice is inherent in the nature of human beings and the existence of free will can lead to evil and sin in the world, we

may ask why God made humans with a nature that necessitated free will. He is omnipotent; surely he could have created a being with a nature that did not allow for the choice of evil. Why, exactly, is it necessary that humans possess a freedom of will?

The answer is love. God fully *is* love and fully loves each and every one of His creations. As in any relationship, love given would desire love returned. Love returned consists in human beings' turning towards God to follow his will and commands on this earth, and the love of God and His will ultimately leads to the fulfillment of our final end, union with God in Heaven. However, love forced is not genuine love at all. God could not make it necessary for His creations to love Him because that would undermine the very nature and definition of love for another. In this way, we can understand His bestowal of the capacity of free will, while still allowing our fulfillment and end to lie, in a predestined way, with Him. We, as humans, achieve the Kingdom of Heaven by choosing to love God and follow His commandments. In granting us free will, God allows us to love Him fully and *freely*, and only in this free choice to love God and follow His commands can we prove ourselves worthy of Heaven after death: "Free will is essential so that [humans'] virtues may properly be called their own, and so that they may freely choose to love God and one another (Berthold 8). Essentially, free will is not only a part of human nature but is essential for human beings' fulfillment and achievement of their natural end – ultimate happiness and perfection with God in Heaven.

In summary, we can see that the nature of the debate surrounding the compatibility of human free will with God's foreknowledge is a deeply complex and controversial one, yet I would submit that it can be resolved: God's omniscience and foreknowledge is, in fact, compatible with human free will. Fatalists and incompatibilists would hold that because God knows, with certainty, all future events and our future choices, then those events and actions are

necessary and predetermined; thus, our free will is actually nonexistent. However, proponents of this view have a misdirected conception of God's knowledge, which exists outside the constraints of time and space. Once we understand God's transcendence and knowledge as thus, it is not difficult to reconcile God's knowing with our free choice. Additionally, free will is not only compatible with God's knowledge but is essential to our nature as human beings as God created us. Essentially, "God created for a purpose, and the purpose was the perfection of creatures, and He had a plan for bringing this about, which followed from the natures the creatures were given. God's providence, therefore, consists in His direction of creation toward the end it is designed for, and, since God is almighty and all-good," so the end of our being, our natural inclination of the will, is towards God (Pontifex 47). It could, then, be argued that a form of causal determinism exists – our free wills are free insofar as they are free to choose perceived or real goods. I would still hold that a freedom here exists, because we are not necessitated to choose an actual good, and have the capability to freely and autonomously choose between a multiplicity of options. The freedom of our will, unhindered by God, can be seen as evident when we consider the evil in the world; God did not create evil, but rather it is through our exercise of free will we can choose that which is contrary to God and his will. However, God's love for us is the reason for this free will, and in correctly exercising the freedom of our will to love God and his commandments we may eventually enjoy union with God – the ultimate end and perfection of our happiness and nature as human beings.

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