God and Human Freedom: A Thomistically Inspired Study and Defense of the Compatibility of Divine Involvement and Human Freedom

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God and Human Freedom

A Thomistically Inspired Study and Defense of the Compatibility of Divine Involvement and Human Freedom

by

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In discourse more sweet
(For eloquence the soul, song charms the sense)
Others apart sat on a hill retired,
In thoughts more elevate, and reasoned high
Of providence, foreknowledge absolute,
And found no end, in wand’ring mazes lost.

Milton
Paradise Lost II.555-561
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Preface

While it is true that the enterprise of philosophy is ultimately one which we each must undertake for ourselves, any topic as deep and as difficult to think about as that of God and human freedom requires a guide. My guide has been St. Thomas Aquinas. This thesis is not intended to be a study or defense of Aquinas’ philosophy regarding God and human freedom, however, but rather a genuine attempt at philosophical thought on my own part. I have not attempted to be original – nothing could be further from genuine love of wisdom than to put originality before the truth. Therefore, I have relied upon Aquinas when I have thought him to be right (and this has certainly been the great majority of the time).

I am also indebted to many other philosophers (a good number of them Thomists themselves) who have helped me to engage Aquinas in a dialogue with contemporary philosophy. One of these thinkers, Father W. Norris “Norrie” Clarke, S.J., provided me with the idea of a “Thomistically inspired” approach to the topic, one which creatively appropriates Aquinas’ incredible metaphysical understanding into my own philosophical inquiry. Therefore, whereas I depend greatly upon the philosophy of Aquinas as a guide, this thesis is the result of my own philosophical thought, and so I bear full responsibility for any error in its reasoning.

I am deeply grateful to my advisors, Professor Peter Kreeft and Fr. Ronald Tacelli, S.J., for sharing the depth of their wisdom with me as I struggled to understand “the meaning of everything.” Working with both of them on my senior thesis has been a dream for years. They were the first to show me the beauty of truth, the first to awaken in me a love of wisdom, and the first to rouse in me the suspicion that faith and reason might actually be compatible.

I cannot possibly express my gratitude to all of the friends and family whom God has providentially put into my life, and who have freely chosen to stay.

I especially want to thank my parents for their constant love, support, and encouragement, as well as for their willingness to read (and re-read) my many early drafts. Special thanks are also due to my brother Michael and to Dimitri, for sharing in the numerous philosophical conversations out of which this paper was borne, and for keeping me honest. Lastly, Amanda, it is my hope that I thank you every day. In this, my first real philosophical undertaking, you have given selflessly of yourself, as you always do. I am forever grateful.
Defining the Problem: God and Human Freedom

_ Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan. _

*Thornton Wilder,*
_The Bridge of San Luis Rey_

Section 1: Fate, Freedom, and the Collective Human Experience

The intertwining ideas of fate and freedom are inescapably ingrained within the collective human experience. Long before he began to articulate and think critically about the problem of free choice and destiny, man felt the tension between them. We do not have to look long at any of the great religions or great stories before we discover that these two themes are woven into the collective unconscious of mankind. Peer back across the centuries to the early myths and religions of man, and you will find fate and freedom occupying the central place. In western mythology, the fates were greater even than the gods, spinning out the destinies of mortals and immortals alike. All of the great pagan stories drew their deep power from the tension between the free struggle of the hero against his sealed and unavoidable fate. Turn to the East and you will encounter the doctrine of karma, the universal law of cause and effect: sow evil, reap evil; sow good, reap good. When coupled with reincarnation, karma amounts to a tension between freedom and destiny similar to that which occupied the pagan mind in the West: the universe is so constituted that the events which I currently experience and which I will experience in the future can be explained as my destiny. The doctrine of karma insists, however, that it was my free choices alone which created this inescapable destiny.

So in the earliest mythical and religious mind of man fate and freedom were already present, locked in an eternal and universal dance, played out in the dramas of the greatest poets...
and the lives of each common man and woman. This is a fact of no small consequence, for the intuited presence of these two themes, carrying as they do such deep significance within the human psyche, indicates the fundamentally existential nature of their relationship: the tension between fate and freedom, between destiny and choice, is a tension that has always had profound meaning for the human person. Hence the personification and the deification found in paganism – these are Jungian archetypes, and they draw their being from the depths of the collective human unconscious.

Section 2: Questions Raised by Philosophy and Theology

When mankind emerged from a subconscious, mythological, intuitive way of looking at the world and we began to reason about our experience and existence, we did not abandon our preoccupation with freedom and destiny. If anything, the birth of philosophy deepened our perplexity; for the first time the mysterious but nevertheless experienced reality of a relationship between destiny and free human choice became a problem. How can man be, at one and the same time, both free and subject to fate? It became a problem for the critically thinking mind, for the philosophical mind. And philosophers rose to the challenge.

Some abandoned both the idea of divine fate and the idea of human freedom. Enter the Atomists, first Democritus and later Lucretius. They did not so much answer the problem as deny it, or rather destroy it. It was not that they set out to do so. Rather, the problem of freedom and fate ceased to be a problem when their consistently materialistic metaphysics denied the possibility of real human choice. If all that is can be explained in terms of atoms and the void, then what we call human freedom is reduced to a physical chain of cause and effect which is
predetermined by the laws of nature.¹ This predetermined chain of cause and effect replaced a
superstitious belief in the fates or in any other gods. The gods, being spiritual beings, had no
place to call home in a universe consisting of nothing more than matter and space. If the
atomists were right (and if their modern materialist predecessors are right), then the problem of
fate and freedom ceases to be a problem at all; the experienced tension between the two amounts
to nothing more than illusion and superstition.

But the theory of a purely material universe proved unsatisfactory to those who looked
more deeply into the structure and nature of being, and none of those early seekers of wisdom
conducted a more thorough examination than Aristotle. The real world of changing beings, of
things ceasing to exist and coming into being, of substance and accident, of the one and the many
— in short, the universe — could not be explained on purely materialistic grounds. Every cause
was not efficient or material; there were also formal and final causes. And likewise not every
existing thing could be explained in purely materialistic terms; there was form as well as matter.

When he considered the universe, a universe he thought to be eternal and constantly
undergoing change, Aristotle came to a further conclusion which would have important
implications for the question of freedom and providence. The only possible explanation for an
eternally moving universe, argued Aristotle, the only cause which could account for an infinite
chain of cause and effect, was a prime mover that moved through final causality without being
moved. Such a prime mover would have to be completely immaterial (because he would have to
be immutable, and all material things can be moved), and therefore would have to be pure

¹ For a taste of the very earliest forms of determinism, see “Atomism” in The Presocratics, ed. Philip Wheelwright
(Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1960). Here is an excerpt from “Atomism” in which an early secondary
source, Diogenes Laertius, quotes Thrasylus listing some of the opinions which Democritus held: “The first
principles of the Whole are atoms and the void; anything else is merely mental supposition . . . . Everything happens
by necessity; and this necessity, particularly the causes of why things come-to-be, he ascribes to vortex [i.e., to the
vortices of whirling atoms]” (Wheelwright, 196). For a much more developed and beautifully poetic presentation of
atomism, see Lucretius, De rerum natura. The standard English translation is Lucretius, On the Nature of the
actuality (because only material beings have potential, such as the potential to be moved or changed), and therefore would also have to be completely perfect (because only those things with potential are imperfect, being not actually and fully all that they can be). Aristotle also argued that the more material a being was, the less intelligent it was, and therefore concluded that the prime mover, being fully immaterial, must possess a perfect intellect. And this immaterial, perfect, purely actual, supremely intelligent prime mover of the universe Aristotle called God.²

This is a fairly good outline of the so-called “God of the philosophers,” the God whom reason alone reveals, the God of natural theology, the God of Deism. Later deists would disagree with Aristotle’s assumption that the universe is eternal, and would add that God must have brought it into being. But whether they conceive of God as a final cause only, or as an eternal clock-maker who wound the universe up and then let it run on its own, such thinkers agree that while it is rationally necessary to posit God as the prime mover (and creator) of the universe, his involvement in the universe ends here.

But what has all this to do with the question of freedom and providence? To begin with, the deist allows for the possibility of a spiritual realm of being, and therefore the proposition that man is materially determined seems to him to be a mistaken conclusion following from a flawed metaphysics. Thus it seems that the deist has once again made room for man’s freedom. But suddenly a new and troubling thought arises: if there exists a perfectly omniscient being, one who knows future human choices as certainly and as clearly as he knows past or present choices, does this not determine every human choice?³ For, when faced with a choice between A and B,

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³ This problem did not, in fact, arise for early deists such as Aristotle. He shared (to a lesser extent) with Plato and Plotinus a contempt for matter, and this is in fact, I would argue, the root of his deism. The perfection of God, he
if God infallibly knows that my choice will be B, doesn’t this mean that I *must* choose B, that I *cannot possibly* choose A? This is the question of divine foreknowledge, and it is the first great question facing those wishing to reconcile the existence of God and human freedom.

Long before Democritus was thinking about atoms and the void, or Aristotle was contemplating the eternal solitude of the prime mover, there existed a remarkably peculiar tribe of people whose identity, so they claimed, was to be the chosen people of God. They were remarkable for their monotheism, surrounded as they were by various polytheistic religions. But they were even more remarkable for their claim that the one true God, who had created the entire universe, was intimately *involved* in His creation, and in particular was involved with the Jewish people. Yahweh certainly did not sit back in eternal and perfect solitude. He called Abraham, hardened Pharaoh’s heart, gave commandments, directed His people to a promised land, and established a covenant and a king.

Of course, the pagan gods of polytheism also interacted with human beings. But Yahweh was no pagan god. He was not one god among many in the universe, because he stood outside the universe as the eternal creator of all that is. Not so the many gods of paganism – Venus may have been the goddess of love, and Mars the god of war, but neither stood in relation to all of creation as the absolute, ineffable, and eternal Creator. Thus their involvement in creation was not problematic, because, while they might exist on a super-human, spiritual plane, they did not, properly speaking, *transcend* the universe. They pushed and pulled, tempted and rewarded, indeed even lusted and warred, with a power much greater than that of human beings, but not with the absolute and eternal power of a transcendent Creator. The gods of polytheism were maintained, consisted in only knowing that which was perfect, and thus God only had knowledge of himself. Likewise, it would be a mark of imperfection for the eternal prime mover to love or care for anything less than himself. Other deists, however, because they attribute to God creation of the universe, reason that he must have knowledge of that which he has created, but that once he put into motion the laws of nature, he now sits back and lets them run their natural course.
certainly very involved in the universe, but their involvement posed no problem to the philosophical mind; if they existed at all, they did so as spiritual beings acting from within the world, and not with omnipotence, but rather with a much greater power than that of human beings. Thus human freedom was not threatened by the gods of polytheism, any more than it was threatened by a powerful storm at sea: the waves may have power over life and death, yes, but not over freedom. And besides, philosophers began to reason, could it be the case that the “god” Neptune is merely an anthropomorphic projection of this awesome power and majesty of the sea? Does not reason lead us away from polytheism and towards a deism that insists upon God’s perfection, and therefore upon his eternal aloofness? For the philosophers and the learned, as we have already seen, God’s involvement was not a problem.

But what of the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the learned”?4 The Jews claimed that their history was precisely a history of God’s direct involvement in His creation, a surprising claim since, though they lacked the philosophical categories and terms, both their scriptures and living history agree with Aristotle that God was an immaterial, perfect, purely actual, supremely intelligent prime mover of the universe. But, unlike Aristotle, their faith had no room for a God who was not involved in His creation – in fact, this is precisely what would later separate Judaism from philosophical deism, and it remains the fundamental separation between all forms of theism and deism: theism insists upon the involvement of God.

Here, however, arises the second great question put to those who wish to reconcile the existence of God and human freedom: the question of divine providence. The Jews, like all theists who claim that God is intimately involved in His creation, insisted that God’s omnipotent will is always done, and that therefore nothing which happens can escape His providential divine

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governance. But they also implicitly insisted upon man’s freedom, a necessity if God and man were to be justified in punishing the wicked and praising the just, and if there was to be any point in calling people to repentance. And herein lies the dilemma. For the omnipotent God of theism not only providentially arranges the movement of the heavens and the laws of nature, inanimate and passive matter which has no free-will; His will also extends to human beings, whose freedom thereby appears to be threatened. For how is it possible for Joseph to maintain that Yahweh’s providence protected him and worked good from evil, when his brothers freely chose to sell him into slavery? How can we say that Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and also insist that Pharaoh was a wicked man who could have freely chosen to free the slaves? In short, the theist must face a new and difficult question, in addition to the question of foreknowledge: if God’s will is always done, and if human beings can freely choose contrary to God’s will, how can providence and human freedom be compatible?

These, then, are the two fundamental questions concerning God and human freedom: (1) Is divine foreknowledge compatible with the inherent contingency of free human choice, or does it render all human actions necessary? (2) Does the omnipotent accomplishment of divine providence allow for the possibility of free human agency? These two questions of compatibility are ordered so as to follow a natural progression of increasing interiority. Put another way, they are ordered to consider an increasing involvement of God within His creation. They move from a question about God’s knowledge and human freedom (which is a problem for any deist), to a question about God’s providence and human freedom (which is a problem for any theist).

5 This claim, of course, also gives rise to the problem of evil, or theodicy, about which much more has been written than the problem of providence and freedom, but which falls beyond the scope of this paper.
6 Genesis 45.5-8 (RSV).
7 Exodus 4.21; 7.3; 9.12; 10.20, 27; 14.4.
Section 3: The Existential Importance for Human Experience

The decisive theoretical import of these questions for philosophy and theology concerning the scope and nature of God and His relation to human freedom can hardly be understated. The problems of divine foreknowledge, providence and their relation to human free will have played central roles in theological schisms, arguments for deism, attacks upon theism, and defenses of atheism. Simply raising such questions necessitates an adequate study and understanding of the nature of God, His divine attributes, and His actions; a valid anthropology which adequately defines, accounts for, and explains the nature of the human will and its freedom; and certain metaphysical distinctions, such the distinction between different types of causality or between contingency and necessity, among others.

Yet there are also many important existential reasons for asking such questions. As we have seen, fate and freedom are central to the human experience, twin poles within the human psyche. Their ultimate compatibility, or ultimate discord, is very important to us on a personal, existential level as well as on an abstract, theoretical level. For we subconsciously realize that without both free choice and destiny, we are faced with a meaningless existence; if freedom and providence are not reconcilable, the result is either meaningless determinism or meaningless chaos. For if I have no free will, then either my actions are completely uncaused, and thus they amount to random meaningless motions, or else they are completely caused by external factors, and thus they amount to determined meaningless motions. On the other hand, if I have free will but ultimately all of my choices do not amount to some higher purpose, some final ending to the story of my life, some destiny or fate or providence that is bigger than myself, then:
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.  

This, of course, is not an argument. There is an important point here, however: philosophy and theology aside, we spontaneously believe in both free will and a providence or destiny of some sort before we are given arguments and reasons to disbelieve in one or the other or both. We may naturally question how both free will and providence can coexist, but deep down we do not begin by questioning whether they coexist.

Lest this last statement appear too dogmatic, remember that it is a statement which makes an existential claim, a claim about human experience. To illustrate the truth of this claim, consider that few things are more central to human experience than the simple act of telling and listening to stories. Even before man could write, he told stories. Now what are the two central components of any truly believable story? Fate and freedom, or, if you would prefer more familiar literary terminology, plot and character development. Without them, stories simply feel flat, unrealistic, and not true to life:

Both of these ingredients, free will and destiny, are always present in every successful story, every interesting story, every (and this is the point) story we find realistic, “true to life”. A story without predestination means a story without an author, and that is a story without any authority. But a story without free will, a story about machines and falling raindrops, is not a story either. Every story has to have in it free persons making free choices that they could have made differently – otherwise there is no drama.

Real life is full of drama, or at least appears that way – this is why, when a story lacks either free will or destiny, we say that it feels unreal. And that is precisely the point: either real life consists of the compatibility of providence and freedom, and thus it is truly full of drama and meaning, or

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9 Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 63.
else it does not, in which case ours is a world of nihilism and absurdity. The question of God and freedom, therefore, is one charged with existential import.

Section 4: Entering into Mystery

The existential and theological nature of our two fundamental questions should make us wary of treating them as mere theoretical problems. Indeed, it must be admitted from the beginning that pursuing the answer to our questions will bring us to the edge of reason; if we hope to understand the depths of God’s nature or our own human freedom, we must enter into the realm of faith and mystery. “The abyss in man cries out to the abyss in God. Tell me, which is deeper?” writes the medieval mystic Angelius Silesius. If it took a mystic to ask such a question, it will certainly take one to answer it.

But keep in mind that it is neither the intent nor the burden of this paper to prove, on the basis of reason alone, that free will or the God of faith (and subsequently foreknowledge and providence) exist, although there are very good reasons for thinking that both do. Rather, this paper seeks to answer questions about their compatibility: is it logically incompatible for foreknowledge and free human choice to coexist? Does divine providence eliminate human freedom?

“Some say that we shall never know and that to the gods we are like flies that the boys kill on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God.”10 What this paper maintains is that both divine foreknowledge and divine providence are compatible with human freedom, and that this can be shown philosophically. Reason will now clear the way so that faith can proceed.

Method of Approach: *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*

_No philosophical conclusions can be deduced from any articles of faith, for they are believed principles of equally believed theological consequences, not intelligible principles of demonstrated rational conclusions. Yet, if reason cannot prove them to be true, it cannot either prove them to be false. Quite the reverse. To any sincere believer who is at the same time a true philosopher, the slightest opposition between his faith and his reason is a sure sign that something is the matter with his philosophy._

_Etienne Gilson,_

*Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*

Section 1: Point of Departure: Revelation as Data

In order to answer any question, the first thing that we must do is gather the relevant data. The data needed to answer the three questions posed in the previous chapter falls into two categories, both of which are essential: data given by experience (and subsequently understood through metaphysical reflection), and data given by revelation. What has been proposed is a philosophical and rational defense of the compatibility of God’s existence and human freedom. Given such a rational defense, it may be asked what role faith should play in exploring these questions. Indeed, it may be objected, these difficult questions concerning the compatibility or internal consistency of articles of faith cannot be answered by an appeal to that same faith alone, for this would beg the question. Rather, the questions which reason raises must be answered on the basis of reason alone. Therefore, we must have a very clear understanding of the relationship between faith and reason, a relationship which must allow for the possibility of both asking and answering the questions which have been raised.

From the outset, it must be said that we are dealing here with Christian revelation. The reasons for this are both practical and personal. As it has already been shown, the problem of
foreknowledge is a problem for any deist such as Aristotle who maintains that reason alone can prove the existence of an omniscient God. Likewise, the problem of providence is a problem for any theist such as a Jewish rabbi who maintains that God is involved in His creation. For the Christian, however, while foreknowledge and providence are distressing problems in their own right, revelation adds to these a number of theological problems which also seem to threaten human freedom. So, for example, the Christian must also ask whether divine grace and human freedom are compatible, or whether predestination precludes free choice. The Christian is convinced by reason and by faith of God’s existence and omniscience, and by faith alone of His providential involvement. In addition to these, however, he is also convinced by faith of certain theological doctrines which seem to threaten human freedom. Therefore, by starting from Christian revelation, we have the practical benefit of raising the philosophical questions of foreknowledge and providence, while simultaneously setting the stage for addressing further theological issues.

So much for the practical reason. As for the personal reason, it is simple: I myself am a Christian, and thus I accept revelation as data, believing that there is good reason to do so.\(^1\) Therefore, the approach of this paper will emulate that traditionally taken by Christian philosophers, theologians, and scholars: *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”). The Christian thinker, critically reflecting upon both the experiential data of free will and the revealed data of God’s foreknowledge and providence, must acknowledge that

\[^1\text{The reasons for this belief cannot be elaborated here. Nevertheless, a wonderfully succinct summation has been provided by the great historian of medieval philosophy, Etienne Gilson: “No man would ever admit that God has spoken, unless he had solid proofs of the fact. Such proofs are to be found in history, where the miracles of God, and quite especially the greatest of all: the life and growth of His Church, prove His presence, the truth of His doctrine and the permanence of His inspiration.” (Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966], 81-82).}^
there is here a seeming incompatibility, a possible internal inconsistency. Here reason seems to
be in conflict with faith.

So why not simply remove the data given by revelation, data which is based upon faith
and not upon reason? Remove God’s omniscient foreknowledge and omnipotent providence,
and there is no longer a problem. But notice that this approach to the problem begs the question.
If we wish to have done with the data of revelation, we must argue against it on the basis of
reason alone. But because reason can neither prove nor disprove the articles of faith as such, it
must proceed by demonstrating an internal contradiction within the beliefs of the Christian. In
other words, the only possible way to argue against faith is to first assume at least two of the
theist’s beliefs, and then to show that they are in direct contradiction, thus proving that holding
both beliefs at the same time leads to absurdity. In logical terms, this form of argument is
entitled *reductio ad absurdum*.

So, for example, a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against divine foreknowledge could
run as follows (and similarly formed arguments could be made against providence):

1) An omniscient God, by definition, infallibly knows everything that will happen in the
universe, including all the choices that every person will make in the future. (Here the
argument assumes a belief of the theist which comes from faith: divine
foreknowledge).
2) A human being with free will can, by definition, choose between at least two
alternatives, such as between A and B. (Here the argument assumes a belief of the
theist that comes from reason: human freedom).
3) Assume that God infallibly knows that the human being will choose A in the future.
4) Therefore the human being will necessarily choose A.
5) Therefore it follows that the human being will not have a genuine choice between two
alternatives, because in necessarily choosing A, it would be impossible to choose B.
6) Therefore free will and divine omniscience are logically incompatible. They cannot
both exist.
7) But free will does exist, which we know from experience.
8) Therefore divine omniscience does not exist.
There are, of course, significant problems with this line of reasoning (not the least of which are premises 3 and 4), but that is not the point of outlining the argument here. Rather, the point is to illustrate that in order for such an argument to work at all, it must first assume (for argument’s sake) the omniscience of God which the Christian maintains is a datum of revelation.

So what does all of this have to do with the approach of this paper? Whether we approach the questions of foreknowledge, providence, and human freedom as believers or non-believers, whether our approach is *fides quaerens intellectum* or an attempt to show the internal contradiction of the Christian faith, we must all agree from the outset to accept the data of revelation. This would be true even if we hoped later to use the incompatibility of such data with what is known by reason and experience as an argument against its validity as data. But we cannot start off by throwing out the very data which we would question.

Section 2: Faith and Reason: Philosophy as the Handmaiden of Theology

So we must begin by accepting revelation as data, all the more so because this paper explicitly seeks to defend the compatibility of foreknowledge and providence with human freedom. And this defense, this intellectual exploration into the compatibility of God’s involvement and human free will, must be carried out by philosophy. For while reason can not and does not provide the data of revelation which faith accepts, it is nevertheless the job of reason (1) to fully understand that faith, insofar as it is humanly possible, and (2) to defend that faith, insofar as it is the truth. And this is so because God is the Author of revelation (which is believed by faith). He is also our Creator; thus He is the Author of our nature, which includes our reason. It therefore follows that the same Author who wrote the Book of Revelation also wrote the Book of Nature. And since these two books share a common Author, they can never
contradict each other – faith and reason can never conflict. If they appear to conflict, as they seem to when we first consider God’s involvement in creation and what that means for human freedom, then we must employ philosophy to examine more closely the apparent incompatibility.\textsuperscript{2} And that is precisely the work of this paper.

This is why it was a common medieval adage that philosophy, while remaining a separate discipline from theology, nevertheless also serves as the handmaiden of theology. Philosophy is related to faith in two ways: as the handmaiden of theology, and as a separate discipline in its own right. Etienne Gilson, the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century historian of medieval philosophy and Christian philosopher in his own right, points out that in the philosophical systems of both Augustine and Aquinas, “Christian philosophy is presented as an understanding of divine things that more and more replaces faith, at least to the extent to which it is humanly possible to do so.”\textsuperscript{3} Here we have the first fundamental way in which faith and philosophy are related: as \textit{fides quaerens intellectum}, “faith seeking understanding.” Gilson continues, “In both systems, whatever may have been the action of faith that precedes and prepares knowledge, it remains that knowledge as an established body of demonstrated truths owes nothing of its scientific evidence to faith.”\textsuperscript{4} And here we are given the second fundamental way in which philosophy relates to faith: as a separate discipline, independent in both its demonstrations and its data. Both relationships will come into play as we continue to explore the compatibility of divine involvement and human freedom.

\textsuperscript{2} This paragraph is essentially a summary of Chapter 7 of Book One of Aquinas’ \textit{Summa Contra Gentiles}, a chapter which he ends by stating: “From this we evidently gather the following conclusion: whatever arguments are brought forward against the doctrines of faith are conclusions incorrectly derived from the first and self-evident principles imbedded in nature. Such conclusions do not have the force of demonstration; they are arguments that are either probable or sophistical. And so, there exists the possibility to answer them” (Aquinas, \textit{Summa Contra Gentiles}, 1.7.7, trans. Anton C. Pegis [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975]). And Aquinas would agree with the following addition: it is through reason alone that these arguments can be answered, although the doctrines of faith could never be given by reason alone.


\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
Therefore, our approach can be neither dogmatic fideism nor skeptical rationalism; the
precepts of faith may be supra-logical, but in no way can they be contra-logical. The correct
method is to begin with an open mind, starting from the data of both revelation and experience,
and subjecting both to a logical and metaphysical inquiry. The result, if reason does not go
astray, will be a newfound depth in the understanding of faith, as well as a satisfactory
demonstration of the compatibility of God and human freedom.

Section 3: How Not to Think About God and Human Freedom

Given that we must start from the twin data of faith and reason, and given that the first
application of rational reflection upon God’s interaction in the world and the experience of
human freedom has raised questions about their compatibility, how should reason proceed in
thinking about and eventually attempting to answer these questions? In other words, how are we
to think about God and human freedom? It must be made clear from the outset that it will be
impossible to expect reason to be able to achieve anything like a mathematical or empirical proof
that foreknowledge and providence exist, or that their existence is compatible with human
freedom. Whatever the way that we must ultimately apply reason to think about God and human
freedom, one way that will most certainly lead to failure, one way not to think about God and
human freedom, is by means of the scientific method.

To see why this is so, let us briefly consider the question of divine providence.
Revelation clearly and consistently provides us with the data of providence, of God’s
involvement in the world. If faith and reason do not conflict but rather “are the two wings on
which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth,” if, in other words, a rational faith

5 The data of providence in Revelation is given both indirectly (through stories, such as when God providentially
cares for and protects Joseph in Egypt) and directly (through statements, such as the one found in chapter 8, verse 28
of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love Him”).
is a real possibility, then we would expect that in addition to the data of revelation there should also be some empirical evidence of divine providence in the world. But if by “empirical evidence” we mean the type of evidence which can be subjected to the scientific method, the type of evidence which could be used to definitively prove the hypothesis of divine involvement, we must admit that no such evidence exists. Or rather we must admit that the evidence, such as it is, is scientifically inconclusive.

This is so because of the very nature of providence. For God, if He acts in the world, can act in two ways: through miracles, or through providence. A miracle is a temporary suspension of the laws of nature by God, laws which scientific observation and method have established. As such, a miracle can in principle be “verified” by the laws of science in that, if an event is truly miraculous, it is something which cannot be explained by the natural laws of cause and effect. Water turning into wine is miraculous, because there is no law of chemistry by which such a transformation can be explained; its cause cannot be natural, and thus must be supernatural. Water turning into vapor, on the other hand, is not miraculous, because it can be explained through the natural causal laws of chemistry; the effect of evaporation has a natural cause, namely the application of heat, which speeds up and eventually breaks H₂O molecules into their constituent hydrogen and oxygen atoms, atoms which in turn are naturally gaseous. Now providence, unlike the miraculous, is God’s involvement in the world not in a manner contrary to the laws of natural cause and effect, but rather in a manner which takes place through these very laws. It is for this reason that there can be no scientific, empirical evidence of providence or of its compatibility with human freedom – for how could science be expected to detect a divine providence behind the meeting of two natural causal chains if it is precisely in the nature of providence to work through those causal chains?

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This last point is a difficult and admittedly confusing one, and it is a point which shall be taken up in more detail later when discussing providence and freedom at length (Chapter 7). For the time being, an oversimplified example will have to suffice. 7 Consider two separate and completely independent chains of events. A wealthy man owns a large field. Having recently acquired a large stockpile of gold, and not trusting anyone else with his treasure, he buries it in his field. Twenty-five years go by, each day of which the miserly man worries and frets about his buried treasure; all this worrying raises his blood pressure, and one day the wealthy man tragically dies of a heart attack. Having no heirs, the property is seized by the government and sold in an auction to the highest bidder. This chain of events, from the burial of the wealthy man’s treasure to the eventual selling of his field, we shall call causal chain A. Now, as it so happens, the highest bidder is a man who makes his living by owning and operating cemeteries. This man happens to think that his newly purchased land would make a spectacular new burial ground, and he converts the rich man’s field into a cemetery. One day he is digging a grave when suddenly his shovel strikes metal, and the buried treasure is found. This chain of events, from the purchase of the field to the digging of a grave where the treasure was buried, we shall call causal chain B.

Now both of these causal chains were initiated independently of each other, and in both cases neither the wealthy man nor the gravedigger initiated his respective chain with any knowledge or intention that the digger of the grave should ultimately find the wealthy man’s buried treasure. The wealthy man buried the treasure out of avarice and fear; the gravedigger

7 The following example of a man who digs a grave and finds a buried treasure is one which Aquinas uses frequently when considering the nature of accidental events, or what we would call coincidences. When thinking about the compatibility of providence and human freedom, he also employs the metaphor of a master sending two servants on separate errands, all the while having directed them to meet, unbeknownst to them: “Thus, for instance, the meeting of two servants, although to them it appears a chance circumstance, has been fully foreseen by their master, who has purposely sent to meet at the one place, in such a way that the one knows not about the other.” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.22.2, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province [New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947]).
purchased the land to turn it into a cemetery and he dug a grave, selecting a location simply because it was the next available spot. This meeting of two independently initiated causal chains, of chains A and B, was accidental. Given the empirical facts – the chance meeting of two chains of cause and effect which led to the finding of the buried treasure – we would surely be right in calling this event a sheer coincidence, albeit a happy one for the gravedigger.

But now suppose that the gravedigger had a daughter who was dying from a curable illness, one which would require a substantial amount of money to treat, an amount which the gravedigger did not possess. And suppose that the gravedigger was a faithful Christian who had prayed for the means to pay for his daughters’ treatment. This fact would not in any way change our purely empirical assessment that the two independent causal chains A and B met by anything other than sheer coincidence. We can seemingly account for every cause and effect which led to this outcome without introducing a supernatural cause; the gravedigger would have found the treasure regardless of whether he had prayed or not, we insist. Yet the gravedigger would surely insist in turn that his finding of the buried treasure was an answer to his prayers, and that God had providentially arranged for him to find the treasure. Is this then an example of providence or of coincidence?

Whatever the answer is, it cannot possibly be given through empirical observation. For if someone were to insist that the meeting of these two causal chains was neither planned nor influenced by the wealthy man nor by the gravedigger, nor in fact by any other visible, exterior agent, and that therefore it was completely coincidental, the gravedigger would reply that, although it seems to be accidental, nevertheless God was at work here, and He providentially arranged for their meeting as an answer to his prayer. And many theologians and philosophers would agree that this would at least be a possible explanation, including Aquinas:
We must therefore say that what happens here by accident, both in natural things and human affairs, is reduced to a pre-ordaining cause, which is Divine Providence. For nothing hinders that which happens by accident being considered as one by an intellect: otherwise the intellect could not form this proposition: *The digger of a grave found a treasure*. And just as an intellect can apprehend this so can it affect it; for instance, someone who knows of a place where a treasure is hidden, might instigate a rustic, ignorant of this, to dig a grave there. Consequently, nothing hinders what happens here by accident, by luck or by chance, being reduced to some ordering cause which acts by the intellect, especially the Divine intellect. For God alone can change the will . . . .

The point here is that neither the believer nor the nonbeliever can point to the empirical evidence of a coincidence to “prove” that providence either exists or does not exist, as a hypothesis is proven by experiment and observation. Indeed, to the nonbeliever, no matter how remarkable a coincidence may seem, no matter how perfectly orchestrated by some supernatural cause an event may appear, it remains for him nothing more than a coincidence. Conversely, to the believer, no matter how unlucky a situation may seem, no matter how bad things may become, nothing can shake his faith that God is providentially arranging all things for the ultimate good, even if he cannot now see what that good will ultimately be. In fact, as far as the empirical evidence is concerned, reason leaves the question of God’s providential involvement in the world entirely open for faith to decide: there seems to be enough evidence of remarkable “coincidences” to support the claim of revelation that God providentially cares for His creation, but not enough to convince reason beyond a doubt that this is so, to compel reason to accept God’s providential involvement. The relationship between faith and reason on this issue turns out to be the one which Pascal has so poignantly described: “There is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition.” God gives enough light by reason for faith, but not so much that He strips man of the freedom needed to genuinely choose Him.

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8 *ST* I.116.1.
9 Pascal, pensée 149, p. 50.
So reason cannot use empirical evidence to scientifically prove the existence of providence (or foreknowledge, for that matter) – its existence must remain a matter of faith, given by revelation, and reinforced by the occurrence of remarkable “coincidences” which neither conclusively prove nor disprove the existence of providence, but which, when considered as a whole, provide enough light for a rational faith. Any attempt to scientifically demonstrate God’s providence will inevitably lead to failure. And yet this poses no threat to faith, for any attempt to scientifically prove otherwise will also fail.

Section 4: The Need for an Illuminating Metaphysics

If we cannot use reason to apply the scientific method to the questions of foreknowledge and providence, then what role should reason play in thinking about these problems? In other words, if the scientific method is the way not to think about God and human freedom, what is the way to think about God and human freedom? In the broadest sense, this question has already been answered: starting from the revealed data of God’s existence (and therefore of foreknowledge and providence) and the observable data of human freedom, reason can show their compatibility. In other words, reason can show that believing in divine foreknowledge and providence, as well as maintaining that human beings have free will, does not involve the believer in an inconsistency. Reason cannot provide the data for faith, nor can it replace the need for faith by scientifically demonstrating the existence of providence or foreknowledge. But it

10 This is the point made so dramatically and so memorably by Thornton Wilder in his classic story about providence, The Bridge of San Luis Rey. In the novella, a monk named of Brother Juniper witnesses the collapse of the most famous bridge in Peru, a tragedy which carried five people crossing the bridge to their deaths. At that moment, “It seemed to Brother Juniper that it was high time for theology to take its place among the exact sciences and he had long intended putting it there . . . . This collapse of the bridge of San Luis Rey was a sheer Act of God. It afforded a perfect laboratory. Here at least one could surprise His intentions in a pure state” (Wilder, 6). The result is pure failure, though not for lack of determination. It is only when the reader is granted access to the interior life of each of the five who fell, only when their stories are told from an omniscient point of view (a literally God-like perspective) that the reader sees the hidden providential reasons for the fall of the bridge of San Luis Rey.
can clear away the mental obstacles to that faith, obstacles such as questions about the compatibility of God and human freedom. And it does this not through natural science, but through philosophy; not through physics, but through metaphysics.

Before we can understand the relationship between God and human freedom, we must first have an adequate understanding of what these terms mean. In order to obtain this understanding, we must explore in depth some of the fundamental principles which underlie all being in general, and human beings in particular. But we must also investigate the principles which allow us to speak intelligently and consistently about a transcendent Creator of all being, and which allow us to consider how such a Creator stands in relation to the entire universe of created beings (including human beings) as an omniscient, omnipotent causal agent. What is needed is an exploration into the underlying principles of all being; what is need is an investigation of the principles which both define and illuminate the relationship between divine and human agency. In short, what is needed is an illuminating metaphysical foundation.
Laying the Metaphysical Foundation: The Thomistic Theory of Participation

*It must be said that every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation, must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially … Therefore it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be more or less perfect, are caused by one First Being, Who possesses being most perfectly.*

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS,
*Summa Theologica*, I.44.1

Section 1: The Study of Being: What is Metaphysics and Why is it Necessary?\(^1\)

Aristotle famously defined metaphysics as the study of being *qua* being, the study of being as such. Every other science and field of study first assumes the existence of being, of all the truly existent beings which form its data, and then proceeds with the business of studying a particular aspect of being. Thus, for example, biology takes for granted that its data (the world of living organisms) exist, and gets on with its study of how such beings exist (i.e. interact with each other, regulate internal processes, organize into groups, reproduce, etc).

But when we say that metaphysics is the study of being *qua* being we mean first of all that metaphysics, like all philosophy, is “a critically reflective, systematically articulated attempt to illumine our human experience[s] in depth … to search out their ultimate grounding or

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\(^1\) As it will quickly become apparent, much of what follows draws heavily upon the thought of W. Norris Clarke, S.J. in his book *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics*. The reasons for this are many, and not least among them is that “Norrie” is one of the wisest men I have ever met (and I have had the good fortune of meeting him twice). He describes *The One and the Many* as “an advanced textbook of systematic metaphysics in the Thomistic tradition, one which is alert not only to developments in Thomism but also to contemporary problems and other movements in philosophy.” The reason for depending so heavily upon Clarke’s metaphysical thought here is twofold: (1) He systematically explains and explores a “Thomistically inspired metaphysics” which preserves the very heart of Aquinas’ own thought (which, I will argue, is essential to understanding and ultimately answering the questions of God and human freedom), but nevertheless also dialogues with contemporary philosophy and science. (2) His thought has a pure ring of truth to it, and a metaphysical depth of understanding, which I find lacking in contemporary analytic philosophers of religion – and both of these are essential to tackling the problems at hand. (Cf. W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001], Introduction).
necessary conditions of possibility, their ultimate meaning, and their connections with the rest of reality.”² But metaphysics also takes up as its subject matter not this or that particular being or group of beings, not this or that particular aspect of reality, but rather all of being, all of existence as a whole. Whereas other sciences can take for granted the existence of their data, and then seek to illumine the mysterious way in which such beings exist and interact, metaphysics raises the peculiar and mysterious “question about everything … As Wittgenstein said, “Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystery.’’³

This metaphysical “question about everything” is not meant to invoke the angst-ridden, quintessentially modern and existential question whether anything exists; rather, metaphysics is simply a recognition of and exploration into all of existence as such, not the study of being under a particular mode or aspect such as we find in every other science. In this sense, metaphysics “goes beyond” the study of nature in its many forms (the term “metaphysics” comes from the Greek metá, “beyond” and physis, “nature”) and explores the underlying and universal properties, principles, and laws of all being as such. Norris Clarke explains:

[The work of metaphysics is] to discern the great universal properties, constitutive principles, and governing laws of all that is real, in a word, the laws of intelligibility of being as such, including how all real beings interrelate to form an intelligible whole, that is, a universum (the term “universe” comes from the Latin universum, which means “turned toward unity”). This is the meaning of the ancient classical definition of metaphysics descending from Aristotle—the first to explicitly define metaphysics—namely, ‘Metaphysics is the study of being qua being’ or being as such. Spelled out, this means the study of all beings precisely insofar as they are real, which means for St. Thomas actually existent.⁴

Because the scientific method will not ultimately shed any light upon the questions raised by considering the existence of God and human freedom, our method must be philosophical, an enterprise of reason which arrives at truth not through experimentation and observation, but

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² Clarke, 5.
⁴ Clarke, 6.
rather by reflecting logically upon the “great universal properties, constitutive principles, and governing laws” which ground the very possibility (or impossibility) of the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and providence with human freedom. In short, our method must be thoroughly metaphysical. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to systematically develop and defend a metaphysics from first principles; entire books, indeed entire libraries (not to mention entire lives), have been devoted to this enterprise.\textsuperscript{5} Nevertheless, the questions at hand cannot be answered without a valid understanding of the relationship between God and His creation, and in particular between God and human beings, an understanding which must of necessity be thoroughly metaphysical.

Take the question of providence, for example. Brian Shanley notes that the contrast between Aquinas’ deep confidence that God’s providential involvement in the world does not entail determinism, and the corresponding confidence of his critics that providence does, in fact, entail determinism, can only have one explanation – a fundamentally different metaphysics:

When Aquinas’ confidence on this point is contrasted to the corresponding confidence of his critics, it becomes clear that each side brings a quite different set of assumptions to bear upon its assessment of the issues. What this reveals is that ultimately it is the background understanding of the metaphysical relationship between God and the world that determines how the issue of divine determinism is resolved.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{5} Likewise, it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend metaphysics as a whole against the many strains of philosophy (Nominalism, Empiricism, Kantianism, Relativism, Logical Positivism, etc.) which seek or have sought in one form or another to deny the possibility of metaphysics. The best that can be done here is to mention that such denials are based upon arbitrary epistemology and take for granted their own metaphysical foundations: “It seems that all those who deny the possibility of metaphysics are implicitly committed to some metaphysical positions: (1) To deny metaphysics as the study of being they must start with a metaphysical stance in looking over the entire field of human knowing and its relation to reality; in a sense they start off as fellow metaphysicians, as Bradley, the English metaphysician, has acutely observed. (2) If they refuse to do metaphysics, they must all take for granted their own existence, that of other human beings, and the whole horizon of experience which are their data—the given—to be explained. . . . To sum up our discussion of objections against the possibility of a valid human metaphysics of real being, it turns out that all of them rest in the last analysis on some form of arbitrarily restrictive theory of knowledge.” (Clarke, 14). Again, whole books have been devoted to refuting the errors in such objections.

And this will likewise be precisely the case when we consider the issue of determinism (i.e. the lack of compatibility with human freedom, such that it destroys freedom) as it relates to foreknowledge: in every cases, it will be the “background understanding of the metaphysical relationship between God and the world” which will determine how the problem of determinism is solved and compatibility is shown.

Section 2: Metaphysical Co-principles

The radical discovery of metaphysical inquiry and reflection is that every dimension of being reveals itself to be both one and many at the same time.⁷ Thus, for example, metaphysical reflection leads to the realization that the act of existence itself is fundamentally one: all beings which really exist share in common the fact that they exist. Put another way, insofar as they exist at all, all beings share in the unifying similarity of their very existing. This is why we can intelligently talk about “being” in the singular to mean “all that really exists,” and why we say that there is only one universe. At the same time, however, while there is only one act of existence which unites all beings, and while there is only one universe of which all beings are a part, nevertheless there are many beings in that one universe.

But the unity and diversity in being does not end here. Certain groups of beings in the universe share a unifying similarity which runs deeper than the sheer fact that they all exist, and we acknowledge this newfound similarity with words such as “species” or “nature.” Consider, for example, a grove of orange trees: on the one hand, the grove is composed of many trees, each occupying its own space, having its own height, its own number of oranges, its own age, etc.; but

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⁷ This discovery is “radical” in the most etymologically correct sense of the word, from the Latin radix, which means “root,” “foundation.” Indeed, the question of the one and the many is so foundational to the history of philosophy that it occupied the whole, or nearly the whole, of pre-Socratic philosophical thought, and the question occupies a central place (whether explicitly or implicitly) in the two most influential and foundational philosophical systems in the history of philosophy, those of Aristotle and Neo-Platonism.
on the other hand the physical properties and individuality of each of these many trees in no way prevents us from acknowledging that they all share in common the one species of “orange tree,” a species which must be truly one because we can distinguish it from other species, such as that of “apple tree.”

Finally, even when we turn to reflect upon a particular, individual being within the universe, in other words when we consider one being, we find here also the presence of the many. This is so in two ways: (1) In addition to possessing one particular essence or nature, each being in the universe also possesses many accidental (non-essential) attributes. So, for instance, one man has many accidental attributes, such as skin color, height, weight, intelligence, etc; all of these remain diverse, yet they are all somehow truly united in his one being. (2) Each particular being which exists in the universe also exists in time, and this means that every being somehow maintains its one identity through each successive moment of time. But each being also undergoes many accidental changes in the course of time, changes which really take place, but which also do not cause the loss of individual identity. When an apple ripens on the branch, changing color from green to red, there is a real change occurring, a many-ness in color which takes place over time. But there is also a one-ness, for the now red apple is not a completely different apple than the green apple – rather it is the same apple which has changed color.

Now when it becomes clear that on every level of being there is both unity and diversity, and that this remains true whether we consider multiple beings or just one being in particular, or whether we consider being in a static state or as changing through time, then metaphysics is in a position to discern the principles which make such similarity and dissimilarity possible. It does so by reasoning that this diversity-in-unity could not be possible at all unless each real being

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8 Clarke refers to these two relationships between the one and the many in individual beings as (1) “the one possessing the many” and (2) “the one perduring through the many” (Clarke, 154).
“were made up of an inner metaphysical composition of two really distinct, i.e., objectively irreducible (not separable), metaphysical co-principles . . . : one the principle of similarity, the other the principle of dissimilarity.”

These metaphysical co-principles of similarity and dissimilarity manifest themselves in different ways depending upon what “level” of being we are considering. So, when we consider the similarity and diversity within all the beings in the universe as a whole, we can explain the one and the many on this level through the metaphysical co-principles of existence and essence: all beings share the same fundamental act of existence, but each individual being is unique because of its own special essence. Or again, when we consider the “narrower” similarity and diversity of beings which exist within a particular species, we can explain the one and the many on this level through the metaphysical co-principles of form and matter: qualitatively, all members of a species share in the same essential form which unites them under that species; quantitatively each member occupies its own space and time, allowing for a diverse, multiple manifestation of the same form. And finally, when we consider the similarity and diversity which co-exist within one being, a fact which makes itself known because the being endures accidental change while remaining the same being, we can explain the one and the many on this level through the metaphysical co-principles of substance and accident: the self-identity of a being which endures through change is that being’s substance, and its accidents are all those aspects of the being which can change without the loss of that being’s very identity.

Section 3: “Metaphysical Fallacy”

9 Clarke, 81.
10 Substance and accident, of course, only account for accidental change, like the change of the thickness of a tree’s trunk over time which is caused by internal growth. In order to account for essential change, such as the change of a tree trunk into ashes caused by fire, we must again make use of the metaphysical co-principles of form and matter. In this case, far from being an accidental change, there is a complete destruction of the very substance of the tree, and its matter is transformed by an overpowering force (fire) into a new form, in this case smoke and ash.
At this point it would be prudent to stop and to inquire what this difficult, abstract, and seemingly tangential journey into metaphysics has to do with the questions at hand, and why such a foray was made in the first place. First of all, we should recognize that, if there was to be any background discussion of metaphysics at all (no matter how general), it would of necessity be difficult in its content and systematic in its approach. There are, however, at least three very practical outcomes of this inquiry which will have a direct bearing upon how the ultimate compatibility of God and human freedom can be understood: (1) the direct use of metaphysical co-principles to solve problems which will be encountered; (2) the recognition and avoidance of a particularly common “metaphysical fallacy”; and (3) the foundation for a metaphysics of participation.

The first of these outcomes is very clear: at times it will be necessary to make reference to such co-principles as those of essence/existence, form/matter, and substance/accident in order to solve particular difficulties. And even where these co-principles in particular are not explicitly used, the metaphysical method has been introduced, and this will be invaluable when subsequent metaphysical issues arise (such as the nature of cause and effect, or the relationship between time and eternity).

The second reason for discussing metaphysics in general and metaphysical co-principles in particular is that it will hopefully head-off a common and destructive error: the often unnoticed (and therefore unchecked) reliance upon images conjured up by the imagination when trying to think about the relationship between transcendence and immanence, for example, or the interaction of two purely immaterial wills (both of which will play key roles later in showing the ultimate compatibility of God and human freedom). Such concepts or spiritual powers are not material beings, and thus cannot possibly be physically sensed. Therefore, they cannot be
accurately represented to the intellect through images (since images rely upon the senses for their content, whether that content is presently experienced or recalled from memory) without radical distortion and misrepresentation. If we insist upon using images in such cases, we must recognize that they can only be used as analogies, and even then only insofar as the analogy serves to approximate some deeper reality. Every analogy breaks down at some point – that is why it is an analogy, and not the thing itself.

This error, while it is not a logical fallacy, is a version of what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness,” the fallacy of treating a purely mental concept as a real, concrete being in the world. We can expand the insight which the fallacy of misplaced concreteness here provides by insisting that any treatment of a particular being which does not take into account that being’s mode of existence commits a “metaphysical fallacy,” and that this holds true whether we are considering real beings (things), mental beings (ideas), or metaphysical co-principles. This last category of metaphysical co-principles has been included because of its unique status and nature within being, and because of the disastrous effects for metaphysics which result if this nature is misunderstood (as it has been in the past and often continues to be today by contemporary philosophers). Clarke explains:

[The] distinct reality [of metaphysical co-principles] must be less than that of a complete being or thing, but rather that of two mutually correlative co-principles or co-constituents, each incomplete by itself, within the enveloping unity of the one complete being, distinct but inseparable. . . . This kind of composition or polarity within a real being has been given the technical name in Thomistic metaphysics of a real metaphysical composition (i.e., not physical parts, because the two co-principles must interpenetrate). This composition is real, between really distinct principles, because they are contraries and irreducible one to the other. But they are less than the strong real distinction between two complete beings, because that would destroy the unity of the real beings that are the data to be explained. . . . One must always, however, guard against the danger of hardening up the real composition of co-principles, through a heavy-handed logic, to become a composition between two things, which destroys its effectiveness.11

11 Clarke, 82.
This danger of “hardening up the real composition of co-principles” is not only an abstract and
distant “metaphysical fallacy” which we must work hard to recognize and avoid in the course of
this paper, but is also a past and present reality in many philosophical systems of thought which
has spread much error and has led to a loss of genuine metaphysical inquiry and advance.\textsuperscript{12}

Section 4: Participation, Act and Potency

The third and most important reason for exploring metaphysics and metaphysical co-
principles, however, is that such an exploration paves the way for a metaphysical understanding
of the relationship between God and all created beings, an understanding which depends upon
the metaphysical theory of participation given to us by Aquinas. The benefits of the Thomistic
theory of participation (a Neo-Platonic doctrine Aquinas brilliantly synthesized with Aristotelian
concepts of essence and existence) will become evident as we explore and explain exactly what
Aquinas’ participatory metaphysics entails. It should be noted at this point, however, that the
reasons for adopting Aquinas’ metaphysical scheme are many: it unites what is best in the two
great metaphysical systems, those of Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists; it provides a new and
fruitful means of expressing and understanding the various metaphysical compositions under the
cooprinciples of act and potency; it is consistent with the revealed doctrine of creation, providing
a deeper understanding to faith by presenting a metaphysical conception of creation as God
actively sharing his pure unlimited existence with many other limited, created beings; and finally
it allows for an analogous understanding of being which can extend even to God’s very

\textsuperscript{12} Beginning in earnest with William of Ockham and Nominalism during the early 14\textsuperscript{th} century, the metaphysically
destructive and arbitrarily limiting epistemology which resulted from what I have here called “metaphysical fallacy”
has continued to this day under many forms. Not the least of these is contemporary analytical philosophy of
religion, which has its genesis in logical positivism. The main danger of such philosophy (even when it remains
faithful to Revelation) is that by throwing out metaphysics it has eliminated the only means by which it could
possibly answer the questions it poses, such as questions about the compatibility of God and human freedom.
existence, providing the means by which we can speak truly and positively about God, while also maintaining His utter and complete transcendence. These benefits provided by Thomas’ metaphysical theory of participation, while at this point distant and not yet fully explained, will prove especially crucial when considering the attributes of God, when exploring His creation of and relationship to all being, and when ultimately demonstrating the compatibility of divine agency and human freedom.13

In order to understand this central metaphysical theme of participation (even in its broadest sense) we must first briefly turn our attention to a composition in being which we have not yet explored: the metaphysical co-principles of act and potency. Thus far the metaphysical co-principles we have listed (essence/existence, form/matter, substance/accident) have been static compositions in beings; by contrast, the act/potency composition is the result of an inquiry into the dynamic nature of being. First posited by Aristotle, act and potency are technical metaphysical co-principles which explain the existence and possibility of observable change in the universe of real beings.

When he set out to analyze the nature and metaphysical structure of change, Aristotle was faced with alternative theories of being and becoming which had been debated at length by pre-Socratic philosophers. Most characteristic of this debate were Parmenides and Heraclitus, early philosophers who represented the opposite poles of thought concerning the nature of change: Parmenides believed that being is unchanging, and that all becoming or ceasing to be is illusory; Heraclitus, on the other hand, argued that everything in the universe is in constant flux.

13 It should not, of course, be thought that Aquinas’ theory of participation is here being adopted because of the benefits which result, benefits which are favorable for the project of this paper. The only honest reason for adopting a Thomistic metaphysics, indeed the only honest reason for adopting any philosophical position, is because it is true (and not merely because it is expedient). Furthermore, the term “benefits” is perhaps misleading, since these results flow directly from his metaphysics of participation, which is the result of careful and open inquiry, not of “reasoning backward” from an intended result to a favorable starting position. If the implications of participation are that it is compatible with Revelation, that it grounds the compatibility of God and human freedom, etc., then this is simply more evidence of its truth, since it accounts for more of both experienced reality and divinely revealed truth.
that there is nothing but change (“You cannot step twice into the same river, for other rivers and yet others go ever flowing on”).\textsuperscript{14} Into this debate stepped Aristotle with his unparalleled clarity of thought and acute ability to analyze the metaphysical co-principles underlying common occurrences – in this case, the experienced reality of both being \textit{and} becoming. The result was a theory of change explained through act and potency which left an indelible mark upon the course of philosophical history and development, a theory that was taken up by Aquinas (and subsequently expanded, as we shall see).

As Aristotle observed, the very meaning of change entails two things: difference and permanence. On the one hand, a being must be different in some way at the end of the change than it was at the beginning (otherwise no change took place at all). To put this in more technical terminology, in every change there must be a transition between two different modes or states of being: “Aristotle . . . called these terminal modes or states actualities—which became simplified into the technical term \textit{act}—to signify the actual here and now state of being, which is actually the case at any one point in the process, before or after.”\textsuperscript{15}

On the other hand, in every change there must be some permanence, some principle of continuity, which is involved in the transition between the two different states of being. If this were not so then there would be no transition between two states, but rather the complete annihilation of the first state of being, and then the sudden, unconnected and unexplained existence of the second state. Such an occurrence is not logically impossible, but it destroys the very meaning of change, and it also contradicts our entire experience of change:

Thus when we observe ourselves . . . first in an angry mood, then slowly calming down and finally smiling, we would have to say that at each discernable moment of the change the previous human being – myself – was totally annihilated, wiped out of existence without remainder, and then at the next moment totally created

\textsuperscript{14} Heraclitus, “Fragment 21,” in Wheelwright, 71.
\textsuperscript{15} Clarke, 116.
out of nothing again! But I am clearly aware of myself as going through these phases and remaining the same self all the while. This would be a total falsehood, an illusion! The meaning of memory or any sense to personal development, story, would also disappear.\textsuperscript{16}

Because of the absurdities which would result if there were no principle of permanence involved in all change, Aristotle concluded that change, in addition to relying upon the principle of difference which he called \textit{act}, was also made possible by a principle of permanence which he called \textit{potential}, and which is known technically as \textit{potency}. And he called this principle \textit{potential or potency} because such a term served to indicate “that the principle of continuity was a capacity, an aptitude, for receiving this new mode of being.”\textsuperscript{17}

Here, then, we have discovered the fundamental meaning of and explanation for the metaphysical composition of act/potency on its most basic level:

\begin{quote}
At any moment in a process of change the being is a synthesis of act and potency—of present actuality and potential openness to future acts—a potency partially actualized by its present act, but still open, in potency, to all further actualities open to it according to the nature and limits of its capacity.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

It should also be noted here that the term \textit{act} has two meanings which are, in some sense, related. In addition to the technical use of the term which means “actuality” and which is one of two co-principles underlying all change (the other of which is potency), \textit{act} is also used in its more familiar sense to mean “action” (as in an action which is performed by some agent). These two uses of the term are related because every action is actual, actually causing change in some way.

\textbf{Section 5: The Metaphysical Primacy of \textit{Esse}, the Act of Existence}

\textsuperscript{16} Clarke, 116.  
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 117.  
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 118.
When Aquinas approached metaphysics, he did so not only by incorporating the very best of the two great metaphysical systems which were known at his time (those of Neo-Platonism and of Aristotle), he also allowed the truth of Revelation to influence and guide his philosophy. And in Christian Revelation there were two points which had enormous import for metaphysics: the doctrine of Creation *ex nihilo*, and the divinely revealed name, the sacred *tetragrammaton*, revealed by God to Moses in the book of Exodus: “I am who am.” Meditating upon these twin revelations, taking them as clues which would enlighten the entire structure of metaphysics, Aquinas transformed the notion of existence as it had previous been understood in past metaphysical systems. Previously, metaphysical primacy had been given to the essence of beings, and existence was largely conceived of as a property which beings possessed. But Aquinas interpreted the divinely revealed identity “I am” to mean that existence is the ultimate source and summit of reality, the fundamental act and source of perfection which underlies all other actions. For the first time, existence took metaphysical primacy over essence and over subsequent actions. Aquinas expressed this primacy by equating existence, not with a property of being, but rather with the first act which lies at the core of every being:

> It is here that Aquinas reaches for analogies with Aristotle’s introduction of the notion of act (or actuality) in *Metaphysics* 9.6 (1048a25-b36), proposing that if existing may not be a feature of things, it may be understood as their most fundamental act—prior to and presupposed as the cause of any activity on the part of the thing itself.¹⁹

This act of existence which all real beings share Aquinas calls *esse*. And he labels *esse* the first act of being to emphasize its metaphysical primacy over all the subsequent actions by which a real being interacts with the universe. Now it is true that such actions are essential to the entire metaphysical project. Every being in the universe can only be known through its actions, through the effect it has upon other beings; if a being in no way acted upon us, in no way

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revealed its presence to us, then not only would we never know its essence, but it might as well not even exist for us. For how would we know of its existence, if it in no way made itself known through an action upon us? In this sense, action is a property of all beings (even if that action amounts to nothing more than a stone reflecting light or being present to stub my toe), and it is a property which reveals the very essence of a being: “It is in the nature of every act to communicate itself as far as possible.” But every self-revealing action which a being performs first depends upon the actual existence of that being, because if it did not first exist, then it could not perform an action. This is what Aquinas means when he says: “Active [power] follows upon being in act [esse], for a thing acts [action] in consequence of its being in act [esse].” Thus we may express the metaphysical primacy of esse by stating that every action of a being follows upon its existence: “As the common medieval adage expressed it, agere sequitur esse [to act follows to be]. As St. Thomas expresses it with technical precision: existence is the first act of a real being, action its second act, flowing immediately from the first.”

Section 6: The Central Theme of Participation in Thomistic Metaphysics

Once we have understood esse as the first and most fundamental act of being, we are at last in a position to understand the central theme of participation which illuminates the whole of Thomistic metaphysics. Because esse is the first act (or actuality) which underlies all other actualities and actions, Aquinas equates it with perfection, since only that which actually possesses a particular attribute can be said to be perfect with respect to that attribute:

Every perfection of any being whatsoever belongs to it according to its act of existence (suum esse). For no perfection would belong to a man from his wisdom

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21 SCG 2.7.3.
22 Clarke, 33.
unless he actually is wise, and so of all other attributes. Therefore according to the mode in which a thing has existence is its mode of perfection.23

The mode of perfection of a being is directly relative to the mode of existence in that being: the more actual it is, the more perfect it is. It therefore follows that esse itself, the act of existence in which all real creatures and actions in some way participate, is most perfect in and by itself:

“That which I call esse (the act of existence, the to-be of things) is that which is most perfect . . . the actuality of all acts and because of this the perfection of all perfections . . . . For nothing can be added on to esse that is extraneous to it, since there is nothing outside of it save non-being.”24

Thus far we have seen how Aquinas has expanded the original Aristotelian meaning of act beyond its role as a co-principle explaining the dynamic structure of being which allows for change in the universe. Act for Thomas (and for us) has become a metaphysical principle which now includes the primary act of existence. In fact, because esse is the root of all perfection, and because this act of existence is the first act at the core of all being, Aquinas expands the metaphysical principle of act further to mean any and every actual perfection within being. But just as act was a co-principle with potency when this metaphysical composition was necessary to explain change, so too here is the entire act-potency composition expanded along with the new expansive meaning given to act. Pure act in itself is unlimited perfection, but in all real beings in the created universe this pure actuality of existence is limited into a finite mode of being. Aquinas redefines potency as the metaphysical principle which limits pure actuality into each and every finite being which exists in the universe, thus expanding the act-potency composition and transforming the relationship between these two metaphysical co-principles:

[Aquinas] expanded the original Aristotelian meaning of act-potency as an explanation of change alone by redefining potency as any principle that receives and limits an actual perfection to some finite mode, whether this is a structure of

23 SCG 1.28 (trans. Clarke, 90).
24 DP 7.2.9 (trans. Clarke, 89).
change or not. His fundamental theorem of the relationship of potency to act now becomes: “Act is not limited save by reception into some distinct limiting potency.” Thus pure act of itself is by nature unlimited, as happens in the pure act of esse in God.25

There is an immediate and important outcome resulting from this new act-potency structure which transforms our entire metaphysical understanding of the universe into one of participation: the metaphysical compositions which were employed to explain the presence of the one and the many found on every level of being (essence/existence, matter/form, substance/accidents) can now all be understood through the formula of a limiting potency which allows for a diverse participation of many beings in some actual perfection. Thus essence can be re-understood as a limiting potency which allows an entire universe of beings to participate, in a finite way, in the “all-embracing perfection of actual existence.”26 Or again, matter should now be viewed as a limiting principle which gives “quantitative order of spatial extension” to every member of a particular species or universal form.27 And finally, substance can now be understood as a potency which receives and limits “the whole range of accidental perfections open to successive participation by this particular kind of being.”28 In other words, the entire structure of being first had to be analyzed and understood on its many levels through a number of diverse co-principles which were necessary in order to explain both the one and the many. But that same structure of being has now been synthesized into a unified whole through the relationship of potency to act as a relationship of diverse participation in actual perfection:

What St. Thomas has done, therefore, in his synthesis of what seemed to him best in both Aristotle and Neoplatonism, is take from Neoplatonism the basic structure of participation, pour into it the “new wine” of his own doctrine of the act of existence as the core of all perfection, diversely participated in by limiting essence (form and matter), and transpose the whole into the Aristotelian

25 Clarke, 157 (emphasis added).
26 Ibid., 86.
27 Ibid., 157.
28 Ibid.
relationship of potency to act to ensure the intrinsic unity of all three resulting compositions—existence-essence, form-matter, accident-substance—needed to render intelligible all the ways that reality manifests itself as both one and many.\(^{29}\)

At this point we, as amateur metaphysicians, might be tempted to believe that we have come to the end of our metaphysical inquiry, having not only analyzed the particular internal compositions which make possible the unity and diversity we discovered on every level of being, but also having synthesized all of these compositions together under the structure of participation in actual perfection by means of limiting potency. But we would be wrong, for there is yet another way in which the universe of beings manifests itself as a universe of participation. We must not forget that, as a theologian, Aquinas allowed Revelation to inform his metaphysics, and that this was especially true of the doctrine of Creation and the sacred self-revelation of God as “I am who am.” Under the act-potency structure of being, each particular creature’s essence is best understood as a limiting participation in the perfection of actual existence. And pure esse, pure act of existence unlimited by any potency, is ultimate and complete perfection (because any potency in a being means finitude and imperfection, the lack of an actual perfection). But only God is infinite fullness and perfection; any being which is in some way finite or imperfect is not a being which we would call God. Therefore it follows of necessity that God, lacking no perfection, must be pure esse, identical with His act of existence, and limited in no way by a finite essence. In a sudden moment of realization, it now becomes clear what the divine self-revelation “I am who am” means: God is His own existence, the pure and infinite actuality of unlimited and perfect esse.\(^{30}\)

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 158.

\(^{30}\) This is the conclusion of the fourth article of the third question of the first part of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, when he considers “Whether essence and existence are the same in God?” The existence, essence, and attributes of God shall be taken up at much greater length in the following chapter.
God is not only the perfect possessor of unlimited *esse*, however. He is also the source of all being in the universe, the Creator of all creation, who gives to His creatures not only their individual and differentiating essences, but also their very existence. But remember that the limiting essence of each creature is what allows that creature to participate in the one “all embracing perfection of actual existence,” a perfection which God realizes in its full actuality without any limiting essence. Astonishingly, what this means is that while remaining completely transcendent to creation, nevertheless God does share with His creatures, in their various limited modes, His own fullness of being. In other words, *every* creature, because of its participation in actual existence through its limiting essence, can in some way be said to be made in the very image and likeness of God Himself:

Thus the best way to think of the whole universe of real beings as both one and many is from the *point of view of God*, the infinite fullness of pure unlimited existence, and the one ultimate source of all being, as actively intending and willing to share, to communicate, his own fullness of being with many other limited beings, each according to its own limited degree or capacity (essence), each corresponding to a distinct *idea* or plan in the mind of God for sharing his own unitary fullness with many.\(^{31}\)

The central theme of participation in Thomistic metaphysics has not only achieved a synthetic metaphysical unity under which the various co-principles in being can be joined and understood, it has also provided a much deeper understanding of revelation, illuminating the pure actuality of God’s existence as well as His “ontological generosity” in communicating that *esse* to creatures through the act of Creation. In turn, the very fact that *esse* is not only shared by all creatures in various finite modes, but is also possessed by God in its fullest and most pure sense, means that it is possible to consider the relationship between God, who completely transcends the created order, and human beings, who are limited and finite creatures within the universe. For both God and human beings share in the fact that they actually exist, although they

\(^{31}\) Clarke, 87.
possess this existence in extremely different (and merely analogous) ways: one is the ultimate and perfect Possessor and Source of all *esse*; the other is a creature who participates in *esse* through a limiting and finite essence. It is the ultimate Source of *esse*, the Possessor of perfection and the Creator of creation, whom we shall now explore at greater length.
God and His Attributes

How weak are words, and how unfit to frame
My concept – which lags after what was shown
So far, ‘twould flatter it to call it lame!

Eternal light, that in Thyself alone
Dwelling, alone dost know Thyself, and smile
On Thy self-love, so knowing and so known!

Dante,
Paradiso, XXXIII. 121-126

Section 1: Thinking about God

Natural theology is that discipline of philosophy which is concerned with proving (or disproving), on the basis of reason alone, the existence of God as well as arguing for (or against) particular attributes which He possesses. The term ‘natural theology,’ Anthony Kenny explains, is meant to contrast those concepts which are known by reason alone with those known by revelation: “The concept emerged in an age in which theologians, reflecting on what they believed, made a distinction between those elements which they thought could be established by unaided reason and those parts they thought due to supernatural revelation of God.”¹ Because natural theology is undertaken by reason alone, it falls into the realm of philosophy. And because the philosophical enterprise entails argumentation and debate, natural theology has become the subject of much debate – in fact, it is safe to say that no philosophical debate has proved as important, as heated, or as perennial as the debate over God’s existence and attributes.

It is the purpose of this paper to enter into one small aspect of that debate, considering and defending the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and providence with human freedom.

However, it lies beyond the scope of this paper (as well as beyond the scope of the present chapter) to enter much further into the realm of natural theology than is necessary to show the compatibility of God and human freedom. Thus, for example, while this chapter considers God and His attributes, it will not attempt to prove the existence of God, nor will it attempt to refute arguments which purport to show that any traditional account of God’s attributes leads to inconsistency. These tasks shall be left to much better philosophers and theologians, those both living and dead (the greatest of whom, St. Thomas Aquinas, took up such tasks with every word he wrote). The burden of this present chapter is not to prove the existence of God, nor to conclusively deduce or derive His attributes, but rather to present and explain the attributes which have been traditionally ascribed to Him and which make possible His foreknowledge and providence. Likewise, the ultimate aim of this paper is not to prove that God possesses these attributes (although, of course, I think that there are good reasons for believing that He does), but rather to prove that the attributes and actions traditionally attributed to the theistic, Judeo-Christian God are compatible with human freedom. It is, to be sure, a small and humble undertaking, but it is an important one nonetheless, both for theoretical philosophy and theology, as well as for everyday, existential human experience.

The task of enumerating and explaining the various divine attributes is a relatively straightforward one, and as such it occupies the latter half of this chapter. What is much more difficult is to understand how it is possible to speak meaningfully about God, the transcendent Source of all Being, Whom we have seen is the pure actuality of existence limited in no way by a finite essence. While our metaphysical investigation into being ultimately led to this conclusion, and while God’s pure act of existence is the very foundation of His perfection and the fount of

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2 Such as the thesis explicitly maintained by Kenny in *The God of the Philosophers* that simultaneously ascribing to God all of His traditional attributes leads to incoherency and inconsistency.
esse which has been generously communicated to His creatures, nevertheless the fact that God’s existence transcends any limiting form or essence poses a significant problem for the human mind: how can the mind, which can only form a mental concept of a real being by abstracting and understanding the essence of that thing, form a mental concept of God? The answer, of course, is one which all or nearly all philosophers and theologians are agreed upon: we simply cannot form a mental concept of God. Aquinas elucidates the dilemma we face in trying to understand God: “By its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing what it is.”3 Because God is pure actuality, existence unlimited by a finite essence, we can know that God is, but we cannot know what He is. The unique and infinite mode of God’s existence lies far beyond our ability to comprehend it.

But, of course, even though it is metaphysically and epistemologically impossible for us to comprehend what God is, both revelation and natural theology alike nevertheless go ahead and make statements which seem to tell us precisely this. Take these words from the First Letter of John: “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”4 Or (moving from revelation to theology) Aquinas, after insisting that we are unable to comprehend God’s essence, proceeds to dedicate question after question in his Summa Theologica to understanding precisely this: “When the existence of a thing [in this case, God] has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence.”5 In the course of this inquiry, he arrives at such conclusions about God’s mode of existence as: God is simple, God is perfect, God is omniscient, God is omnipotent, God is good, etc. And we, too, want to maintain that, in addition to whatever other attributes are proper to God, He is also omniscient,

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4 1 John 4.8 (emphasis added).
5 ST I.3, Prologue.
omnipotent, for these divine attributes underlie His foreknowledge and providence respectively. How, then, are we to understand these claims about the nature of God, when it has just been maintained that we cannot comprehend the divine essence?

Section 2: Divine Language and the *Via Negativia*

One approach to the problem of meaningfully talking about the divine attributes is to use language which tells us not what God is, but rather says what God is not. This is the *via negativa*, the “‘negative way’” commended to us by various ancient, medieval, and modern philosophers and theologians alike who, in their admirable insistence upon the absolute transcendence of God from all of His creatures, maintain that we can say nothing positive about God, but can only speak about Him through the use of negative language. The best we can do is to maintain that “God is ‘above being, non-being, non-personal or above personal, non-knowing, non-material, non-finite,’ etc., the Mystery beyond all human words and ideas that can only be pointed to in silence or in metaphor.”

Such thinkers point out that all of the attributes which we seem to predicate positively of God are derived in the first place from the attributes of creatures which are accessible to us, and they are right in pointing this out. When we say that God is wise, for instance, it is not because we observe this wisdom in God Himself, but rather because we see it manifest in the ordering of creation, in the same way that we see the wisdom of Socrates manifest in the ordering of his statements and arguments. But, these thinkers insist, there can be no similarity whatsoever between the use of such concepts when applied to creatures, and the use of such concepts when applied to God. So, for example, we say that Socrates is wise. And we also say that God is wise. The term “wise,” is not being employed here in a *univocal* sense. A univocal use of a term

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6 Clarke, 53.
occurs when that term is predicated of two or more subjects with exactly the same meaning, such as when hydrogen and oxygen are both said to be elements. Now, whatever it means to say that God is wise, it cannot mean exactly the same thing as saying that Socrates is wise, for Socrates is a limited and finite creature who possesses wisdom in a limited and finite way.

The proponents of negative theology conclude from the foregoing that those terms which are predicated positively both of creatures and of God are predicated *equivocally*, which is to say that they are predicated of their subjects with completely unrelated meanings (such as when a dog is said to have a bark and a tree is said to have bark). Thus Moses Maimonides, the famous medieval Jewish philosopher and theologian, and proponent of the *via negativa*, insists upon the utter transcendence of God beyond the concepts and terms which we are able to apply to Him in a merely equivocal sense:

> Those who are familiar with the meaning of similarity will certainly understand that the term Existence . . . Wisdom, Power, Will and Life are applied to God and other things with perfect equivocity. . . . There is no way or sense anything common to the attributes predicated of God and ourselves: they have only the same names and nothing else is common to them.7

This sort of negative approach to talking about God has much to recommend it, since if we cannot say what God is, it is surely the next best thing to be able to say what He is not, to distinguish Him from anything which would limit and make finite His absolute and infinite existence. In fact, many of the traditional attributes predicated of God are a result of this sort of negative approach: God is eternal, which literally means that He is outside of time, He is *not* in time, He has no beginning or end; God is simple, which is another way of saying that God is *not* a composite of essence and existence, matter and form, or body and soul; God is immutable, which means that he does *not* change; and so on. And this seems to be the approach which Aquinas explicitly takes in the *Summa Theologica* when he begins to explore God’s essence:

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“Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not. . . . Now it can be shown how God is not, by denying of Him whatever is opposed to the idea of Him.”

Ultimately, however, the use of purely negative language with respect to God proves impossible to maintain with consistency. The impossibility lies not just in an existential failure on the part of the worshipper to refrain from attributing something positive to God (such as knowledge, power, or love, for example), but in a number of fundamental flaws which are inherent in a consistent via negativa which introduces no positive elements. In the first place, this sort of negative theology fails to make use of analogy, a category of relation which has deep metaphysical underpinnings in Aquinas’ concepts of esse and participation. The enormous difference which analogy makes will be explored in the next section.

On a much more fundamental and practical note, however, it seems that certain attributes which have traditionally been ascribed to God cannot be the result of pure negation. Surely “omnipotent” has some positive content, some meaning which goes beyond “not lacking power.” The meanings of such terms as “omniscient” (all-knowing), “omnipotent” (all-powerful), and “omnibenevolent” (all-good) seem to suggest something both negative and positive: in each case it is true that there is a negation of any limitation in the possession of the attribute; at the same time, if the attribute is to have any meaning whatsoever, it seems clear that we must also make the positive assertion that God actually does possess the attribute (although in an unlimited way).

Lastly, while it is true that the terms predicated of both God and creatures cannot be predicated univocally, nevertheless maintaining that our understanding of the proposition “God is wise” must be wholly unlike our understanding of the proposition “Socrates is wise” (because the term “wise” must be employed equivocally) is tantamount to saying that, when applied to

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8 ST I.3, Prologue.
God, the term “wise” is an empty term, lacking any recognizable content whatsoever. Brian Davies, quoting Aquinas, clearly points out this flaw which is implicitly involved in reducing all terms predicated of both God and creatures to equivocal terms:

If words applied to God and to creatures always mean something entirely different, then there is little point in talking of God at all since we will then have absolutely no criteria for applying particular terms to God. . . . Terms cannot be applied to God and to creatures equivocally. For if they were so applied, they would just lack content. As Aquinas himself puts it . . . : “A name is predicated of some being uselessly unless through that name we understand something of the being. But, if names are said of God and creatures in a purely equivocal way, we understand nothing of God through those names; for the meanings of those names are known to us solely to the extent that they are said of creatures. In vain, therefore, would it be said or proved of God that He is a being, good, or the like” (Summa Contra Gentiles I, 33, 6).\(^9\)

Section 3: Positive Attribution and the Role of Analogy

The dilemma which we now seem to be facing is one of language: if a positive term can be applied to both God and creatures in neither a univocal nor an equivocal way, how can positive terms be applied to God? The answer lies in understanding and making use of a third way of predicating similar terms of different subjects: analogy. An analogous term is any term which “lies between the univocal and the equivocal, i.e., it occurs when the same term is applied to several different subjects according to a meaning that is partly the same, partly different in each case, e.g., “strength of muscles, strength of an argument, strength of will.”\(^10\) There are a number of different types of analogy, but the only type which concerns us here is known as “analogy of proportionality.” Clarke explains what is meant by this type of analogy:

This type is found when a term is predicated of several subjects in order to express some proportional similarity between them: e.g., “A worm knows; a human being knows; God knows.” Note that the similarity expressed is not directly between two essences or natures as such, which in themselves are just different, but between their respective activities, what they do, as somehow truly

\(^9\) Brian Davies, Thinking about God (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 139-140.
\(^10\) Clarke, 45.
similar, while at the same time these natures are quite different in how they exercise this activity.¹¹

The metaphysical conclusion which should be drawn from reflecting upon the analogy of proportionality, argues Clarke, is that the bond of similarity which links together ontologically different subjects under one analogous term is action: “The analogous term thus signifies a similar type of activity going on in each, but carried out by each agent-subject in its own distinctive way, according to the structure and capacities proper to its own essence or nature.”¹²

When we couple our newfound analogy of proportionality with the complex metaphysics of participation outlined and explained in the previous chapter, we at last hold the key to understanding and affirming positive attributes of God. For, as we saw when considering the metaphysical structure of participation, while God utterly transcends the limited essences or modes of existence which define every other being in the universe, nevertheless each and every being shares with its Creator (in a limited, different, and thus analogous way) the supremely positive act of existence. Esse, the act of existence, can thus be predicated of both God and His creatures by means of analogy of proportionality: the act of existence is something truly similar in both God and His creatures, but the mode or manner of this act remains completely and utterly different, defined and understood in creatures by their essence, but utterly transcendent and incomprehensible in God. And the same holds true for all of the other positive attributes of God: “They are all predicated according to the analogy of proper proportionality, i.e., they signify some activity (in the broadest sense) that is similar in God and creatures but without specifying the mode of performing the action proper to the particular subject, whether God or creature.”¹³

¹¹ Clarke, 47.
¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid., 54.
What this amounts to saying is that we can now confidently and properly predicate positive attributes of God, as long as we remember that these attributes are being predicated analogously, and that they are not saying something about the divine form or essence, but rather about the divine activity. While we can say *that* God is wise, for example, we cannot understand *how* He is wise, and we can be sure that in whatever manner or mode God acts wisely, it is a mode which infinitely transcends the limited and finite manner in which Socrates is said to be wise: “certain words can signify something that is really in God, … we can understand something of what is signified by these words, and yet … the way in which God is as he is said to be is not something we can understand.”¹⁴ In this there should be some recognition of a point made previously, namely that while we can say *that* God exists, we cannot understand *how* He exists, i.e., we cannot comprehend His mode of existence. Analogy of proportionality (which makes it possible to speak positively and meaningfully of God’s attributes while simultaneously preserving His transcendence) finds its parallel, on the metaphysical level, in the doctrine of participation (in which God is said to communicate to creatures His own pure act of esse while simultaneously transcending their limiting essences).

We are now in a position to outline a systematic approach to discovering and affirming positive attributes of God. Clarke identifies this approach as the “classic Triple Way pioneered by Pseudo-Dionysius and refined systematically by St. Thomas and other medievals” and outlines the following three steps.¹⁵ (1) *Affirmation of the similitude between every creature and God:* this step recognizes the metaphysical principle that every effect must, in some way, resemble its cause, because it is the result of the cause. This is all the more true in the case of God, who gives form, matter, and even *esse* itself to His creatures in the act of creation *ex nihilo.*

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¹⁴ Davies, 143.
¹⁵ Clarke, 232. What follows in the this and the concluding paragraphs of this section is a close reading and paraphrase of Clarke’s succinct account of the “Triple Way” outlined in *The One and the Many* from 232-234.
Just as *esse* is expressed by each creature in some finite, limited way, but by God perfectly and absolutely, so too is every limited, creaturely perfection possessed by God in a perfect and absolute manner – participation extends not only to *esse*, but also to every real perfection subsequent to this first act of existence.

(2) *Purification of the resulting concept (the negative moment):* here we combine what was best in the *via negativa* with the analogy of proportionality, allowing us to speak positively of God’s attributes. Not every good property we observe in creatures can be applied to God literally, because some such properties involve inherent limitations or imperfections (e.g., those positive properties that involve matter, such as vision, though positive in themselves, nevertheless contain the inherent limitation of composite being, and therefore must be denied of God). Once we identify the small number of those highest positive qualities observable in creation that contain no such inherent limitations, once we have identified the positive qualities which are “unqualifiedly better to have than not to have, so that if God did not possess them he would be inferior to us,” then we can move on to the third step.\(^{16}\)

3) *Reaffirmation and application to God + the index of infinity:* this is the last step which affirms the positive (though analogous) application of the property to God, while simultaneously affirming the transcendent nature and mode of the divine possession of this property. The perfection is affirmed of God; if it were not, then creatures would possess a perfection which their Creator did not. But to this is added “possession in an infinite degree, beyond our positive vision or grasp by human concepts, pointing to the ultimate Mystery, the Infinite Being that is the wellspring of all reality, which we realize we must affirm as true even though we cannot directly

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\(^{16}\) Ibid., 233. Here Clarke identifies these positive qualities as: “existence, activity, unity, goodness, power, intelligence, will, love, and others derivative in some way from these or implied by them (justice, mercy, compassion, etc.).”
penetrate the mystery.”  

The end result of this *Triple Way* is a small number of infinite, positive attributes whose existence we must affirm in God, but whose mode of existence will ever escape our limited and finite understanding: “We know *that* God is intelligent, loving, etc., and to an infinite degree, but not *how* he is such.”

Having explained and justified the method for arriving at the positive attributes of God, we are now in a position to derive those very attributes. Such a project, the proper work of systematic natural theology, lies beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore what follows is a brief account of those divine attributes which are necessary for demonstrating the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and providence with human freedom. The attributes considered below comprise but a sample of those traditionally ascribed to God, and no extensive derivation or defense is given. However, all of the attributes listed below seem to follow directly and quite clearly from the *Triple Way* outlined above. Each section briefly defines and explains the considered attribute, considers the most common misunderstandings and/or objections related to the attribute (when necessary), and finally locates the importance of the attribute within the overall project of exploring and defending the compatibility of God and human freedom.

Section 4: Simplicity and Unity

God is absolutely simple. In God, there can be no composition of the metaphysical co-principles (existence-essence, form-matter, substance-accidents, act-potency, etc) which are found in every other being in the universe. There are many reasons why this must be (Aquinas lists at least five), but for our purposes the following observation will suffice: we have already seen that God is pure actuality, limited by no potency or potentiality whatsoever. And it was

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17 Ibid., 234.
18 Ibid. (emphasis added).
also argued that every metaphysical composition is a composition of act/potency, (e.g., essence is a limiting potency in relation to the act of existence, matter a limiting potency in relation to the actuality of form, etc.). Therefore we can conclude that, being wholly actual and limited by no potentiality, God cannot be a composition.  

It is relatively easy to understand why God must be completely and absolutely simple; it is much more difficult to say how this is so. Some of the implications of divine simplicity seem fairly commonplace and readily understandable. For example, God is not limited by the finite composition between form and matter, and thus divine simplicity entails His spirituality, the fact that He is immaterial: “God is the pure infinite concentration of spiritual energy, lucidly and totally self-present and self-conscious, with no dispersal of parts over space and time, no darkness of unconsciousness, ‘pure Light,’ as St. John says.” But things become slightly more difficult when we attempt to consider what it means to say that God is not a composition between, say, substance and accidents – for this means that God must be identical with his attributes, and they with each other: “Since God then is not composed of matter and form, He must be His own Godhead, His own Life, and whatever else is thus predicated of Him.”

It helps to observe that much of our difficulty in conceiving of divine simplicity lies in the fact that our minds are discursive, constantly and spontaneously distinguishing between the nature of created beings and their individual attributes. The doctrine of divine simplicity is essentially a reminder that we cannot do this with God, Who transcends the compositions which we so easily analyze in created beings: “it is an attempt to say that while, for example, we can distinguish between Bill and his human nature, we cannot do the same sort of thing when it

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19 This is Aquinas’ fourth way of showing the divine simplicity in the *Summa Theologica*: “Fourthly, because in every composite there must be potentiality and actuality; but this does not apply to God; for either one of the parts actuates another, or at least all the parts are potential to the whole” (*ST* I.3.8).

20 Clarke, 231.

21 *ST* I.3.3.
comes to God. In this respect, Aquinas is saying, God differs from things like Bill.”^22 Unlike the composite mode of existence in limited and finite creatures, God exists in one, simple, perfect, and inexhaustible reality.

What then are we to make of the fact that we are currently in the process of enumerating and distinguishing between God’s various attributes? If God is absolutely simple, how can it be true to say that He possesses such multiple attributes as knowledge, power, and love? The answer lies in realizing that God is really simple in Himself, but our intellects are not – none of the limited concepts which we predicate of God can express His fullness and unity by themselves. Because the attributes we predicate of God fail in themselves to capture the whole of God’s unified perfection, we need many true “pictures” or “snapshots” of God if we are to understand something of the fullness of His perfection. The many divine attributes which we predicate of God “refer to the same identical simple reality of God, seen incompletely by us from different points of view. Yet since our ideas are not themselves real beings, they do not posit any real multiplicity of distinct parts or qualities in God himself.”^23 Aquinas argues that even while the human intellect must rely upon multiple conceptions to express God’s fullness, nevertheless it simultaneously recognizes the fact that God must, in reality, be altogether one and simple:

God, however, as considered in Himself, is altogether one and simple, yet our intellect knows Him by different conceptions because it cannot see Him as He is in Himself. Nevertheless, although it understands Him under different conceptions, it knows that one and the same simple object corresponds to its conceptions. Therefore the plurality of predicate and subject represents the plurality of idea; and the intellect represents the unity by composition.\(^{24}\)

God’s ultimate unity and simplicity does not have a direct bearing upon the compatibility of divine agency and human freedom. Rather, it serves as a sort of background metaphysical

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^22 Davies, 123.
^23 Clarke, 236.
reality to which we will occasionally make reference in order to clarify a point or warn against a misleading image or tendency which destroys the divine unity and simplicity. If, on the other hand, we consider the attribute of divine simplicity as primarily expressing God’s immateriality, then this attribute will very often come up in our consideration of God’s causality, His relation to created and bodily creatures, etc. Furthermore, because divine simplicity entails the real identity of attributes which we conceptually distinguish, it will sometimes clarify what is meant when, for example, we consider God’s “causal knowledge,” a derivative attribute which depends upon a real identity between God’s knowledge and His creative will.

Section 5: Omniscience and Foreknowledge

Knowledge is one of the positive perfections which we must, by analogy of proportionality, affirm in God, and to an infinite degree. Thus we say that God is omniscient, which literally means that He possesses all knowledge. What is traditionally meant by saying that God is omniscient is summed up nicely by Brian Davies: “if God is omniscient he timelessly knows all true propositions, and he knows all that has happened, all that is happening, and all that will happen.” What must be stressed about God’s perfect knowledge is that, in the first place, it is eternal, and in the second place, it must be utterly unlike our own knowledge.

The common objections and misunderstandings concerning God’s omniscience lie in a misunderstanding of eternity and its relationship to time on the one hand, and, on the other, in thinking that God’s knowledge is somehow speculative and discursive as human knowledge is. Both of these flawed understandings of divine knowledge will be considered at much greater length in Chapter 6 when considering foreknowledge. For now, however, it is enough to hint at some of the ways in which divine omniscience should be understood. In the first place, to say

25 Davies, 189.
that God’s knowledge is eternal is to say that He stands in relationship to all time in an eternal now. Furthermore, God’s omniscience cannot be passive and dependent upon creation for its data; rather, God’s knowledge is causal knowledge, and He has knowledge of past, present, and future beings and events by knowing Himself as the cause of them:

If God has knowledge, then something stands to him as knowable, and it is true that God knows it. But he cannot know it by being acted on by anything knowable outside himself in such a way that the thing acts on him so as to bring it about that he knows it. For God, as we have seen, cannot be acted on by anything [because He is purely active, and being acted upon requires potentiality]. The knowledge God has must therefore begin and end in himself. It cannot, that is to say, be produced in him by someone other than himself. . . . If God knows himself for what he is, then he knows himself as Creator of all that has existed, all that does exist, and all that will exist.26

These points are admittedly difficult ones, and what has been presented here should in no way be construed as an adequate explanation of the eternal or causal nature of divine omniscience. These concepts will be taken up, explained, and defended at length in later chapters, especially Chapter 6. For now it is enough to understand that “In God there exists the most perfect knowledge,” that this knowledge is not like human knowledge, but is “according to the mode of the one who knows,” and that, because it is omniscient, the knowledge of God extends not only to the past and the present, but also to the future.27 When only one aspect of divine omniscience is considered, namely the knowledge of future events, actions, and free human choices, this is termed foreknowledge. Thus, whatever conclusions we ultimately reach concerning the nature of omniscience, these conclusions will likewise hold for foreknowledge.

26 Ibid., 190-191.
Section 6: Omnipotence and Providence

Omnipotence is very often misunderstood because it is often thought to be explained by the declarative sentence “God can do anything.” Such an understanding of omnipotence suffers from a number of flaws. In the first place, it is much too vague (the source of the problem lies in the utterly ambiguous term “anything”), and as it stands it opens the door to all sorts of “logical conundrums” such as “Can God create a being which He cannot destroy?” Furthermore, it also seems clear that God cannot, in fact, do anything: for He cannot do many things which human beings do everyday. If God can do anything, why can He not surf, sniff, slouch, or sin?

Thus we must carefully reconsider what we mean when we say that God is omnipotent. In the first place we must say that God cannot do something which is logically impossible. Nevertheless, this introduces no limit to God’s power. Something which is logically impossible is not really a something at all, but rather is a set of empty and meaningless words which have no existence in reality: “a logical contradiction is not a state of affairs which is supremely difficult to produce, but only a form of words which fails to describe any state of affairs.” Thus Aquinas maintains that “since power is said in reference to possible things, this phrase, God can do all things, is rightly understood to mean that God can do all things that are possible; and for this reason He is said to be omnipotent.”

But actions which are performed by human beings are not logically impossible; the very fact that human beings perform such actions every day shows that they are quite possible. Nevertheless, although God is omnipotent, we must say that God cannot perform these actions. Let us consider the first three actions listed above (surfing, sniffing, and slouching). These are actions which we would classify as bodily activities. As we have already seen, however, because

28 Davies, 174, 177.
30 ST I.25.3.
of God’s simplicity, He does not and cannot exist as a composition of spirit and body. But this simplicity, far from a failure, is a perfection – if God were bodily, we would be introducing in Him a limitation and finitude. Therefore, Aquinas argues that God’s inability to perform bodily actions is no limit to his omnipotence, as long as it is remembered that materiality involves composition and thus imperfection: “we say that God cannot fail, and consequently that he cannot be moved (since movement and failing imply imperfection), and therefore that he cannot walk nor perform any other bodily actions, since these are inseparable from movement.”31 To this we should add an important observation: while God “cannot drink beer, have sex, [or] smell roses,” since such activities are necessarily bodily, He can nevertheless “experience to an infinite degree the delight and joy we get from doing these human actions, which is why we do them.”32

If God cannot perform bodily actions since such actions would limit His perfection by creating in Him a composition of form and matter, still less can God sin. To sin is not a positive action; it is a failure of action. In fact, as Aquinas points out, the fact that God cannot sin is not due to a limitation to His omnipotence, but rather is a direct result of His omnipotence: “To sin is to fall short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence. Therefore it is that God cannot sin, because of His omnipotence.”33 Boethius makes the same point in a memorable way, concluding from God’s omnipotence and His inability to do evil that “evil is nothing, since God, who can do all things, cannot do evil.”34

There is, of course, much more to be said concerning divine omnipotence, especially in regard to divine providence. For now, it is important to understand that providence is traditionally defined in reference both to God’s omniscient knowledge and His omnipotent will.

31 DP 1.6.
32 Clarke, 239.
33 ST 1.25.3, ad 2.
Thus Aquinas says, “Providence resides in the intellect; but presupposes an act of willing the end. Nobody gives a precept about things done for an end; unless he will that end . . . in God both the will and intellect are one and the same thing.”35 However, for our purposes, when we discuss providence we shall be concerned not so much with the work of the divine intellect in mentally ordering the universe, but rather with the causal action on God’s part in bringing about the divine plan. As such, providence for us will fall under a consideration of divine omnipotence, for God’s power extends to all of His causal actions. As with foreknowledge and omniscience, providence and omnipotence shall be considered at much greater length in a subsequent chapter (Chapter 7).

Section 7: Omnibenevolence and Ontological Generosity

In saying that God is omnibenevolent, we mean that God wills that which is good for every created thing. To use more familiar and less technical terminology, we mean that God loves all creatures, since “to love anything is nothing else than to will good to that thing.”36 The way in which this divine love is most fundamentally expressed by God is through His free and utterly gratuitous gift of creation, and His continued communication of esse to His creatures. In other words, God’s love can be thought of as an “ontological generosity” by which He wants to share the perfection of His existence with limited and finite creatures.

To see why this is so, we must consider that every intelligent being which performs an action does so for a reason, driven by some motive. What, we may therefore ask, was God’s motive in creating the universe? It cannot be to add in any way to His perfection, because He possesses in Himself already the absolute fullness of perfection. There is nothing that can add to

35 ST I.22.1, ad 3.
36 ST I.20.2.
God’s full and immediate enjoyment of His own absolute perfection, not even the worship and adoration of finite creatures. Therefore, we must conclude that the only possible motive for creation was God’s own love for His goodness. This sounds like a profoundly *selfish* motive for creation, until we consider that there is more than one way of loving one’s own goodness:

> There are two ways of loving one’s own goodness: one is to *enjoy* it; the other is to *share* it, communicate it to others. The latter is precisely the reason, the motive—and the only possible one—why God creates the whole universe, anything finite outside of himself: simply out of pure gratuitous love that wants to share his own riches with us, to make *us* happy [for, if He wanted merely to enjoy His goodness eternally without sharing it, He need not have created the universe]. As the 14th century mystic, Meister Eckhart, summed up the whole meaning and purpose of the created universe in one sentence: “God enjoys himself, and wants us to join him.”

Furthermore, as Aquinas points out, God is said to be omnibenevolent not only because His love extends to all creatures (because He created them and wills their proper goodness and fulfillment), but also because divine love is so supremely above human love in its efficacious causal power that God always and everywhere provides the good which He wills for creation: “our will is not the cause of the goodness of things, but is moved by it as its object … whereas the love of God infuses and creates goodness.”

In other words, omnibenevolent love is intimately involved in the very notion of creation. In creating His creatures, God both wills their good and creates the very goodness which He wills for them: “There can be no doubt that God loves creatures, in the sense of willing their good, for this is involved in the very idea of creation. Creation means the carrying out of a plan or purpose, and this purpose is nothing else than the realization of the powers given to creatures.”

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37 Clarke, 238.
38 *ST* I.20.3.
Section 8: Creation and Transcendence

Thus far, in considering the many attributes of God, we have often made reference to both God’s creation and His transcendence. These two attributes of God, more so than any of the foregoing, express a relationship between God and the universe, and as such they will prove extremely valuable for our inquiry into the compatibility of God and human freedom, for the compatibility of two things depends very much on the nature of their relationship. A much more detailed and metaphysically nuanced account of both creation and transcendence will be given in Chapter 7, one which expands greatly upon the causal nature of creation and the implications of transcendence for understanding the divine causation. Here, however, a brief outline of both terms will be sketched so as to provide us with a working definition and understanding of creation and transcendence.

Creation is essentially nothing more than the divine communication of esse to limited and finite beings other than God, as was outlined in the previous chapter when considering the metaphysics of participation. Thus Aquinas has recourse to the language of participation when considering and defining creation as the dependence of every being upon God for its existence:

It must be said that every being in any way existing is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation, must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially, as iron becomes ignited by fire. Now . . . God is the essentially self-subsisting Being . . . . Therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation. Therefore it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be more or less perfect, are caused by one First Being, Who possesses being most perfectly.40

In the technical and philosophical use of the term, creation is predicated of God in a special sense: it means the “dependence of all that is, in so far as it is” upon the causal activity of God, Who actively and continuously gives the entirety of being (existence and essence, form and

40 ST I.44.1.
matter, substance and accidents) to every creature in existence.\textsuperscript{41} In other words, by calling God the Creator, we mean that God is the one and only cause of being, the \textit{causa esse}, of every creature in the universe.

Once we have understood creation as a continuous causal act on the part of God by which \textit{esse} is communicated to every real being in the universe, two important implications follow: first of all, even though we often speak of creatures in the universe “creating” things, such as when an artist creates a painting, there is really “a great gap between [divine] creation and making or causing in our familiar sense.”\textsuperscript{42} Because all creatures are dependent upon God to first create their particular being, with all of its inherent powers and limitations, every “creation” on the part of a creature is really a pro-creation, one which depends first and foremost upon the divine creation. And this is why, in contrast, the divine creation is said to be \textit{ex nihilo} (“out of nothing”):

The “out of nothing” here, frequently misunderstood, means simply “not out of any pre-existing material or subject.” In a word, it means that God is the cause of the total being of his effect, called a “creature.” The causal activity of creatures, on the other hand, always presupposes something pre-existing to work on, and so is the cause only of the becoming, the transformation of its effect from this mode of being to that, not of the total being of its effect. Thus God alone is ultimately Creator of the whole universe of finite being.\textsuperscript{43}

Secondly, although creation is popularly understood as the temporally first act of God which began the universe (by causing the Big Bang, for example), the metaphysical concept of creation \textit{ex nihilo} which necessitates that God be the first cause of the universe does not necessitate that the universe have some beginning in time. What is perhaps misleading is the term \textit{first} cause, but here “first” is being used to indicate ontological priority, not some sort of temporal causation: God is the first cause of the universe in the sense that it depends upon Him

\textsuperscript{41} McCabe, 10.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Clarke, 237.
first of all for its very being, not in the sense that He gave it a beginning in time. David Burrell points out that the medieval philosophers are insistent upon the point that creation *ex nihilo* and the beginning of time are two unrelated assertions: “the origination [of the universe] need not originate time as well; the universe could have utterly depended from its originator without a beginning point. While that may boggle the imagination, it does not confront the intellect with a contradiction.”44 If we have good reasons to believe in the beginning of the universe (and I think we do), then these reasons must come from science and/or from revelation, but not from metaphysical inquiry. Nevertheless, because “an absolute temporal beginning makes the utter dependence that is required much more evident to us,” the idea of creation *ex nihilo* “has come to refer, more popularly, to an absolute beginning of time as well.”45

Just as creation is intimately related to the metaphysics of participation outlined in the previous chapter, so too is God’s transcendence. Transcendence, from the Latin *transcendere*, literally means “to climb over, to go beyond.” As we saw when considering the metaphysical structure of participation, God is said to transcend His creatures because His mode of being, limited in no way by a finite composition of essence and existence, “goes beyond” or transcends creaturely limitations in one pure and full act of existence: “God, as pure Subsistent Act of Existence (*Ipsum Esse Subsistens*) with no limiting essence, transcends all his creatures as composed of existence and limiting essence.”46 Furthermore, because God is the Creator of the universe, His is an utterly unique relationship with all the creatures in the universe, a relationship which transcends any of the relationships which exist between two creatures within the universe: “[the] doctrine of creation entails that God is radically transcendent and distinct from creation in such a way that God and creatures cannot be thought of as coordinate parts of a larger whole or

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44 Burrell, 25.
45 Ibid.
46 Clarke, 89.
context. God . . . transcends the created order whose existence is a gratuitous gift."⁴⁷ When we return to consider the concept of transcendence in Chapter 7, the fact that God’s relationship to creation is a transcendent relationship finding no parallel within the created order will become especially important, for it will have decisive implications for the way in which we are to conceive of the relationship between divine and created causality.

Section 9: From Metaphysics to Mystery

There are, of course, other attributes of God beyond the ones which have been listed here. To explore and explain such attributes is best left to a full treatise dedicated exclusively to the philosophy of God. What has been given above is an abbreviated list and a brief explanation of those attributes which are particularly important for the inquiry at hand. However, even this partial and amateur attempt at illuminating something of God’s perfection should inspire a spontaneous and genuine reaction of wonder and awe. For if our limited and fragmented human consciousness can comprehend something of the divine perfection communicated to us through actions which reveal God’s simplicity, omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, creation, and transcendence, how much more glorious must He be as He is in Himself, utterly mysterious and completely ineffable as this is for us in our present state? In many contemporary circles philosophy has become a discipline so analytic and mathematical that there is no longer any recognition or enjoyment of the beauty and wonder to which the love of wisdom naturally leads. But this was not so with the ancients – they allowed their philosophical inquiries to lead into contemplation, and even, during the medieval marriage of faith and reason, into adoration. To recapture something of the spontaneous wonder and adoration to which contemplation of the divine attributes would naturally lead earlier thinkers, it is appropriate to end this chapter with an

excerpt from one of the most famous philosophical poems of the Middle Ages, composed by Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy*:

Oh God, Maker of heaven and earth, Who govern the world with eternal reason, at your command time passes from the beginning. You place all things in motion, though You are yourself without change. No external causes impelled You to make this work from chaotic matter. Rather it was the form of the highest good, existing in You without envy, which caused You to fashion all things according to your external exemplar. You who are most beautiful produce the beautiful world from your divine mind and, forming it in your image, You order the perfect parts in a perfect whole. . . .

Grant, Oh Father, that my mind may rise to thy sacred throne. Let it see the foundation of good; let it find light, so that the clear light of my soul may fix itself in Thee. Burn off the fogs and clouds of earth and shine through in Thy splendor. For Thou art the serenity, the tranquil peace of virtuous men. The sight of Thee is beginning and end; one guide, leader, path, and goal.48

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48 Boethius, Book 3, Poem 9, p. 53-4.
Section 1: Freedom and Determinism in the Modern Discussion

This chapter is concerned with defining and understanding what is meant by human freedom, an enterprise that will ultimately identify free choice as the most fundamental meaning of freedom. The greatest work of this undertaking is found below in Section 4, entitled “A Metaphysical Account of Free Choice,” wherein the concept of free choice is not only explored and discussed, but also explained and defended at length.

Before we present such a detailed account of free choice, however, we must acknowledge that freedom has occupied a very prominent place in modern thought, especially in the debate between freedom and determinism. Therefore, it is important to briefly consider some of the modern conceptions of freedom, especially as they are related to determinism, in order to examine the validity of such conceptions, and to begin clarifying our understanding of freedom by contrasting it with determinism.

There is a story told of a man who set out one day for a leisurely walk. After half an hour or so, he found himself walking down the street in a part of the city which he had never visited before. As he walked, he began to take notice of his surroundings. Ahead, nestled among the standard storefronts and brown-stone apartments, two unusual doorways caught his eye.
side of the street there was a sign prominently displayed on a basement-level door which read, in mathematically precise black-and-white block letters, “DETERMINISTS ASSOCIATION”; across the street there was a similar sign hanging above a similar door which colorfully read, in a flowing and free-handed script, “Free-will Club”. Intrigued, the man paused in thought for a while, and then knocked on the door of the Determinists Association. A slot in the door was opened, and a voice from within demanded, “Why are you knocking?” The man, taken aback, collected his thoughts and replied, “Well, your sign intrigues me, but I couldn’t help but notice a similar sign across the street for what I suppose is a rival club. I thought for a while about first crossing the street to check out the Free-will Club, but in the end I made up my mind and chose your door.” No sooner had he finished speaking than the slot in the door slid angrily shut with a resounding bang. Feeling slighted by the rebuff, the agitated man strode across the street and knocked on the door of the Free-will Club. The door opened but a crack, and a voice inquired, “Yes? Why are you here?” Flustered, the man answered, “Well, I was just rejected by the Determinists Association, and so I don’t really have any other choice, now do I?” The door slammed shut, and the bewildered man was left standing outside in the middle of the street.¹

This story characterizes the modern approach to freedom and determinism. Faced with what appears to be more and more scientific evidence accounting for human behaviors and choices on the basis of neurological, genetic, environmental, psychological (etc.) factors, modern man has become increasingly anxious and unsure about whether he actually enjoys the freedom which he seems to exercise in every choice. The question of genuine human freedom is one which proves especially perplexing for the scientifically-minded modern man, for while direct

¹I overheard this clever anecdote a few years ago, and it was then attributed to William James. I have searched for James’ own version in his many writings, and have checked with various “James aficionados” (who assured me that the story is consistent with his wit and sense of humor), but neither effort has turned up the original. Nevertheless, it was too good a story to pass up, even in my own paraphrased form. This being said, credit is due to the original author, and not to the author of this paper.
human experience appears to provide immediate and irrefutable evidence of free choice, scientifically observable laws of cause and effect seem to demonstrate determinism:

We have a profound conviction of freedom. We know we are free. Yet when we think of ourselves from a scientific view, we do not see how we can be free. It would be a denial of science, we feel, to make man an exception to the universal laws of nature. . . . And yet we are reluctant to surrender our freedom without a struggle.2

Determinism is the philosophical claim that human actions are not free, but rather are caused (and therefore determined) by something other than the free choice of the human will. It should be noted that while all determinists agree that something other than “free choice” accounts for human actions, there is significant room for disagreement as to exactly what does account for the whole of human activity. Explanations of determinism range from the laws of physics and biology to psychological make-up or environmental upbringing, and some accounts even rely upon complex philosophical concepts such as logical necessity and the a-temporal nature of truth-statements.3 Nevertheless, we can generalize mainstream determinism as a position maintaining that “there are no free human actions, that all our activity is completely determined first by our genetic make-up and then various natural forces operating on us, just as the activity of a computer . . . is determined by its structure and the forces acting on it.”4

All of the social sciences (psychology, sociology, and even economics) are heavily involved in the debate between free will and determinism, and so too is much of contemporary philosophy. Whether man is free or is determined by natural forces beyond his control has implications for the whole of human life, but perhaps nowhere are these implications as important as in the realm of ethics. For morality depends upon personal responsibility, and

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3 See Lucas, section 12 “Types of Determinism” for an excellent summary of the four most common types of determinism: logical, theological, psychological, and physical.
4 McCabe, 11-12.
personal responsibility depends upon genuine human freedom. This is as true now as it was in the 13th century when Aquinas made the commonsense observation that “if nothing is within our power, but we are necessarily moved to will, then deliberation, exhortation, precept, and punishment and praise and blame, with which moral philosophy is concerned, are nullified.”

Ethics and freedom go hand in hand, and this means that the debate between freedom and determinism takes on profound existential importance: if we are truly determined, if external causes control our every action, then we must abandon the whole of ethics and with it the very foundations of human society.

While the debate between freedom and determinism is one whose outcome could not have greater importance for human existence, it is not the purpose of this paper to dispute with determinism as such. Here we are concerned only to demonstrate the compatibility of human freedom with the omniscient and omnipotent involvement of God in the world. What this means practically is that there is no need for us to definitively refute the type of determinism which we have been discussing. Indeed, for such a determinist the problem of God and human freedom is really no problem at all, because there is no such thing as human freedom to begin with. If we are truly concerned about whether or not God’s agency destroys human freedom, we must first take the notion of free human choice very seriously. Of course, in one sense the debate over determinism is very relevant to the question of God and human freedom. Determinism means that human actions are caused by something other than free human choice, and if God’s infallible

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5 This is why our legal system incarcerates murderers, but commits the insane to mental institutions – in the first case the murderer is morally culpable because his action was freely caused by nothing other than himself; in the second case, something other than the person’s free choice (in this case, his psychological constitution) caused the person to kill.


7 Although we should note with McCabe that if the determinists are right, it would be impossible to argue at all – for no matter how much it would seem as if we were having a genuine conversation, what would really be transpiring would be nothing more than pre-programmed reflexes and automatic noises coming from our mouths, like two tape-recorders being played at the same time (Cf. McCabe, 12).
foreknowledge or omnipotent providence causes human actions in such a way as to eliminate free human choice, then we could say that divine agency is a form of determinism. Philosophers even employ the technical term *theological determinism* to distinguish this type of determinism (in which God, a *supernatural* external cause, precludes human freedom) from the determinism we have been discussing (in which *natural* external causes preclude human freedom).

Section 2: “Compatibilism” and Human Freedom

We should, however, avoid using the term “determinism” as much as possible when referring to the problem of divine agency and human freedom. In the first place, because God transcends space and time, His causation is not properly *external* to the human will as are the natural causes of determinism, a point which will be taken up in greater length in the following chapters. Even more importantly, however, if divine agency is defined as a form of determinism, then those familiar with modern theories of determinism and freedom may be tempted to misconstrue our ultimate conclusion that God and human freedom are compatible. For there are some philosophers who present complex arguments designed to prove that every human action is in fact determined by external factors, but that such actions nevertheless remain free – in other words, they maintain that determinism and human freedom are compatible. This philosophical position has been appropriately labeled “compatibilism”.

Now, for a compatibilist, the question of God and human freedom poses no more of a problem than it did for a determinist: if human beings are completely determined by factors other than their free choice, and yet they can still

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8 The first and most famous compatibilist was Hume, who argued that free will consisted not in the ability to freely choose between two alternatives in any given situation, but rather in the ability to always choose in accordance with one’s inner beliefs and desires, such that if those beliefs and desires changed, so too would the choice. Of course, a person’s beliefs and desires are ultimately determined, not by free choices (for this would involve us in circular logic), but by external factors. Thus, according to Hume, every choice is determined, but so too is it free. For a detailed explanation of Hume’s compatibilist theory see Paul Russell, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
(somehow) be said to be free, then so too can they be determined by God, and still be said to be free.

But such a position is really no solution at all to the problem of God and human freedom (nor to the modern debate between determinism and freedom). For, compatibilists aside, when we are told that determinism and freedom are simultaneously true and therefore compatible, we react with surprise and incredulity: the compatibilist, we object, has misunderstood or mischaracterized what we mean by determinism, or freedom, or both. In order for the terms determinism and freedom to have any real meaning, the realities which they express must be utterly incompatible. For in whatever way determinism might be compatible with some sense of freedom, it nevertheless destroys freedom in the only sense that really matters: “Determinism deprives [men] of any real say in the course of events; not because they have a say, only, it is ineffective, but because they themselves, their very saying of their say, are totally dependent on other factors outside their control.”

Any account of God and human freedom which really strives to tackle the problem head-on must affirm at one and the same time that human freedom consists in human actions which are not wholly determined by other causes, and yet that God is an infallible knower and an omnipotent willer, whose knowledge and will also extends to human actions. And any genuine solution to the questions which these two statements raise cannot be found in the unsatisfying and unfounded assertion that determinism and human freedom as such are simply compatible. Rather, such a solution can only result from a deep exploration into the relationship between God and human freedom, one which will affirm both the reality of human freedom and the reality of divine agency, while nevertheless providing the means by which also to affirm their genuine compatibility.

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9 Lucas, 28.
Section 3: Failures in the Modern Conception of Freedom

Before we proceed with this exploration into the nature of human freedom, however, it should be noted here that the widespread modern debates over freedom and determinism have resulted in profoundly unsatisfying accounts of human freedom (when such accounts have attempted to make room for freedom at all). The reason for this is that modern conceptions of freedom and determinism for the most part rely on what seem to be astonishingly limited conceptions of causality and of the will. Causation is often reduced to efficient causality alone, with the result that internal causes such as desires are characterized as determining a person’s actions by “pushing” the will to a particular choice rather than “pulling” the will through final causality. This is a point which we shall address at greater length in the following section.

More importantly, in the modern discussion the term “will” has come to signify “an autonomous self-starter” in which the freedom of the will is necessarily opposed to the necessity of nature, and “manifest priority” is given to the will as an “unmoved (or ‘autonomous’) mover.” What this has resulted in is a division of modern philosophy into either determinism or indeterminism: in the former, human actions are thought to be fully caused by external and internal factors, and thus the will is thought to be non-existent (since, by the modern definition, it cannot be caused in any way); in the latter, human actions are attributed solely to the free choice of the will, but since the will cannot be influenced at all by any internal or external factors (by the modern definition), this leads to what seems like an utterly arbitrary and irrational choice by the will. Thus, for example, one modern introduction to ethics characterizes the problem of free will and determinism as a problem of choosing between determinism and indeterminism (notice also the identity of causation with efficient causality):

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10 Burrell, 88, 93.
Here determinism is the view that every event, including human choices and volitions, is caused by other events and happens as an effect or result of these other events. Indeterminism denies this, and adds that some events, among them human choices and volitions, happen without any cause or explanation.\footnote{William Frankena, \textit{Ethics}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1973), 73. To his credit, Frankena acknowledges that there is some question as to whether either of these two positions is true, and states that “this question belongs to metaphysics.” He also points out that some thinkers have introduced a third category, that of “self-determinism,” to the debate, but he does not think that this position has been adequately worked out, and again “a discussion of it would involve us in metaphysical questions we cannot consider here” (Frankena, 76). There is no mention of Aquinas’ account of voluntary human action.}

The modern debate has left us with two equally unappealing options: either our choices are completely determined by events and causes other than ourselves, or else our choices are completely arbitrary, random, and unexplainable. But if, as it has been contended, the seemingly inescapable choice between these two positions is dependent upon a deeply insufficient understanding of causality and the will, then we can conclude that the categories of determinism and indeterminism are not really mutually exclusive. There is, perhaps, a better account of free choice than we have been given by modern thought, an account which will prove to be more consistent with our experience of freedom than that given to us by determinism (or by its only proposed alternative, indeterminism). It is this account of freedom which we shall now explore.

\textbf{Section 4: A Metaphysical Account of Free Choice}

Having considered determinism, the very antithesis of freedom, we can now turn to developing an account of freedom, one which will prove more consistent with the genuine human experience of choice than the various accounts of determinism or indeterminism. It should be mentioned from the start, however, that any account of freedom which is truly consistent with the human condition must acknowledge that our choices and actions are in fact greatly influenced by causes other than ourselves. Herbert McCabe, very much an advocate for free choice, is perfectly willing to admit this fact: “I doubt whether there are any completely free
human actions: we are all to a great extent determined by factors outside our control and in ways that we are not conscious of.”12 But of course, just because we are influenced by many factors other than ourselves, and just because we may sometimes be mistaken about the degree of freedom which we are actually exercising at any given moment, this does not mean that we are wholly determined. What we must maintain, if there is to be any human freedom, is the commonly experienced fact that “there is a certain degree of spontaneity and creativeness in human action, something that comes just from Fred and not from anything outside him nor from the sheer structure with which he was born.”13 For a human action to be free, it need not be wholly undetermined. But it must contain, at its core, a real choice of the will, however limited.

Far from being a completely arbitrary and utterly autonomous act of the will (as the indeterminists would have us believe), the reality of free choice is much more subtle. Free choice, as we shall see below, can only be understood as an integrated process involving both the intellect and the will, and an adequate explanation of its nature depends upon a fully developed metaphysical account of causality which recognizes not only efficient, but also final causality. In addition, the “inner dynamics of voluntary human action” are best expressed by employing the language of practical reason, i.e. by making use of the important distinction between means and ends.14 It is for this reason that we shall be relying explicitly upon the Thomistic account of free choice. For the account Aquinas gives us takes very seriously the role of both the will and the intellect in free choice (though it would benefit greatly by incorporating developments in modern psychology), it is built upon a firm metaphysical foundation of causality, and it employs a “means/end scheme … to express the domain of created freedom.”15 All of this, in turn, allows

12 McCabe, 12.
14 Burrell, 87.
15 Ibid.
Aquinas to present a philosophically satisfying account of free choice which avoids the problems inherent in the misguided and underdeveloped debate between determinism and indeterminism.¹⁶

To truly do justice to such a systematically developed account of free choice, much more space and time would need to be devoted than this short chapter can allow – this is true not only given the sophisticated nature of Aquinas’ account itself, but also because the precise nature of the account is much debated by his followers: “[Aquinas’] overall account of human action involves a complex interplay of reciprocal causality between intellect and will whose precise nature has long been the subject of dispute among his interpreters.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, at the risk of oversimplification, we should at least outline the dynamics of free choice, so that it will become clear exactly what seems to be threatened by divine foreknowledge and providence.

“The word choice,” observes Aquinas, “implies something belonging to the reason or intellect, and something belonging to the will.”¹⁸ In order to understand the mutually constitutive roles which both the intellect and the will play in free human choice, it is necessary to first examine the role which each plays individually, and then to combine these individual elements into one cohesive vision of free human choice. The role which the intellect plays in choice is twofold. In the first place, the intellect apprehends that particular objects or actions are good. Secondly, the intellect is able to think out more than one course of action for obtaining a particular end, “each of which is better in some respect than the others, no one of which is superior to the other in all respects.”¹⁹ In other words, because the intellect can always creatively

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¹⁶ Of course, when Aquinas was developing and presenting his theory of free choice and voluntary human action, the modern debate between determinism and freedom as such did not yet exist. All that is being maintained here is that Aquinas had a much more developed understanding of causality, a better descriptive scheme of choice, and a more nuanced characterization of the will than is present in much of the modern debate. Also, for our purposes, his terms “involuntary” and “necessary” can be treated as more or less equivalent with the modern term “determined.”
¹⁸ ST I-II.13.2.
think up more than one good means to attaining any one particular end, there must be something in each mean which is better (and something which is worse) in respect to the other means. This is so because each mean is particular and finite, and thus cannot be completely good in all respects: “in all particular goods, the reason can consider an aspect of some good, and the lack of some good, which has the aspect of evil: and in this respect, it can apprehend any single one of such goods as to be chosen or to be avoided.”20 So we can summarize the role which the intellect has played thus far in choice as: 1) apprehending some particular good end, and 2) creatively determining more than one means to attain that particular end, each of which is good in certain respects.

The will, as we shall see, is intimately related to, and in some sense dependent upon, the role which the intellect plays in free choice. However, it too has a unique role to play in choice and, as we shall see, it can in turn influence the intellect. We must resist the temptation, so prevalent in modern thought, to conceive of the will as “an autonomous self-starter.”21 The will is truly the ultimate seat of causation in the human person, the faculty which moves the person to choose and to act; but it is not an autonomous uncaused cause, an unmoved and self-starting mover. The modern conception of the will is partially correct, for the will does choose between two or more alternatives. But, if it goes no further, then this understanding of the will remains radically insufficient, for it gives no account of why the will chooses in the first place. The will must be defined not only in terms of efficient causality (by which it moves all of the powers of the soul, including the intellect and even including itself, to whatever end it wills, a point we

20 ST I-II.12.6. Those familiar with Aristotelian logic will recognize here that Aquinas is drawing upon the notion of the practical syllogism, in which the conclusion (which gives the means to a particular end) is contingent and not necessarily demonstrated, as it is in a scientific syllogism. In fact, Aquinas explicitly states: “Choice results from the decision or judgment which is, as it were, the conclusion of a practical syllogism” (ST I-II.13.3).
21 Burrell, 88. Burrell notes that it is on this mischaracterization of the will that the contemporary debate between determinism and indeterminism has arisen.
shall take up shortly), but also in terms of the final causality by which the will itself is moved. Now a final cause can be defined as “that for the sake of which something is made or done”; it is the “goal, purpose, or end-tended towards,” and it answers the question “Why was this made or done.”

To understand why we must include final causality in our understanding of the will, remember that when we considered creation in the previous chapter, we saw that the human person, like all creatures, is the result of a creative and intelligent act by God. From this fact we can now draw the further conclusion that, because man is the result of a creative act by an intelligent Creator, there is built into his very nature a certain ultimate goal, purpose, or end. We can see this in the analogy of a human artisan creating some artifact: when a carpenter creates a chair, he creates it with the inbuilt end or purpose of providing a place to sit. It is this final end or purpose of the chair, in fact, that motivates the carpenter to create the chair in the first place.

Now this analogy only approximates God’s creation of the human person, because whereas the final end of the chair is defined in terms of fulfilling some lack in man (the need for a place to sit), the final end of man cannot be defined in terms of fulfilling some lack in God. For God lacks nothing in Himself, and in this sense there is nothing which He gains by creating creation. Rather, God’s creation of man is a supremely generous act which can have no other motivation than that of sharing the divine perfection and goodness with creatures. What this entails for our consideration here is that the final end or purpose of the human person is not defined in terms of something which God intends for Himself (as the purpose of the chair was defined in terms of something which the carpenter intended for himself, namely a place to sit), but rather as something which God intends for man himself. And this final end, built into the

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22 Clarke, 210.
23 See Chapter 4, Sections 7 and 8 above.
very nature of man as a creature designed with a specific purpose, is nothing less than the
possession and enjoyment of goodness. When we consider this final end from the subjective
perspective of the human person actually possessing the end, we entitle it “happiness”; when we
consider it from objective perspective of the end itself, we entitle it “the good,” “goodness,” or
“the universal good” (bonum universale in Aquinas’ terminology).

It is only in the context of this inbuilt final end of the human person that our
understanding of the will can now be expanded beyond simple efficient causality. The will
should be understood first and foremost as that in man which draws him to his final end; it is
man’s “inner orientation to the good.”²⁴ The will is the faculty in man which desires the good or,
as it were, feels the pull of goodness as the end and purpose for which man was created. It is
what makes man aware of his ultimate end. Just as God created the human person with the
inbuilt end of the universal good, so too did God create the human will “with a natural dynamism
to the universal good (bonum universale) such that God alone can perfectly satisfy and move the
will as its ultimate object and final cause.”²⁵ This last statement, that it is God alone who can
perfectly satisfy and move the will as its final cause, needs some explaining. In one sense, it is
fairly clear that God is the ultimate object of the will’s inner orientation. For only God is the
fullness of perfection, and thus only God is perfectly good, containing within Himself no
limitation or finitude or lack of goodness. Therefore, if the ultimate end of the human person is
happiness, and happiness means the possession of any and all goodness in general, and if the will
is not satisfied until it is happy, there is only one object that can finally and completely satisfy
the will, and this is God. In light of this fact, the will takes on a new and essential role in the
human person. It is the inner prophet dwelling in the very center or heart of man, drawing him

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²⁴ Burrell, 88.
ever beyond limited, finite goods back to his Creator, the Source and Summit of all goodness:

“Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”

At the same time however, it is clear that we are not always conscious that God is the ultimate fulfillment, the final and perfect object, of our will’s “natural dynamism to the universal good.” How are we to explain this? The answer lies in the realization that God is the only object which can perfectly fulfill our will’s orientation to goodness, because only He is perfectly good; but our will desires not this or that particular good object, but rather “the Good,” or “goodness as such” as its final end. Another way of expressing this is to say that happiness is the ultimate desire of the will and is man’s final end, but that true and ultimate happiness consists in nothing less than God Himself. A particular man need not know that God is the final fulfillment of his desire for happiness in order to feel that desire for happiness; conversely, just because a particular man does not know that only God will ultimately fulfill his desire for happiness, it does not change the fact that God is really the ultimate end of this dynamism of the will.

So we can say that man’s ultimate end is happiness, keeping ever in mind that our happiness ultimately consists in God, and that the will is that which is drawn to happiness as its end. But we should not be surprised that we are drawn to other limited and finite goods besides God. For the will desires not this or that good in particular, but rather goodness in general, or happiness, as its final end; but in desiring the end, the will also desires the means to that end: “the end is willed in itself, whereas the means, as such, are only willed for the end . . . the will is moved by one and the same movement – to the end . . . and to the means themselves.”

And in light of this, we can characterize all particular goods as means to this one end of happiness. For, although we may occasionally characterize them as ends in themselves, all finite and limited

27 ST I-II.9.1.
goods which we desire we only desire for the sake of happiness, our ultimate end. So, for example, although we normally consider health as an end in itself (for the obtainment of which we employ means such as exercising, eating right, medicine, etc.), even health is desired only as a means to our ultimate end, which is happiness. Indeed *every* limited, particular good is a means to the ultimate end of happiness, and is only willed for the sake of the final achievement of happiness.

But notice that the human will is *not* free to choose with respect to its ultimate and finite end, because this end is built into the very nature of the human person and the human will itself.²⁸ Far from determining human choices, however, this necessary orientation to the final end of goodness in the human will is what actually guarantees man’s freedom of choice. For, given that the will is first moved to happiness as its final end, we can now characterize the daily, moment-to-moment choices of finite and limited goods as means to this one ultimate end. And these finite, particular means are apprehended by the intellect as being good in some respects, but also as lacking in other respects, and thus (unlike the final end of God Himself) they do not compel the will as does the final end. In other words, because every limited and finite good is a means to the ultimate end of happiness, the will finds itself “faced with a choice of alternative ways to realize a goal which transcends particular aims or intentions.”²⁹ Therefore, although *being moved* by the final end of goodness, the will must now also *move itself*, as an efficient cause, to will a particular means to that end. It is precisely here, on the level of choosing one of the many particular goods which the intellect presents to the will as a means to the final, ultimate

²⁸ We do not *choose* to be happy; it is *to be happy* that we choose. In other words, happiness is our absolute, the inbuilt and final end which justifies every other choice, but which cannot justify itself. The question “Why did you want X?” put to a man who made a particular choice in a particular instance will ultimately be answered with the statement “Because I thought it would make me happy.” But a man can never answer the question “Why did you want to be happy?” because happiness is the final end of man. There is no further end which would justify happiness as a means.

²⁹ Burrell, 88.
good, that free choice is born: “[man’s] will, in virtue of desiring the end, can move itself to willing one of the ways to the end, [and therefore] he is free in choosing how he will get to his end.”

We are now in a position to summarize exactly what is meant by free choice, as well as to account for the cooperative roles which the intellect and the will play in grounding this freedom. In the most general sense, free choice consists in “our selecting means to the end which we discern to be for our good – a process triggered and sustained by the grounding orientation of our will to ‘the good,’ however deluded we may be in identifying it.” As Aquinas has succinctly put it, “choice is not of the end, but of the means.” More specifically, Bernard Lonergan has identified in Aquinas’ account of free choice four separate presuppositions which ground every free human act:

A free act has four presuppositions: (A) a field of action in which more than one course of action is objectively possible; (B) an intellect that is able to work out more than one course of action; (C) a will that is not automatically determined by the first course of action that occurs to the intellect; and, since this condition is only a condition, securing indeterminacy without telling what in fact does determine, (D) a will that moves itself.

So the account which we have given of free human choice is one which has attempted to harmonize the roles of both the intellect and the will in choice, as well as to account for the genuine motion of the will as the seat of causal action in the person; in addition, it has been argued that the will is a genuine mover in its own right which chooses between particular finite goods which the intellect presents to it, but that the will is a moved mover, since it does not determine its own ultimate and infinite end. What has emerged is a complex relationship

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30 Mansini, section II.
31 Burrell, 88.
32 Ibid.
between the will and the intellect which constitutes the freedom of human choice. On the one hand, we can truly say that the will is moved by the intellect as by a final causality, since the intellect apprehends the good, and the good moves the will as its final cause: “in a sense, reason precedes the will and ordains its act: in so far as the will tends to its object, according to the order of reason, since the apprehensive power presents the object to the [will].”

On the other hand, however, the will stands in relation to free choice as its efficient (and therefore substantive) cause, as the self-moving mover which moves the human person from potentiality in respect to all of the various alternatives presented, to the actuality of freely choosing this or that particular good: “Wherefore choice is substantially not an act of the reason but of the will: for choice is accomplished in a certain movement of the soul towards the good which is chosen. Consequently it is evidently an act of the [will].”

The genius of this account, bequeathed to us by the wonderfully expansive and (where possible) philosophically synchronistic mind of Aquinas, is that it begins by appropriating Aristotle’s account of the role of the intellect in reasoning practically about means and ends, it then incorporates Augustine’s account of the will as an inner dynamism towards the good, and finally it transforms the entire relationship through the language of final and efficient causality into one which secures the freedom of human choice while simultaneously preserving the creaturely limitations of that freedom:

The background for Aquinas is Aristotle’s notion of practical rationality, together with Augustine’s inner orientation to the good (or will), and his concern is to meld the two precisely in such a way that the will and intellect operate in concert, and the will’s capacity to move is that of a moved rather than an unmoved or “autonomous” mover.

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34 ST I-II.13.1.
35 Ibid.
36 Burrell, 88.
In every choice, therefore, the intellect is the final cause, and the will the efficient cause. Thus it is that both the intellect and the will account for the freedom inherent in every human choice: “Why is the will free? Because it is not determined by the intellect and because it does determine itself. Why has man free will? Because man has an intellect that arrives contingently at different courses of action.” In the end, however, while we should always take into account the complex interaction between the intellect and the will which is involved in every free human choice, we are right to characterize human choice as a free act of the will. And we are likewise right to identify the problem which foreknowledge and providence present for human freedom as a problem which is dependent upon the relationship between divine causation and the human will. For the will is the efficient cause of human choice; to it belongs the “ultimate determination of which alternative is pursued in the act of choice.” What this means is that it is the free human will which is most directly and substantively responsible for human causation in the world – it is a moved mover, yes, but it is a genuine mover in its own right by which the human person is able to freely choose how to exercise causality in the world. Therefore, the question of God and human freedom is really a question about free choice: does God’s involvement in the world preclude free human choice?

Section 5: Liberum Arbitrium and Libertas: The Multiple Meanings of Human Freedom

Thus far we have equated human freedom with free choice, for it is free choice which has shown itself to be the locus of causal agency in the human person, and it is precisely here that we appear to run into problems of compatibility with divine foreknowledge and providence. There are, however, a number of different and important senses in which freedom can be understood,

37 Lonergan, 97.
and each of these various understandings carries with it critical implications for how the relationship between God and human freedom is characterized. In fact, one of the factors which has traditionally complicated a discussion about God and human freedom is that the term “freedom” has been employed in a number of different ways by a number of different thinkers and philosophers throughout history.\(^3^9\) Therefore, while we have primarily characterized human freedom as freedom of choice, we should briefly consider a few of the other senses in which the human person is said to be free, as well as the implications that such conceptions of freedom have for the relationship between God and human freedom.\(^4^0\)

There is a particular conception of human freedom which has become increasingly popular in modern and post-modern thought (reaching perhaps its fullest expression in the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre), and we have already seen something of its presence in the modern characterization of the will as completely and utterly autonomous. This is the freedom to “do as one pleases,” the freedom to establish for oneself one’s own meanings, values, purposes, etc., the freedom of absolute human autonomy. It was anticipated in the Enlightenment dictum: *Man is the measure of all things*. Germain Grisez captures the spirit of this conception of freedom, as well as its relationship to God, by posing the following two questions: “How can a transcendent creator give meaning and establish values without infringing

\(^3^9\) Mortimer Adler identifies at least four distinct uses of the term throughout history in his exceptionally clear and succinct essay *Freedom: A Study of the Development in the English and American Traditions of Philosophy* (Mortimer Adler, *Freedom* [New York: Magi Books, 1968]). The use of the term “free choice” in this paper corresponds to what Adler refers to as “self-determination.” The present section of this paper also briefly considers freedom in the sense of liberty from any external or internal constraints (and the Appendix takes up this sense of freedom at greater length); this type of freedom loosely corresponds to “self-realization” in Adler. Finally, this section considers the Augustinian conception of *libertas*, the freedom which results from adhering to the natural law (vs. *liberum arbitrium*, or free choice). *Libertas* corresponds to Adler’s “self-perfection.”

\(^4^0\) Just as any discussion about freedom is complicated by a variety of different meanings and senses in which freedom can be understood, so too are there a variety of terms which have been employed to express similar or even identical meanings of freedom. So, for example, freedom in the sense of “free choice” (which this chapter has considered and identified as the most fundamental meaning of human freedom) has also been designated by a variety of other terms which include “free will,” “self-determination,” “self-causation,” or even simply “choice.”
upon the autonomy of the human person? How can man be free to do as he pleases if he has an all-seeing and omnipotent Father standing over him?"  

We must admit from the outset that there can be no hope of reconciliation between the reality of a transcendent creator and a conception of freedom which “supposes that the human person is not truly free unless he creates all meanings by his own interpretations and all values by his own decisions.” For, as we have seen, the fact that men are creatures means that they are not the measure of all things; rather, they are themselves measured, the result of a divine creative act which gives them not only their existence, but also their essence. There is built into the very nature of man a certain end for which he was made, and only certain choices and actions will fulfill or accomplish this end. God created man with a final end and with an inbuilt dynamism towards that end, and He also created man as a free creature who could choose how to go about pursuing that end, and indeed whether to pursue that end at all (to his fulfillment) or whether to ignore it completely (to his peril). Man no more creates the meanings and purpose of his own life than he creates the laws of nature. Rather, he discovers these meanings and this purpose as built into his very nature, and in light of these he freely chooses in what manner and to what degree he will pursue and live by them (which is simply another way of expressing Aquinas’ observation that choice is not of the end, but of the means):

A human person does not create his own possibilities as a human person. One must discover these possibilities. Each person can shape his own life in many ways, but the distinction between actualizing possibilities which fulfill a human person as such and actualizing possibilities which mutilate a human person as such is not up to man. Still, the limitation indicated by this distinction is not imposed upon man by the creator, as if one could better exist without being anything at all, and could have it open to oneself to be whatever one pleased.

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
It is a great irony that whereas the modern conception of freedom demands independence from any sort of absolute and eternal law “imposed” upon man by God, the great majority of ancient and medieval philosophers and theologians actually equated freedom in its deepest sense with discovering and adhering to this very same eternal law. So, for example, St. Augustine, who devoted an entire work to articulating and defending freedom in the sense of free choice (entitled De Libero Arbitrio, or “On Free Choice”), nevertheless also maintained that there is another type of freedom which is even more essential to man than the freedom of choice: “This is our freedom, when we are subject to the truth; and the truth is God himself, who frees us from death, that is, from the state of sin.”

This freedom, entitled libertas to distinguish it from freedom of choice (which, for Augustine, was liberum arbitrium, or “freedom of decision”), is intimately connected with a possession of what is truly good for man. Libertas is that freedom in man which consists of (1) enjoyment of the end built into his very nature (which, as we have seen, is happiness, ultimately fulfilled only by God Himself), and (2) possession of the virtuous dispositions and divinely bestowed grace necessary to enjoy this end. Augustine captures both of these aspects of libertas when he says: “the only genuine freedom is that possessed by [1] those who are happy and [2] cleave to the eternal law.” But although it encompasses both the enjoyment of the end and the means of securing that end, the freedom of libertas is most often described in terms of this latter aspect, for in this way libertas takes on a descriptive role which focuses upon the means by which the ultimate end of perfect goodness and happiness can be obtained.

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Ibid., 1.9, p. 25.

Of course, it should be noted that, for the Christian, true libertas “is achieved absolutely only by the blessed hereafter [who enjoy the Beatific Vision], but it is approximated by the saints in this life.” (Adler, Freedom, 18).
Therefore, *libertas* can be described negatively as “exemption from the slavery of certain mental attitudes and habits,” or, in the case of Augustine, exemption from sin.\(^{47}\) Positively, it can be described as the possession of virtue, which is nothing more than the inner disposition to “distinguish between the *apparent* and the *real* good, [and to] steadfastly [will] the latter.”\(^{48}\) Thus, although it is higher than free choice, *libertas* nevertheless depends very much upon free choice for its foundation. For every choice of the will has not only an extrinsic effect on the world in the form of some action which sends ripples of change into the universe, but also an intrinsic effect on the will itself by developing and forming internal dispositions such as virtues and vices.\(^{49}\) These virtues and vices, in turn, make it easier or more difficult for the will to choose what is truly good for the human person in the future; every choice of what is immediately good or bad for man also has the result, when combined with the cumulative effect of other such choices, of orienting the will towards a continued choice either for or against man’s ultimate end.

In light of the added dimension of freedom which the concept of *libertas* introduces, the free choice of the will takes on a much more existentially important role. For every free choice must now be understood either as a choice in accordance with the “eternal law” by which man has been given his true happiness and ultimate end, or as a choice contrary to this same eternal law. In one sense a choice contrary to the eternal law is free, for it is a free choice of the will. But in another much more important sense, such a choice frustrates the very nature of man, prevents him from obtaining the good which he desires, and creates in him a growing tendency


\(^{48}\) Ibid.

\(^{49}\) Of course, not every human choice results in an outward action on the part of the human person. Some choices are purely internal and intrinsic. Nevertheless, the point is that those choices which *do* result in some outward causal action also simultaneously and inescapably have an intrinsic effect as well, resulting in the development of internal dispositions.
to continue to choose contrary to his true end in the future. And in this sense, although both the
virtuous and the wicked man possess freedom of choice, and indeed although each has become
what he is through the very exercise of this free choice, the former possesses a genuinely deeper
freedom which the latter does not, and this is what is meant by *libertas*:

> Since the will is free, it has a choice about whether to obey the eternal law. Human beings can voluntarily wreck their lives by running afoul of the laws that govern their nature. This is indeed a sort of freedom, but it can hardly be the best sort. That very will by which human beings fight against the law of their own nature, a law that they did not make and from which they cannot escape, can be used to love that law and live up to that nature. A soul that has such a will is genuinely free [*libertas*]: free from a hopeless struggle against itself, free to become what it most truly is.\(^{50}\)

Section 6: God and Human Freedom

Far from being threatened by God, *libertas* is a freedom which is directly the result of
God’s creation, that divine act which bestows upon man his unique essence, complete with both
a final end to be realized in God himself, and a natural dynamism towards that end which is the
will itself. But the will is not merely moved by God’s final causation, as we have seen; it is a
moved mover, a truly free power in man which, in concert with the intellect, deliberates between
finite and limited goods and then freely chooses a particular good, making man a free causal
agent in his own right. It is precisely here at the seat of genuine deliberation and the source of
free causal power in man that God appears to threaten human freedom, and He seems to do so in
two separate and yet equally crucial ways: “Challenges to the freedom of choice can arise from
considering God as knowing the choice or as causing the choice. For God is an infallible
knower, and he is an irresistible willer whose power is infinite and so unpreventable.”\(^{51}\) Divine
foreknowledge threatens human freedom because, by infallibly knowing the result of a presently

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\(^{50}\) Thomas Williams “Introduction” in Augustine *De Libero Arbitrio*, xix.

\(^{51}\) Mansini, section IV.
pondered choice, God appears to remove from that choice the presence of real alternatives to from which to choose, alternatives which are so essential to the freedom inherent in choice. And divine providence threatens human freedom because, in the course of omnipotently causing His will to be done in the world, God often works through human choices – thus His causation appears to override and destroy genuine human causation.

One of the very first lessons which love of wisdom teaches us is that we must distinguish carefully between appearance and reality. It appears that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are incompatible; it likewise appears that divine providence and human freedom are incompatible. We are now in a position to delve deeply into the reality of both, to see whether or not the appearance and the reality are one. In the next chapter, we shall turn our attention to the first question at hand: Are divine foreknowledge and human freedom incompatible, as they appear to be, or is the reality much different than it seems at first glance?
Divine Foreknowledge

“Now I am confused by an even greater difficulty,” I said.

“What is it?” Philosophy answered, “though I think I know what is bothering you.”

“There seems to be a hopeless conflict between divine foreknowledge of all things and freedom of the human will.”

BOETHIUS,
The Consolation of Philosophy, Book 5

Section 1: Formulating the Problem

Reason and revelation both maintain that God is omniscient, that He possesses perfect and infallible knowledge of all that was, all that is, and all that will be. Here we are concerned only with His knowledge of future events, a particular type of knowledge designated by the term foreknowledge, proper to God alone as an omniscient being. We must take the reality of divine foreknowledge as an assumed datum, as our starting point. God infallibly knows every future event, every leaf (or sparrow) which will fall to the ground tomorrow, every future effect of every present cause, every choice which every man and woman will make. And it is precisely here, at the cross-roads of free human choice and divinely infallible foreknowledge, that we locate our problem: Are foreknowledge and free will compatible? Boethius states the problem succinctly:

For if God sees everything in advance and cannot be deceived in any way, whatever his Providence foresees will happen, must happen. Therefore, if God foreknows eternally not only all the acts of men, but also their plans and wishes, there cannot be freedom of will; for nothing whatever can be done or even desired without its being known beforehand by the infallible Providence.¹

¹ Boethius, Book 5, Prose 3, p. 94-95.
Section 2: The Metaphysics of Time

Before we can inquire into the nature of divine foreknowledge, we must first explore the nature of time, for foreknowledge is knowledge which is defined in relation to time: it is knowledge of the future. Time is one of the most pervasive aspects of our being; every action, every occurrence in our lives, indeed our very lives as a whole, are measured by time. Yet even though the dimension of time is constantly present to us, even though we are beings-in-time, as W. Norris Clarke puts it, we nevertheless have trouble understanding and articulating the very being of time itself.² Faced with the deceptively simple question “What is time?” we find ourselves at a loss, reduced to echoing the famous bewilderment of St. Augustine: “What is this time? If no one asks me, I know; if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know.”³

Time, we know from experience, is somehow inseparably related to the concept of change, to the succession of real events one after the other. But how is time related to this succession? It is tempting to conceive of time as an ontologically objective and independent measurement of these events, existing prior to their succession as a constantly and steadily flowing “river” by which we may compare the priority or posteriority of one event with respect to another. But this is a theory which both science and metaphysical inquiry quickly eliminate. Scientific exploration has discovered that we do not exist in a Newtonian universe in which time possesses its own, independent existence, but rather in an Einsteinian universe where time is relative both to the position of the observer in space, as well as to the speed of motion of both the observer and the body observed. Metaphysical analysis leads to the same conclusion: “If time is something real in itself, some real ‘flow’ before all changing bodies—hence presumably independent of them in its own being—then what is it the flow of? the flow of some other

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² Clarke, 161.
changing material body or bodies, or of some real field?" There must be some real succession of change which exists logically prior to time for time to measure.

But while time is dependent upon this real and objective succession of change, it cannot be merely identical with the change we find in the world as such. For unless the changes are compared and recognized by some mind as existing before or after one another, there is simply change as such. Only when consciousness encounters a succession of change, compares each change to some arbitrarily chosen standard (such as the revolution of the sun around the earth), and then orders each real being in the mental order of being (past, present, future), does time arise. As Clarke observes, “Time, formally as such, is the unification in some consciousness of the successive phases of a real process of change, recognized as before and after (or successive to) each other.” Put another way, “Time is some real process of successive change, held together and recognized as such in the unity of an act of consciousness.” In the language of metaphysics, the matter of time is the succession of real change in the world; its form is the unification and ordering of these changes in the mind: “Time here becomes a synthesis of real and mental being: successive real being gathered together into a mental presence by a consciousness which recognizes them as before and after.”

Now there are some philosophers and scientists who reject this commonsensical understanding of time, insisting not that time exists prior to the observable succession of events, as Newton did, but rather that there is no objective succession of events at all. Such proponents

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4 Clarke, 162.
5 Ibid., 163.
6 Ibid., 166. What has been given here is somewhat of an oversimplified theory of time. There is a great deal of debate in philosophy over the reality of movement or change in the world, and the relationship between motion in the world and the measuring of this motion by the mind. What is essential, however, is that time must have a mental component, that it cannot possibly exist without a mental measuring. The more difficult question is whether the mind is noticing change in the world, or whether it is a priori applying the concept of change to the world. Without getting deeply involved in these complications, it should be said that if the mind is to have any genuine knowledge of the world, there must be some correspondence between the mind’s measurement of change and actual change in the world. And this irreducibly mental measurement of ontologically real change in the world we call time.
of what has been labeled the B-theory of time (as opposed to the commonsense theory of time, labeled A-theory) maintain that the real world is timeless and unchanging, and that time is nothing more than the subjective movement of our consciousnesses forward (and, conceivably, backward) along the crystallized lines of existence. The B-theory maintains that “time is purely subjective and events in the future and past are every bit as real as events in the present … All moments and events – whether past, present, or future to us – are equally real and existent, and the difference between them is a subjective feature of consciousness.”7

Such a theory has the benefit of eliminating the problem of foreknowledge as such, since it removes any true distinction between present and future; thus future knowledge would be the same as present knowledge, only differing in subjective focus of consciousness.8 But the solution is much too simple, and the cost much too high: if nothing really happens, then neither are free choices really made, and we must abandon all moral responsibility. Besides, the B-theory is not only contradicted by empirical evidence and commonsense understanding of time, it is also self-contradictory:

[In the B-theory] nothing ever moves from potentiality to actuality and all decisions are already made, timelessly. But then even the movement of consciousness itself becomes illusory, and there cannot be even the illusion of any distinction of past, present, or future. Thus the very theory itself self-destructs and vanishes as not coherently thinkable. The theory eliminates the very data it is intended to explain!9

We must begin then by recognizing time for what it is: a “synthesis of real and mental being” which consists of the mental ordering of real being in succession by a consciousness.10

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8 The B-theory also has the additional benefit of making time travel a conceivable possibility, since it would consist in nothing more than the “simple” realization of the subjective nature of time, and the subsequent leap of consciousness into whatever time (and space) the time traveler wanted to visit. This fact may account in part for the popularity of the theory among certain scientists and philosophers.
9 Clarke, 171.
10 Incidentally, this mental ordering through consciousness seems to be a unique power of the human intellect, one which animals do not share. For it is the power of consciousness to hold together in the mind, through both memory
Or, as Clarke points out, we can sum up all the foregoing in the famous and wonderfully brief words of Aristotle in Book IV of his *Physics*: “‘Time is the numbering of motion according to before and after.’ Motion is the basis of reality; numbering is done by a unifying consciousness, in terms of another motion taken as a standard of reference.”  

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**Section 3: The Point of View from Eternity**

Boethius famously defined eternity as “the simultaneous possession of all perfection in a single present.” By this he does not mean simply that eternity consists of an everlasting duration, a lack of beginning and end, although this too is contained within the concept of eternity. Rather, his definition of eternity hinges upon the *simultaneous* possession of all perfection; eternity is a state of being which is not only without beginning and end, but which also involves immutability. Aquinas makes this point explicit when he agrees with Boethius’ definition of eternity, stating: “Thus eternity is known from two sources: first, because what is eternal is interminable—that is, has no beginning nor end (that is, no term either way); secondly, because eternity has no succession, being simultaneously whole.” When considering the divine simplicity (Chapter 4) it was argued that God must be immaterial because of He could not be a composite of form and matter; thus it should be fairly clear that God is also eternal, since time depends upon the measurement of motion, and motion is precisely the movement of matter.

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11 Clarke, 167.

12 Boethius, Book 5, Prose 6, p. 104.

13 *ST* I.10.1.
Lack of matter, and therefore lack of motion, in God removes any possibility of God being in time, since time has just been defined as “the numbering of motion according to before and after.” As Brian Davies puts it, “if something is totally changeless, and if it is quite distinct from any world of change, then it is also outside time. So defenders of the classical view of eternity have frequently equated eternity with timelessness.”

Thus far this seems fairly clear and fairly obvious. But the question naturally arises: if God possesses knowledge of His creation, and if God is eternal (i.e. outside of time), then what does it mean to say that He possesses knowledge of the world of being and becoming, the world which exists in time? In other words, what can it mean to say that God has eternal knowledge of the temporal? The issue is a thorny and difficult one, and indeed much has been written on the topic. A clear understanding of the relationship between God’s eternal knowledge and the temporal world is essential if we are to understand the concept of foreknowledge. Consider, in fact, the very word: “fore-knowledge.” If we are correct in maintaining that God (and therefore His knowledge) exists outside of time, then would we not be mistaken in employing temporal terminology to refer to that knowledge? How are we to understand the relationship between eternal knowledge and the temporal world?

Boethius gives us two famous visual analogies in his *Consolation of Philosophy* for understanding God’s eternal knowledge of the temporal, both of which Aquinas takes up to help us understand the point of view from eternity. The first image, adapted by Aquinas from Boethius’ account in Book 6 of *Consolation*, compares God’s eternal knowledge of the temporal to that of a man who is standing on a high vantage point looking down upon a procession of people going along a road:

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14 Davies, 149.
15 Much of the explanation that follows draws heavily from the brilliant article, Brian Shanley, “Eternal Knowledge of the Temporal in Aquinas,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (1997): 197-224.
Things reduced to act in time, as known by us successively in time, but by God (are known) in eternity, which is above time. Whence to us they cannot be certain, forasmuch as we know future contingent things as such; but (they are certain) to God alone, whose understanding is in eternity above time. Just as he who goes along the road, does not see those who come after him; whereas he who sees the whole road from a height, sees at once all traveling by the way.\textsuperscript{16}

The man journeying along the road cannot see the whole of those traveling on the road all at once, but can only see a succession of travelers, and even this succession he can only see relative to himself – this is the situation we find ourselves in, being in time, with respect to our temporal knowledge. But God, from the viewpoint of eternity, sees in one eternally present glance the entire succession of time, just as the man from a high vantage point “sees at once all traveling by the way.”

The second image is a more technical analogy from geometry which Aquinas takes from Book 4 of the \textit{Consolation}. The analogy of God’s eternal knowledge of the temporal is that of the relationship between the center point of a circle and the circumference of the circle:

For, since time lies within motion, eternity, which is completely outside motion, in no way belongs in time. Furthermore, since the being of what is eternal does not pass away, eternity is present in its presentiality to any time or instant of time. We may see an example of sorts in the case of a circle. Let us consider a determined point on the circumference of a circle. Although it is indivisible, it does not co-exist simultaneously with any other point as to position, since it is the order of position that produces the continuity of the circumference. On the other hand, the center of the circle, which is no part of the circumference, is directly opposed to any given determinate point on the circumference. Hence, whatever is found in any part of time coexists with what is eternal as being present to it, although with respect to some other time it be past or future. Something can be present to what is eternal only by being present to the whole of it, since the eternal does not have the duration of succession. The divine intellect, therefore, sees in the whole of it eternity, as being present to it, whatever takes place through the whole course of time.\textsuperscript{17}

The value of this image is that it helps us to avoid the mistake (often a subtle and involuntary one) of thinking and talking about the relationship between God’s eternity and our

\textsuperscript{16} ST I.14.13.  
\textsuperscript{17} SCG 1.66.7.
time as if that relation was *temporal*. This, of course, is precisely what it cannot be. If we are to conceive of the relationship between eternity and time through visual analogy, we should employ a *spatial* analogy, because this prevents us from falling into the trap of speaking about eternity in a temporal way. A moment in time relates to other moments in time temporally, as either before or after; but a moment of time relates to eternity as “being present to the whole of it, since the eternal does not have the duration of succession.” This is what Aquinas means when he says that “whatever is found in any part of time coexists with what is eternal as being present to it, although with respect to some other time it be past or future.” C.S. Lewis likewise employs a spatial metaphor to make the same point:

If you picture Time as a straight line along which we have to travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn. We come to the parts of the line one by one: we have to leave A behind before we get to B, and cannot reach C until we leave B behind. God, from above or outside or all round, contains the whole line, and sees it all.18

Section 4: A Partial Solution

The foregoing concerning the relationship between eternity and time is crucially important for the problem of foreknowledge and human freedom. Foreknowledge is a problem for human free will precisely because, and only insofar as, it seems to impose necessity upon what philosophers would call a future contingent action. In other words, God’s knowledge of neither a past free choice nor a present free choice seems to present any problem for the freedom of that choice. It is only when we consider our *future* free choices, and God’s infallible knowledge of them, that they seem to be determined.

To illustrate this point, as well as to show the nature of both necessity and contingency, let us imagine that Socrates is sitting on a chair in a room at 3:00 in the afternoon, and his

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disciple Plato is there in the same room watching him. As Plato watches Socrates sitting on his chair at 3:00, Plato is merely observing Socrates freely choosing to stay seated; presented at that moment with the choice of sitting or standing, Socrates freely chooses to sit. He is in no way compelled to sit by Plato’s knowledge that at 3:00 he is, in fact, sitting – thus we say that Socrates’ choice to sit is contingent, that it depends not upon some external agent or fact, but upon Socrates’ own internal choice to sit rather than stand.

But notice that there is, in one sense, a certain necessity to the fact that Socrates is sitting. For if Plato sees that at 3:00 Socrates is sitting then, although it is true that Socrates is freely choosing to sit, the fact remains that at 3:00 Socrates must be sitting. In other words, if we use Aquinas’ commonsense definition of necessity as “that which must be,” then there is a certain sense in which we must say of every actual event that it is necessary, precisely because it is actual. If Plato witnesses Socrates freely choosing to sit at 3:00, on the one hand Plato can say of this event that it is wholly contingent, because there is nothing compelling Socrates to sit; on the other hand Plato can also truthfully say, in the language of Boethius, that the event is conditionally necessary, because if he truly knows Socrates to be sitting, Socrates must be sitting. But notice that this conditional necessity poses no threat to Socrates’ freedom, but in fact is completely dependent upon his free choice to sit or to stand. For if Socrates, at 3:05, freely chooses to stand up, then Plato at 3:05 observes that it is now conditionally necessary that Socrates be standing. This is how it is with all knowledge of present contingent events – such knowledge only imposes conditional necessity, but this in no way interferes with the contingency of the event.

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19 This example is an elaboration of a similar illustration taken from ST I.14.13 where Aquinas asks whether the knowledge of God is of future contingent things.
21 Boethius, Book 5, Prose 6, p. 107.
But now let us imagine that the day before Plato had visited the Delphic Oracle, where he was infallibly informed that at 3:05 on this very day, Socrates will stand up from his chair. Now, at 3:00, Plato stands in the room where Socrates is sitting, possessing the knowledge of his master’s future contingent act. The question arises: does Plato’s infallible knowledge of Socrates’ future contingent choice to stand at 3:05 impose a necessity upon that choice, or not? Of course, at 3:05, when Socrates chooses to stand, there will be the conditional necessity of his actual standing. But the type of necessity we are now considering goes beyond conditional necessity into the realm of what we might call absolute necessity, or *necessity of coercion*.\(^{22}\) We have already seen that what is known, if it is truly known, must in fact truly be; therefore it is also true that a future event which is known, if it is truly known, must in fact truly come to pass. Does this then mean that Plato’s foreknowledge of Socrates’ free, contingent choice to stand removes the contingency from that choice and renders it absolutely necessary? For even though Socrates at 3:05 will experience both continuing to sit and standing up as the two free alternatives open to him at that moment, and even though he will maintain at 3:05 that his free choice to stand is wholly contingent and in no way necessary, nonetheless if Plato’s knowledge is completely infallible, doesn’t this mean that Socrates could not have remained sitting? For, if he stayed seated, then Plato’s knowledge would have been fallible. But Plato’s knowledge is infallible. So does it then follow that at 3:05, no matter what Socrates believed about the freedom of his choice, he never had a genuine choice to remain sitting, but rather it was absolutely necessary for him to stand?\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\) *ST* I.82.1.

\(^{23}\) Some thinkers maintain that knowledge of future contingents does *not* impose absolute necessity, and that in this case Socrates would have freely chosen to sit and Plato’s knowledge would have conformed to that free choice, but not in such a way as to determine it. Foreknowledge does not impose any necessity of coercion upon the will, it is argued, but only the logical necessity that it could not have come to pass that Socrates had not chosen to stand up. Such an approach seems to be very possible, and it is logically compelling. But when applied to *divine* foreknowledge, as for example William Lane Craig applies it to the problem of divine foreknowledge in *The Only
Now the problem of divine foreknowledge and free will is often formulated in just such a way. The reasoning runs that an omniscient God would have knowledge of all things, including future contingent actions, and that this in turn would create the same dilemma of imposing an absolute necessity upon a contingent choice which Plato’s foreknowledge seems to impose upon Socrates’ contingent choice to stand in our example. But this problem is only a problem if we are under the mistaken assumption that God’s knowledge is like our knowledge, bound to the succession of temporal events, yet somehow able to run ahead to see what will happen next. As we have seen, nothing could be further from the truth. God’s knowledge of temporal events is not itself temporal, for God’s perspective from eternity stands in relationship to each moment of time as an eternal present: “Thus, if you will think about the foreknowledge by which God distinguishes all things, you will rightly consider it to be not a foreknowledge of future events, but knowledge of a never changing present.”24 Such a knowledge seems to be foreknowledge from our perspective, because it is of a moment which stands in relation to our present time as being in the future; but to God, who is outside of time and to whom each moment in the created, temporal order stands as an eternal present, it is simply knowledge of what actually is.25 And this present knowledge, like Plato’s present knowledge that Socrates is now sitting at 3:00 or now standing at 3:05, imposes only conditional necessity, not absolute necessity:

If God foresaw our acts, it would be very hard to understand how we could be free not to do them. But suppose God is outside and above the Time-line. In that case, what we call ‘tomorrow’ is visible to Him in just the same way as what we

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24 Boethius, Book 5, Prose 6, p. 106.
25 As we have already seen in part, Aquinas makes this point in _ST_ I.13.14: “Things reduced to act in time, as known by us successively in time, but by God (are known) in eternity, which is above time. Whence to us they cannot be certain, forasmuch as we know future contingent things as such; but (they are certain) to God alone, whose understanding is in eternity above time . . . . Hence what is known by us must be necessary, even as it is in itself; for what is future contingent itself, cannot be known by us. Whereas what is known by God must be necessary according to the mode in which they are subject to the divine knowledge, as already stated [what we have called contingent necessity], but not absolutely as considered in their own causes.”
call ‘today’. All the days are ‘Now’ for Him. He does not remember you doing things yesterday; He simply sees you doing them: because, though tomorrow is not yet there for you, it is for Him. You never supposed that your actions at this moment were any less free because God knows what you are doing. Well, He knows your tomorrow’s actions in just the same way—because He is already in tomorrow and can simply watch you. In a sense, He does not know your action till you have done it: but then the moment at which you have done it is already ‘Now’ for Him.26

Because God is omniscient, moreover, there is another reason why His eternally present knowledge of contingent events, such as free human choices, can in no way impose necessity upon those events. For, if the divine knowledge did impose such necessity, God would then be involved in a contradiction. God’s omniscience means that God has perfect knowledge. Perfect knowledge includes not only the fact of an event occurring, such as the free choice of a human being, but also the mode of that event occurring, in this case its contingency. Now, suppose that God knows a free choice made by a man, such as the choice of Socrates to stand up, an action which is wholly contingent. If in knowing this contingent action, God imposes necessity upon that action, then He no longer perfectly knows the action. For if God knows the action perfectly, He knows that its mode is contingent; but if in so knowing He changes its mode to one of necessity, then His knowledge of its contingency would thereby be incorrect, and hence imperfect. But God’s knowledge cannot be imperfect, because He is omniscient, and therefore we may be certain that God’s knowledge in no way imposes necessity upon an event. Rather, he knows contingent events as contingent (such as those actions which result from the free choice of the human will) and necessary events as necessary.

26 Lewis, Mere Christianity, 170.
Section 5: Crippling Wrong Assumptions about God’s Knowledge

It seems, then, that we can be confident in asserting that God’s foreknowledge (or, more properly speaking, simply God’s knowledge as such) is compatible with human freedom, and that this is so because His eternal perspective of each temporal moment is outside of time, and thus His knowledge of a moment which would be future from our perspective is eternally present from His. God’s knowledge poses no more of a threat to our free choice than does the knowledge of an onlooker observing the free choices we are making right at this moment.

But there are those who would question whether or not our picture of God’s eternal knowledge of the temporal is an accurate one.27 The main problem that such thinkers have with God’s eternally present knowledge of the temporal is that it radically misrepresents the dynamic and flowing nature of time. Take, for example, the circle analogy which Aquinas employs in describing the relation of eternity to time. The medieval philosopher Duns Scotus (along with many contemporary analytic philosophers) has objected that this analogy is seriously flawed, and that it reveals an error in Aquinas’ metaphysics which is detrimental to his claim that all of time can be eternally present to God. Scotus begins by asserting that “(1) only what actually exists (esse existentiae) can be present to God and (2) only the temporal present actually exists.”28 He then attacks Aquinas’ circle metaphor by pointing out that each point on the circumference of a circle actually exists as present to the center of the circle because the circumference of a circle is static; but since this circumference is meant to represent the dynamic, flowing line of time, the image is exceedingly misleading. If it is to be an accurate picture, maintains Scotus, we must imagine a point moving in a circumference around the center: “since time is not a fixed

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27 Among these is William Lane Craig, who maintains that the proposal “Truth and God are Timeless” is an unsuccessful attempt at escaping fatalism (cf. p. 64). As we shall see, his position and similar positions have made one of the three crippling assumptions about God’s knowledge which are explored in this section.

circumference but rather flowing, nothing of the circumference exists except the actual instant – thus nothing can be present to eternity (which is like the center) except that instant which is as it were the present.”

If such a critique is valid, then the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom has not been solved. For, it now seems, the only way that it could be true that God has eternally present knowledge of the temporal would be if time were something static and fixed, requiring that “the past and the future be ontologically on a par with presently existing reality.” But this is precisely the B-theory of time which we have rejected; besides, Aquinas explicitly agrees that the future as such does not possess being, that it is not real as the present is real. Therefore if, as Scotus presumes, “intuitive divine knowledge by eternal presence presupposes a real relation of co-existence between the knower and the known,” then it would be impossible for God to have an eternally present knowledge of the future, which does not yet exist. The dilemma is summed up by Richard Creel: “according to the logic of Aquinas’ position, either the future is actual for God to know it, and so time and change are illusory, or God is mistaken.”

Brian Shanley identifies at least two assumptions which all such critiques share, two assumptions which are ultimately and fundamentally flawed and which do not correspond to the reality of God’s eternal knowledge. If we are to properly understand God’s eternal knowledge of the temporal, this can only be done against the background context of God’s knowledge of created being in general, a context which these shared assumptions seem to overlook. Once these flawed assumptions have been corrected and a proper understanding of God’s knowledge

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31 See ST I.14.10.
has been reached, the foregoing defense of the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom will remain standing, free from error.

The first of these assumptions is that God’s knowledge, like our knowledge, is speculative, including His knowledge of the future – in other words, that His knowledge conforms to the object which it knows, that it is effected by and dependent upon what is known. This in turn means that the object must first exist for Him to know it, and, as we have already seen, this presents a problem because the future does not yet exist for God to know it. The second assumption is that “there must be some kind of isomorphism between God’s knowledge and the way things really exist. If God knows things tenselessly, then they must actually exist tenselessly. Conversely, if reality is tensed, then God’s knowledge must somehow be tensed.”

This would completely eliminate the critical point that God’s eternal knowledge of the temporal consists in an eternally present knowledge of that which is truly temporal in its own right.

Section 6: Aquinas’ Penetrating Insight – *Scientia Dei est causa rerum*

What both of these failed assumptions share, and what all flawed critiques of the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom have in common, is a radically mistaken understanding of the nature of divine knowledge. Far from being speculative, “God’s knowledge is not effected by and dependent upon what is known, but rather is itself causative of what is known: *Scientia dei est causa rerum* [the knowledge of God is the cause of things].”

This must be true if we take very seriously the idea of creation, for God, as Creator, is necessarily the first cause of all being, the *causa esse*. But, we ask, how is God’s knowledge related to this causation? It cannot be the case that God knows His creation as human beings

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34 Ibid., 203.
35 Ibid., 205.
know the world, for our knowledge depends upon the existence of a created universe of beings which we first discover through our senses and subsequently come to know through the process of mental abstraction. But God knows all of His creation not through having encountered it, but through having made it. In other words, God fully knows every created being through knowing Himself as the cause of that being. This is so because “an effect is adequately known when its cause is known,” since “the likeness of every effect somehow preexists in its cause.” Therefore God’s omniscience, which includes perfect self-knowledge, entails that He knows all that He has created precisely because He created it. And furthermore, because in God both knowledge and will are one through the divine simplicity (as was demonstrated when considering His attributes in Chapter 4), the doctrine of creation entails that the knowledge of God is the cause of things. As Aquinas puts it, “it is manifest that God causes things by His intellect, since His being is His act of understanding; and hence His knowledge must be the cause of things, in so far as His will is joined to it.”

So we must once and for all abandon the idea that God’s knowledge resembles our own. In fact, “the divine intellect’s relationship to the world is the obverse of our own: whereas our knowledge passively presupposes the existence of its object and is measured by it, God’s causal knowledge actively precedes and measures what it knows.” Far from being speculative, and far from corresponding to an already existing future being, God’s knowledge is causal, is the causa esse of that very future being when it occurs. In the words of Augustine’s famous insight in De Trinitate, “Not because they are, does God know all creatures spiritual and temporal, but because

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36 SCG 1.49.2,3.
37 ST I.14.8.
He knows them, therefore they are.”\(^{39}\) So much then for the first assumption that God’s knowledge must be speculative.

The second assumption, that there is an isomorphism between God’s knowledge and the way things exist, is much more easily addressed. Boethius reminds us of the epistemological principle that “Everything which is known is known not according to its own power but rather according to the capacity of the knower.”\(^{40}\) Now we have already seen that God knows not through abstraction, as we do, but rather by perfectly knowing Himself; because He is the cause of every being, He in turn knows every being as an effect of His causality. Once we apply to God’s causal knowledge the principle that whatever is known is known according to the capacity of the knower, it immediately becomes apparent that just because God knows temporal things does not mean that He Himself must have temporal knowledge, or that He must know in a temporal mode. God does not need to know temporal things temporally, but rather can know temporal things eternally through his eternal causal knowledge.\(^{41}\)

Whereas earlier we asserted that God’s eternal knowledge of the temporal could not be temporal, we now must add that neither can it be speculative knowledge. The relationship between eternity and time, a relationship which was approximated in our earlier analogies of the privileged observer or the center of a circle and its circumference, can now be much more fully explained on the basis of God’s causal knowledge:

God’s knowledge of the temporal world is as its eternal cause. God knows what is future to us not because it already has some kind of real temporal existence, but rather through the eternal act whereby the Creator God causes everything to come


\(^{40}\) Boethius, Book 5, Prose 4, p. 100.

\(^{41}\) Aquinas makes use of this principle that “knowledge takes its modality from the knower rather than from the known” to explain how God, who is not material and who lacks material senses, can nonetheless have knowledge of particular things, since matter is the principle of individuating universal forms into particular beings. Once again, it is through his causal knowledge that God knows particular beings, all the more so because He created not only the form, but also the matter, of every being in the universe. (Cf. Shanley, “Eternal Knowledge,” 214).
into existence at its proper time. What is future to us is present to God as
\textit{creatura}, as the object or term of God’s eternal causality. It is only when
considered precisely as the effect of God’s creative activity and thus taken up into
the measure of divine eternity that all temporal beings are present to and coexist
with God. . . . What is future, contingent, indeterminate and unknowable to us is
present to the God whose eternal act brings it into existence.\footnote{Shanley, “Eternal Knowledge,” 223.}

\textbf{Section 7: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom}

“If we conclude that God has no foreknowledge because he is outside time,” observes
Brian Davies, “then it does seem true that he can know what people will freely do without
compromising their freedom.”\footnote{Davies, 188.} And this is precisely what we must conclude. God’s existence
is not to be found within the ebb and flow of time; it is not to be located in a temporal sequence
of events that depends upon the motion of matter for its very being. Rather, “God is altogether
outside the sequence of time, being, as it were, a great citadel of eternity which is altogether at
once and beneath which lies the whole course of time in one simple vision.”\footnote{Aquinas, \textit{In Peri Hermeneias}, I, XIV, ed. R.M. Spiazzi (Turin 1955), 195, quoted in Davies, 188.}

Therefore, although from our temporal perspective we refer to God’s knowledge of a future event as
“foreknowledge,” from the point of view of the eternal present it is simply knowledge of that
which actually is. We cannot conflate our temporal mode of existence with God’s eternal nature:

The [divine] act is, at its subjective pole (at God’s end, if we may use that phrase),
timeless, even thought at its objective pole (at the creatures end) it is temporal.
God timelessly exerts a creative activity towards and upon the whole spatio-
temporal fabric of the created universe. This will be experienced as temporal by
each creature who observes it and describes it from his own spatio-temporal
standpoint; but it no more implies that God is in time . . . than the fact that I
describe God in English means that God is English.\footnote{E.L. Mascall, \textit{The Openness of Being} (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 166.}

Knowledge of a future contingent event \textit{does} create absolute necessity; but knowledge of
a present contingent event as such does not. Therefore God’s eternal knowledge of those events

\footnote{Shanley, “Eternal Knowledge,” 223.}
\footnote{Davies, 188.}
\footnote{Aquinas, \textit{In Peri Hermeneias}, I, XIV, ed. R.M. Spiazzi (Turin 1955), 195, quoted in Davies, 188.}
\footnote{E.L. Mascall, \textit{The Openness of Being} (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 166.}
which are future with respect to us, but eternally present with respect to God, no more poses a problem for human freedom than does God’s present knowledge that the reader is reading these words at this moment. God’s eternal knowledge of the temporal is not speculative knowledge, nor is it an isomorphic temporal knowledge. Rather, it is causal knowledge – God eternally knows the temporal precisely because He knows Himself as cause of every temporal being.

But suddenly we are struck by a new and troubling thought. We have maintained that God’s knowledge must be causal, that scientia dei est causa rerum. And without God’s causality making possible His eternal knowledge of the temporal, divine foreknowledge and human freedom could not be compatible. Furthermore, we have maintained that God’s knowledge of His created order is precisely a causal knowledge: He knows every created being in the universe by knowing Himself as its creator, as its cause. In other words, God’s knowledge and God’s causality are co-extensive – His knowledge extends just as far as his causality, because His knowledge depends upon his causality. But we have insisted that God’s knowledge extends to human beings in general, and to their free wills and thoughts in particular. Does it not therefore follow that God’s causality also extends to the human intellect and the will? As Aquinas explains, this is precisely what follows, and in fact if God’s causality did not extend to the intellect and will, these could not be known by the divine intellect:

By knowing His essence, therefore, God knows all things to which His causality extends. But it extends to the operations of the intellect and the will. For, since each thing acts through its form, from which the thing has a certain being, so the fount and source of all being, from which is also every form, must be the source of all operation; for the effects of second causes are grounded more principally in first causes. Therefore, God knows the thoughts and affections of the mind.46

We have shown the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom, but in its place has risen an even more puzzling problem: is divine causality, a causality which extends to

46 SCG 1.68.3.
the human intellect and the human will, compatible with human free will? Or, put another way, the problem of divine foreknowledge must be reframed: is God’s active and *causal* knowledge of particular human choices compatible with human freedom? This is the problem of divine providence and human freedom, and it is the problem which we are now in a position to address.
You believe that the world is not subject to the accidents of chance, but to divine reason. Therefore, you have nothing to fear. From this tiny spark, the living fire can be rekindled.

Boethius, 
*The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book 1

For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

St. Paul, 
*Letter to the Philippians*, 2.13

Section 1: Formulating the Problem

In the previous chapter it was argued that the knowledge of God, far from being temporal and speculative, is both eternal and causal. In fact, God’s knowledge of all created being extends precisely as far as His causality of all created being, since His knowledge of the created order is accomplished through His perfect self-knowledge of Himself as cause, a self-knowledge which allows a perfect and intimate knowledge of the effects of His own causality. Any other account of God’s knowledge not only misrepresents divine omniscience, but also renders divine foreknowledge and human freedom incompatible. But even though God’s causal knowledge solves the problem of divine foreknowledge and human freedom, it seems to create a new and even more difficult problem: “For many it is axiomatic that a causal account of divine knowledge entails a denial of human freedom because it is usually assumed that human freedom requires causal independence from God.”¹ In other words, by insisting upon the inescapably causal nature of God’s knowledge as the means by which to secure the compatibility of

foreknowledge and human freedom, perhaps we have inadvertently eliminated the possibility of human freedom due to God’s omnipotent causality, a causality which, it has been maintained, extends even to human thoughts and intentions.

William Lane Craig makes precisely this argument when he considers Thomas Aquinas’ insistence that *scientia dei est causa rerum* (the knowledge of God is the cause of things):

> It seems to me that having sought to escape the clutches of theological fatalism, Aquinas flees into the arms of divine determinism. In maintaining that God’s knowledge is the cause of everything God knows, Thomas transforms the universe into a nexus which, though freely chosen by God, is causally determined from above, thus eliminating human freedom.²

The problem now facing us is not that of theological fatalism (the incompatibility of human freedom and divine foreknowledge), but rather that of divine determinism (the incompatibility of human freedom and divine causality). If divine causality extends to free human choices, does the omnipotent accomplishment of the divine will therefore determine these choices, such that they are no longer free? This is the question of divine providence and human freedom, and it is a question which we are now in a position to answer.

Before such an answer is attempted, however, a brief preliminary remark must be made: the reader should be warned that what follows will not be particularly easy going. Mark Pontifex makes this point in the introduction to his book *Freedom and Providence*: “Of its very nature the subject is one in which the imagination has little scope; it is almost wholly a matter of argument. To try to popularize the subject, in the sense of trying to make it easy reading, would be

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² William Lane Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez* (The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988), 126. Shanley specifically mentions Craig as one of a number of contemporary philosophers who reject the causal nature of God’s knowledge because of its seeming implications for determinism. Here, as before, the analytical nature of Craig’s approach (shared by many of his contemporaries), while logically convincing, nevertheless lacks an adequate metaphysical understanding of both eternity and divine causality. Such an understanding, which was so essential when considering God’s eternal knowledge of the temporal, will likewise prove essential when considering the relationship between divine causality and human freedom.
inevitably to leave the real subject aside and to talk of something else.”\(^3\) And a further difficulty for the reader must be added to the limited scope of imagination and to the complexity of argument: the reconciliation of divine providence and human freedom is one which can only be achieved by drawing deeply from all that has gone before. A proper metaphysical understanding of causality, the avoidance of the metaphysical fallacy of misplaced concreteness, the centrality of both divine transcendence and creation, an adequate anthropology which accounts for genuine human freedom, the causal nature of divine knowledge – in short, every central point made thus far – will prove essential to understanding the compatibility of providence and freedom.

Section 2: Defining the Providential and Distinguishing It from the Miraculous

Because of the weight which will be given to the Thomistic account of providence and freedom in this chapter (an account which itself draws extensively from other Christian philosophers, most notably Boethius), a slight ambiguity must be addressed which may arise concerning the technical definition and use of the term *providence* in this chapter. This ambiguity arises when we consider that Boethius defined providence as “the divine reason itself which belongs to the most high ruler of all things and which governs all things,” while he employed another term, *fate*, to designate “the disposition by which Providence joins all things to their own order.”\(^4\) Similarly, Aquinas makes the distinction between “the reason of order, which is called providence and disposition” and “the execution of order, which is termed government,” and he subsequently considers providence and divine government under separate questions in the *Summa Theologica* (I.22 and I.103-119 respectively).\(^5\) So, according to these classic sources, it seems that providence concerns a mental ordering performed by the divine intellect, while some

\(^3\) Pontifex, 7.
\(^4\) Boethius, Book 4, Prose 6, p. 82.
\(^5\) ST I.22.1, ad 1.
other term, such as fate or government, concerns the actual working out of this mental ordering by a causal operation of the divine will in the world. But this is misleading. For divine simplicity requires that both God’s will and His intellect are really one and the same thing; besides, as we have already seen, the knowledge of God is causal knowledge. In fact, Aquinas locates both the “reason of order” and the “execution of order” under the general use of the term providence, and explains that providence involves both the divine will and intellect: “Providence resides in the intellect; but presupposes an act of willing the end. Nobody gives a precept about things done for an end; unless he will that end … in God both the will and intellect are one and the same thing.”

Therefore, while both Boethius and Aquinas treat providence and government (or fate) as separate aspects of God’s providential care, they do so only nominally, to distinguish the eternal ordering by the divine intellect from the temporal working out of that order by the divine will. In reality, the eternal “reason of order” and the temporal “execution of order” occur simultaneously. For this reason the term providence will henceforth be used to include both the mental action of the divine intellect and the causal action of the divine will. However, it will primarily be used to mean any and every divine causal action (that aspect of providence which Aquinas calls divine government), because it is precisely here that the problem arises with human free will. Thus the question of divine providence and human freedom is a question of causation. Asking whether divine providence is compatible with human free will is equivalent to asking whether God’s causal operation in every created being, including His causal operation in human beings, overrides the self-determined causation of the human will so as to destroy its freedom.

Special attention must be given to the fact that the question of providence has been defined here not as a question about God’s causal operation in general, but rather as a question

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6 ST I.22.1, ad 3.
which concerns God’s causal operation *in every created being*. The point of this distinction is to recognize the fact that God’s causal activity in the created world falls into two distinct categories: the miraculous and the providential. It is of course perfectly true that miracles are events which are caused by God and which are ordered to a particular end which God has willed, and in this sense they fall under divine providence as it has been defined. Nevertheless, although various objections have been leveled against miracles (most notably their supposed *a priori* impossibility, a position made famous by the empiricist Hume), they are not objected to on the grounds that they preclude human freedom.

A miracle, according to the wonderfully brief and clear definition given by C.S. Lewis, is “an interference with Nature by supernatural power;” and as such it is of course an act of God. But if a miracle is an act of God which *interferes* with the laws of nature, then we can and should distinguish divine providence from the properly miraculous by stating that providence denotes the causal acts of God which work *within* the laws of nature. Included among the laws of nature are those laws which govern the nature of causality, those laws which dictate which causes are necessary and which are contingent. Of course, free human choices fall into the latter category of causes, and it is precisely the contingency of human choices which guarantees their freedom. Thus, to be strictly consistent, providence must extend to all causality, including human causality. It is for this reason that miracles raise no question of compatibility with human freedom, but providence does raise such a question: when it is properly understood as the divine causal operation at work in and through every created being (including in human beings and their free choices), providence seems to destroy the inherent contingency of those choices.

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8 The distinction between providence and miracles is explored by Lewis when he reflects upon the fact that prayers are answered by God in one of two ways: (1) through the supernatural interference in nature which occurs when a miracle takes place, or (2) through the supernatural direction of natural events which is providence. He makes an
The causation of human choices is unique among all other created causes because it alone (as far as we know) is free – no other cause in the universe posses the special human dignity of free choice. While human causes may be unique in their freedom, however, both human beings and their choices exist in a universe created by God, and thus human causation shares with every other causation in the universe the fact that it is created. The analogous nature of all created causation (analogous because all such causation shares the fact that it is created by God), allows us to consider the broader relationship between divine causation and all created causation as the context in which we can then turn to the specific instance of the relationship between divine and human causation. As it will be made clear, the compatibility of divine providence and human freedom depends completely upon the utter transcendence of God (a transcendence which, paradoxically, is the grounds for His immanence in every cause), the relationship between every created being and God their Creator, and the primacy of the divine creative will as the causa esse (cause of being).9

When we considered the attributes of God in Chapter 4, it became apparent that God’s most fundamental attribute, in terms of His relationship to the universe, is the fact that He is its Creator. This, in turn, entails two important consequences for thinking about God: (1) the fact that God created the entire universe _ex nihilo_ means that He must utterly and completely transcend the created universe as its Creator. In other words, “God cannot be a thing, an existent

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9 In both this outline of approach, as well as in all of what follows, I am once again deeply indebted to the thought of Brian Shanley. His analysis of Aquinas’ deep metaphysical understanding of and insistence upon God’s transcendence and creation in the article “Divine Causation and Human Freedom in Aquinas” has proven invaluable.
among others. It is not possible that God and the universe should add up to make two.”

(2) At the same time, however, the fact that everything which really exists in the universe participates in esse, esse which the doctrine of Creation maintains is given and sustained by God who is pure esse itself, means that God stands in relationship to the universe as the cause of all being, the causa esse. These two attributes of God, His transcendence and His primary role as causa esse, both of which flow from the doctrine of creation, form the “complementary doctrines” which safeguard the compatibility of divine providence and human freedom.

The role which divine transcendence plays in our understanding of providence and freedom is primarily negative; it reminds us, in the words of Wittgenstein, that “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Practically, this means that we must resist the temptation to conceive of the causal relationship between God and His creation by means of insufficient and misleading imagery: “if we strive to remain faithful to ‘the distinction’ of God from the world, we will realize that we are unable to find an image for the interaction of creatures with their creator, since one of the terms is not an object in the world but is the source of all that the other is.” Indeed, the Christian doctrine of creation and corresponding insistence upon God’s transcendence not only prevents us from employing faulty images, it also prevents us from employing faulty metaphysics:

God is not part of a larger whole comprised of God plus the world, but rather transcends the created order whose existence is a gratuitous gift. The “Christian distinction” cashes out here to mean that God and creatures cannot be conceived as rival causes vying for primacy or dominance in the same metaphysical space (in the way occasionalists seem to fear). Nor can God and creatures cooperate in the same metaphysical space as co-causes (in the way that Molinists like to

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10 McCabe, 6.
11 Burrell, 122.
13 Burrell, 128.
imagine). It is rather that God the Creator must act in created causes in a way that utterly transcends any mundane model and therefore any hint of either rivalry or cooperation.\textsuperscript{14}

The relationship between God and His creatures is utterly and absolutely unique, having no parallel within the universe, and thus we must take care in all that follows lest we inadvertently conceive of the causal relationship between God and creation (including human beings) in the same way we would conceive of a causal relationship between two creatures within the universe.

Divine transcendence will once again become important when we consider the causal categories of necessity and contingency, as well as the categories of primary, secondary, and instrumental causality. As a transition from considering God as transcendent to considering God as \textit{causa esse}, however, it should be noted that the doctrine of creation is the essential point which prevents us from conceiving of the transcendent God as eternally “outside” the created order. In the first place, this type of language is helpful if it prevents us from treating God as one creature among many; but it is of course metaphorical language, for “outside” is a \textit{spatial} term, and as such can only be applied to physical beings within a material universe. In fact, as Germain Grisez points out, when we conceive of God, our unwavering insistence upon his transcendence must be tempered in turn by our similarly adamant insistence upon His immanence: “the uncaused cause is no more outside things—alien to them—than within things.”\textsuperscript{15} To say that God is “within” beings is also, of course, to use metaphorical and spatial language; the point is that it is no further from the truth than to say that he is “outside” all of creation. If God is the Creator of all that is, if He created the universe \textit{ex nihilo}, then in affirming His transcendent otherness from all creation, we are also affirming His immanent closeness within all creation.

\textsuperscript{14} Shanley, “Divine Causation,” 103.
\textsuperscript{15} Grisez, 280.
God’s immanence is, in this sense, the metaphysical co-principle of His transcendence, for the one cannot exist without the other. But in addition to simply revealing the relationship between divine immanence and transcendence, the doctrine of creation provides a metaphysical explanation of God’s radical interiority within every created being. God, as the cause and sustainer of all being (the *causa esse*), can properly be said to exist intimately within every being. Brian Davies explains this point by drawing from Aquinas’ piercing insight concerning the intimate and profound interiority of existence to every creature, an insight which explains the possibility of God’s immanence:

If he is the Creator of everything, then he must be present to everything as making it to be. In other words, as the cause of the existence of everything, God must be present to everything, and, in this sense, can be said to exist in everything. As Aquinas puts it: “God exists in everything . . . as an agent is present to that in which its action is taking place . . . [God] causes existence in creatures . . . . And God is causing this effect in things not just when they begin to exist, but all the time they are maintained in existence. . . . During the whole period of a thing’s existence, therefore, God must be present to it . . . . Now existence is more intimately and profoundly interior to things than anything else. . . . So God must exist and exist intimately in everything (*Summa Theologica* Ia, 8, 1).” This seems to me exactly right. God, we may say, is in everything since everything exists by virtue of God’s presence to it as Creator.¹⁶

God’s intimate interiority to all created being, therefore, is a direct result of the fact that He is the *causa esse*. Now existence is the primary and fundamental act of every being which must come before any and every other act (e.g. a dog must exist before it can bark).¹⁷ Therefore, because God creates and actively preserves the existence of every being in the universe, it follows that God’s primary causation in creatures is His causing of their existence. But God’s action does not simply terminate in creating and preserving the existence a particular creature, as if He created and wound up a toy soldier and then let it run on its own. If *real* actions are to be

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¹⁶ Davies, 197.
¹⁷ *Esse* is ontologically prior to every other act, not temporally prior. As soon as a given thing exists, it exists with all of its particular actualities and it can immediately act. But these actualities and actions all depend upon the act of *esse* for their very existence, and in this sense *esse* is said to come before every other act.
performed by a creature, they depend firstly upon the creature’s actual existence, and secondly upon the creature’s essence (for every creature acts in accordance with its nature); as both the essence and existence of the creature are created by God, the actions which result from them are also a result of God’s causality. To put it another way, “Every action in the world is an action of God; not because it is not an action of a creature but because it is by God’s action that the creature is *itself* and has its *own* activity.”

What all of this amounts to is that the fundamental nature of the relationship between divine causation and creatures is to be found in the fact that God is the *causa esse*: “God alone is the proper and immediate cause of *esse*, the intensive act that is the root perfection of being. Every element of created being—its substance, accidents, and activities—is *is* only because of the fundamental actuality of *esse*.” And now we are in a position to derive our first major conclusion concerning providence and creative causality. In the first place we have seen that God’s primary relationship to all created being is that of *causa esse*. Furthermore, the divine causation of being entails the creation of all of the situations in which the creature will act, and all of the powers by which the creature will act. And finally this divine causation is intimately and radically interior to the creature. From all of this it follows that, far from being a rival and exterior agent, “The foundation of God’s causal involvement is in God’s creation and conservation of beings with their own dynamic natures and active powers … The primary mode of divine causation is creative and constitutive, not controlling and compelling.”

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18 McCabe, 7.
20 Ibid., 103, 105.
Section 4: Plunging Deeper Into the Nature of Causality

At this point the reader might remark that what has been stated thus far regarding divine causality and its relationship to creation has been interesting, and perhaps has introduced a new metaphysical framework in which to situate the relationship between God and creatures as such, but it seems to have lacked a consideration of the real issue at hand. Although it has been maintained that divine causation stands in relation to the universe of created beings as the transcendent *causa esse*, nothing near an adequate account has been given concerning what this means for the causal actions of creatures, let alone for the free choices made by human beings. This is true, and it is to this task that we shall now turn. However, it should be noted that while the discussion thus far has been more or less restricted to the being of creatures as such, and has not focused primarily upon their causal actions, nevertheless in discussing God’s primary causation as *causa esse* it was maintained that this divine causality extends to creature’s acts, and that it does so in an interior, creative, constitutive way which neither precludes nor overpowers the creature’s own causality. How this should be so is the question now at hand.

Let us take an example presented by Guy Mansini, O.S.B. to consider the relationship between God’s causality and the causality of a created being:

Fruit trees make sugar. And God makes fruit trees. Is it that God makes the trees, and then the trees, independently of God, make sugar? No. . . . God makes the fruit trees making sugar. The trees really make sugar. But unless God is making it, there is no tree, and unless God is making the tree’s making, there is no making of sugar. You can even say, if you like, that God makes sugar; and that, since he can be viewed here as a principal cause in relation to an instrument, the tree, he is even more responsible for the sugar than is the tree. Still, even if he is chiefly responsible for the sugar (in comparison with the tree), he does not make it (ordinarily anyway) except through making trees (and other things) making it.21

This example provides one way to conceptualize the relationship between God’s causality and the causality of a created being (in this case a fruit tree) by providing a paradigm of instrumental

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21 Mansini, section I.
causality. Conceived in this way, God’s primary causality stands in relationship to the tree’s own real causal power as that of an agent wielding an instrument: without God’s primary causation, the fruit tree would neither exist nor have the power to make sugar; but the tree itself actually converts sunlight, water, and carbon dioxide into sugar. In this sense it would be correct to maintain that both God and the tree cause sugar, and this is so because one is the primary agent, the other the instrumental cause. The type of causal relationship at work here is made explicit in the case of a craftsman and his tool – take, for example, a lumberjack and his axe. We can validly maintain that both the lumberjack and his axe cause a tree to be cut down – the lumberjack causes the felling of a tree insofar as he first conceived of the end product of a felled tree, then wielded his axe to cut it, and finally brought about the end product he had conceived; the axe, of course, can also be said to have cut the tree because it was the instrument that did the cutting.

As long as it is remembered that God’s primary causation in created beings is through an interior, creative, and constitutive *causa esse*, then the category of instrumental causality can be illuminating. One of the benefits of the instrumental causality paradigm is that, when coupled with God’s unique and transcendent creativity, it provides a model of compatibility which does not seem to detract from the genuine efficacy of the creature’s causality. While it is true that God works in all things, we must also maintain “that God works in things in such a manner that things have their proper operation.” This is so because God, working from within His created order, and being completely omnipotent, is so efficacious that He not only brings about the things which He wills, He also brings them about in the manner in which He wills them: “For when a cause is efficacious to act, the effect follows upon the cause, not only as to the thing

\[22\] ST I.105.5.
done, but also as to its manner of being done or of being.”

To return to our fruit tree example, the end which God wills is the production of sugar, and the manner of that production which He wills is the real causal efficacy of the fruit tree itself, a tree which He has created with the end of producing sugar and with the power to produce sugar, a causal power which He actively upholds. If God’s causation somehow destroyed the real and genuine causation of the tree, then God, as the Creator of that tree and of all of its powers, would be involving Himself in a lived contradiction, a real absurdity, for: “Creation means the carrying out of a plan or purpose, and this purpose is nothing else than the realization of the powers given to creatures.”

A relationship of instrumental causality between divine causality and created causality has thus seemed particularly useful because it conjures up a readily accessible image (that of the craftsman with his tools) by which we might more easily come to grasp the nature of God’s causality through created causes. But, however useful such a picture of causality might seem for comprehending God’s providential involvement, it is ultimately flawed. This is so for two reasons. First and foremost, conceiving of the relationship between divine and created causality as that of an agent wielding an instrument will ultimately prove completely disastrous when we turn to consider human causality. Such a conception would preclude the freedom of human causality by limiting the inherent causal power necessary for free choice: “by definition an instrumental cause does not produce its effect by virtue of its own inherent causal power, but rather by virtue of the superior causal power of the principal cause to which it is subordinate.”

Secondly, the fact that the language of instrumental causality brings “mundane examples to mind” such as “the artist with his tools” should serve as a warning about its metaphysical

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24 Pontifex, 41.
accuracy and analogical usefulness.\textsuperscript{26} The transcendent nature of God’s causality is such that ultimately these images will lead to more confusion and misunderstanding about the relationship between divine and created causation than they will clarify it. The image of God wielding inanimate nature as an instrument to accomplish His providential purposes might work when we consider unfree causes. The soldier might say of his near escape on the battlefield, “God saw from eternity the bullet which would be shot in my direction on that day, He heard my prayer for protection, and in answer He providentially wielded from all eternity the precise causes in nature that would bring about the slightest cross-wind at that moment, just enough to send the bullet flying harmlessly past me.” But such an image completely fails when considering free human choices – if God wields human causality as an artist wields his tools, then human choices are completely determined. The inevitable mental image becomes that of God pulling the strings of human puppets. As Grisez points out, “It is extremely difficult to keep clear in one’s mind that ‘cause’ is said of an uncaused cause [God] in a unique sense. One keeps importing the idea of one thing pushing another, or of a producer and a product, or the like.”\textsuperscript{27}

What is needed is a metaphysical account of the relationship between divine and created causality, one which maintains the primacy of God’s causation as \textit{causa esse}, a causation which is therefore creative and constitutive, but also one which preserves the genuine causal efficacy of the created cause, and accounts for the fact that God works in His creatures so as to preserve their own proper operation. And our account of causation should also avoid, as much as possible, misleading images which reduce God’s transcendental existence by conjuring up

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{27} Grisez, 281.
images which inadvertently involve the mistake of treating God as “an inhabitant of the universe, existing alongside his creatures, interfering with some but not with others.”

Section 5: Primary and Secondary Causation

“It is to be observed,” writes Aquinas when he takes up the question whether God works in every agent, “that where there are several agents in order, the second always acts in virtue of the first; for the first agent moves the second to act . . . . God works sufficiently in things as First Agent, but it does not follow from this that the operation of secondary agents is superfluous.”

In this passage, as well as elsewhere throughout his consideration of divine and created causality, Aquinas has provided us with precisely the metaphysical relationship of causality for which we have been searching: God is the primary cause and creatures are secondary causes. What this primary-secondary relationship of causation entails is an ontologically unique relationship between a Creator and His creation, a relationship in which secondary causes are dependent for their being and for their causal power upon the primary cause, but in which they are also genuinely efficacious in their own right:

The primary-secondary couplet helps make it clear that the causalities operate at different metaphysical levels. A secondary cause is a real cause acting through its own intrinsic power to produce a commensurate effect, but only insofar as it acts in dependence upon its primary cause . . . the primary cause is a cause of causing. It is not a case of partial or co-causes contributing a separate element to the same effect . . . any created effect comes totally and immediately from God as the

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28 McCabe, 11.
29 ST I.105.5.
30 Once again, I am deeply indebted to Brian Shanley for his insistence upon and explanation of the primary-secondary causal model in Aquinas. In addition, Burrell (whom Shanley references), Craig, Grisez, and Davies have all insisted upon such language so as to avoid the misleading images associated with an instrumental causal explanation. And even McCabe and Mansini have a similar metaphysical understanding of causality, although they do not explicitly use the primary-secondary terminology. It should also be noted here that Aquinas consistently employs both the language of primary-secondary causality and the language of instrumental causality. There is much debate among Thomistic scholars about whether the transition to primary-secondary language is a development in Aquinas’ understanding of divine and created causality, or whether he employs instrumental language in a merely analogous sense, but in either case the debate lies beyond the scope of this paper.
transcendent primary cause and totally and immediately from the creature as a secondary cause; it is impossible to separate what comes from God and what comes from the creature, either in the realm of nature or of grace.31

The point of describing the relationship between divine and created causation as one of primary and secondary causality is that it constantly reminds us that, due to God’s unique transcendence, and due to His ability to work through causes without compromising their own proper operation (made possible by his interior presence as causa esse), the relationship between God’s causality and the causality of creatures is one with a unique ontological status, unique because one side of the relationship is utterly transcendent. Both causes are genuinely efficacious in their own right – both fully cause the same effect. Yet there is a relationship of dependency between the secondary and the primary cause, precisely because the secondary cause depends upon the primary cause for its existence as well as for its causal power. A proper understanding of the terms ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ here is essential for understanding the causal relationship which is being described:

‘Primary’ and ‘secondary’ do not indicate greater or less intensity of causing, or that a primary cause is more of a cause than a secondary one, for these assertions both presume a univocal genus, cause. The terms ‘primary’ and ‘secondary,’ rather, come into play when we are faced with the situation where one thing is what it is by virtue of another. So each can be said properly to be a cause, yet what makes one secondary is its intrinsic dependence on the one which is primary. . . . What this distinction suggests is that whatever can function as a primary cause in a clear primary/secondary relationship will have to possess a unique ontological status.32

It is at this point that we would naturally hope for some sort of analogy to illustrate the nature of primary and secondary causality, something akin to the analogy of the artisan with his tools made possible by the language of instrumental causality. But this is precisely what the primary-secondary relationship of causation cannot provide: it is the most accurate and

32 Burrell, 97.
metaphysically substantive account of the relationship between divine and created causation, but it must not be forgotten that it is a *metaphysical* account, not a descriptive one. We cannot ask for an image of primary and secondary causality, because the very relationship depends, for its metaphysical accuracy, upon really upholding the transcendent causality of God. It is ultimately misleading and futile to search about for an example in creation of this type of relationship, because the primary-secondary causal relationship is utterly and ontologically unique – there is no other such relationship in all of existence besides the relationship between the one, transcendent Creator of all that is and His creation as a whole.

Now if every created cause stands in relationship to the Creator as a secondary cause with its own causal power which is nevertheless dependent upon God as a primary cause, then it is also true that created human causation is a secondary cause with its own causal power and which is nevertheless dependent upon God as a primary cause. But, of course, because human causation is self-determined, contingent, and free, it is unique among created causes; for this reason, more still needs be said concerning the relationship between human and divine causation. Still, human causation *is* created causation, and as such any subsequent analysis of the relationship between divine and human agency must be conducted from within the framework of the primary-secondary causal relationship which holds between God and all created causes. For this reason, before moving on to consider divine and human causation, a summary should be made of all that has been said thus far concerning the relationship between divine causation and all created causation.

Providence denotes the causal acts of God which work within created causation. Because human beings and their choices are created by God, human choice falls in the category of created causation. Now the compatibility between divine and created causation depends upon two
things: the transcendence of God, and the fact that God is the *causa esse*. God’s transcendence means that the relationship between his causality and created causality cannot be explained by imagery or models of causality which involve rivalry. But His transcendence also entails His immanence, an interiority to His creatures which is best understood through His primary causation as *causa esse*, the cause of being. This interior and intimate mode of causality means that God works in His creatures in such a way that they maintain their own proper operation, because His causality is completely efficacious, not only bringing about the intended effect, but also bringing it about in the intended manner. Thus, God’s causation is both creative and constitutive – God’s causation is completely efficacious, but so too are its created causes. The most accurate account of this relationship is that of God as the primary cause and creatures as secondary causes. This primary-secondary relationship is ontologically unique, and entails that secondary causes are dependent for their being and causal power upon the primary cause, but are also genuinely efficacious in their own right: both fully cause the same effect, but the primary cause is the “cause of causing” in the secondary cause. With all of this in mind, and striving ever to transcend the tempting but misleading notion that divine and created causation are rival causes existing, as it were, within the same “ontological space,” we can now turn to consider the only created causation which is self-determined, contingent, and free – human causation.

Section 6: Divine and Human Agency: God and the Human Will

Although the mind may assent to what has been stated above concerning the compatibility of divine and created causality when it is explained on the basis of primary and secondary causality, and although it may also readily assent to the fact that human beings (and their free choices) are created by God, nevertheless it balks when it is maintained that the
primary-secondary causal explanation has demonstrated the compatibility of divine providence
and human freedom. It seems that so long as we employed the seemingly innocuous term
“created causality,” it was assumed that what we were discussing was not free human choice, but
rather all of the inanimate and irrational forces in nature. In other words, while we may be
willing to go so far as to say that the whole created order falls under God’s providence, we
would want to maintain some sort of independence between human beings and God’s causal
action:

It is a fairly common and really quite understandable view that whereas inanimate
and irrational creatures are determined by the will of God in all that they do and in
all that happens to them, human beings are to some extent free and to this extent
independent of God’s causal action. God, it is thought, has endowed man with
independence from him, so that a person may choose freely whether to serve God
or love God.33

The motivation for conceiving of human beings and their free causation as somehow
independent from God’s causation, a causation which extends to every other created being, is
well-intentioned: if such an independence is not maintained, it is thought, then there is no
possible way to preserve free human choice (regardless of what has been said above concerning
the creative and constitutive nature of divine causation, or the fact that secondary causes are true
causes in their own right). But, of course, human causation is created causation, and there can be
no possibility of any sort of causal independence from God; God is the immanent causa esse of
all creatures and their actions, including human beings and their free choices: “The free actions
of creatures are part of creation and, if creation (i.e. what is created) is caused to be by God, then
the same is surely true of the free actions of creatures . . . they cannot be thought of as coming to
be independently of God but must, instead, be thought of as being caused to be by God.”34
Therefore the only hope of maintaining compatibility between divine and human agency lies in

33 McCabe, 11.
34 Davies, 208-209.
understanding more fully how divine causality is related to the human will, not in trying to create some sort of artificial distance between the omnipotent divine agency and free human will.

When Aquinas poses the question “Whether God can move the created will,” he answers that there are two ways in which God can be said to cause the acts of the will: (1) as a final cause, since “the will can be moved by good as its object … the potentiality of the will extends to the universal good … [and] God alone is the universal good”; and (2) as an efficient cause, “by an interior inclination of the will.”\textsuperscript{35} Shanley points out that elsewhere Aquinas maintains that God is likewise the formal cause of the acts of the will, since “God creates and conserves in being the human person with his will.”\textsuperscript{36} Now of these three ways in which God can be said to cause the acts of the will (as final, efficient, and formal cause) it is God’s efficient causation “by an interior inclination of the will” that poses the direct threat to human freedom. God’s formal cause of the will poses no problem; indeed without the creative \textit{causa esse} providing the human person with his unique faculty of the will, there would be no possibility for him to choose freely. In addition, since human choice is always the choice of a particular good, which is a means to his ultimate end (as we saw in Chapter 5), far from determining human freedom, God’s final causality is the ultimate foundation of that freedom: “because the dynamism of the human will for the infinite good cannot be satisfied this side of the beatific vision, we are therefore free with respect to every particular good and every particular choice.”\textsuperscript{37}

Therefore the question now facing us is the following: how can God move the will by an efficient interior inclination of that will without doing violence to that will, i.e. without

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{ST} I.105.4.
\textsuperscript{36} Shanley, “Divine Causation,” 111.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 112.
destroying its free choice? And, as a prelude to this question: why must we insist, along with Aquinas, that such an interior inclination by God is necessary?{38}

Aquinas insists that God must be an efficient cause of the human will because of the metaphysical necessity that all secondary causes (including the human will) are ultimately dependent upon the primary cause (i.e. God) for their movement from potency to act. In order to actually bring about an effect, a secondary cause must be moved from being a potential cause to actually realizing its causal power. Because a potential cause cannot move from potentiality into actuality unless it is acted upon by some other actual cause (since, being a potential cause, it lacks even the actual causality needed to move itself), and because only God is purely actual, every secondary cause ultimately depends on God to actualize its potentiality as a cause:

Aquinas argues that all finite secondary causes are moved movers, and therefore dependent upon the *primum movens non motum* [first unmoved mover], because nothing moves from potency to act except under the influence of what is already in act. Every created agent, material or spiritual, requires the prior actuality of God as *primum movens* in order to actualize its potentiality to its own proper actions.{39}

As a created cause, the human will also falls under the category of a secondary cause. The will, even though it is self-moving, is nevertheless also a moved mover dependent upon the prior actuality of the prime mover to move it from potentiality to the actuality of self-movement:

“For everything that is at one time an agent actually, and at another time an agent in potentiality, needs to be moved by a mover. Now it is evident that the will begins to will something, whereas

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{38} Here, more than ever, my utter dependence upon Shanley’s piercing analysis and understanding of the Angelic Doctor’s metaphysical subtleties on this point must be acknowledged. Indeed, no other source I have encountered has explained what he rightly maintains is the “crux interpretum and key point” in Aquinas’ thought for showing the compatibility of divine and human causality. Therefore, in what follows, my answer to this crucial question is essentially the one I have been provided by Shanley’s scholarship and, of course, by the thought of Aquinas himself.

previously it did not will it. Therefore it must, of necessity, be moved by something to will it."\(^{40}\)

The language which Aquinas uses to describe this efficient, metaphysically necessary, and ontologically prior first movement of the will by God is an “interior inclination.” And he maintains, indeed metaphysical necessity demands that we likewise maintain, that such an efficient cause is necessary in all created agents, not simply in the human will:

> It is important to note the metaphysical character of Aquinas’ treatment. He is not singling out the will as in special need of divine motion, nor is he trying to account for a particular psychological datum. Rather, he is arguing that as a created potency to the *bonum universale* [universal good], the will can only move itself actually to will something (*ex parte exerciti actus* [from part of the exercise of act]) in dependence upon God as First Mover.\(^{41}\)

Thus an interior inclination by God is a necessary efficient cause which must be applied to the human will in order to account for its own self-movement. But then does not this divine efficient causation, which operates by inclining the will from within, destroy human freedom? No. Once again, we must have recourse to the language of primary and secondary causality: God, as the primary cause of all that the human will actually wills, stands in relation to the secondary cause of the will itself as the *causa esse* of both the human person and his power of willing. Whereas any other efficient cause acting upon the will from outside would coerce the will and violate its freedom, the divine efficient cause works from within in such a way as to preserve the will’s natural operation: “Only God, as the immediate creator and sustainer of the spiritual soul’s existence and its power of willing, is able to move the will without doing it violence. . . . God moves the will so that it acts in accord with its own nature as a self-determining power.”\(^{42}\)

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\(^{40}\) *ST* I-II.9.4. Notice that the will has now been said to be a *moved mover* in two senses: (1) as moved by God as a final cause (through the dynamism of the will to the Good), and (2) as moved by God as an efficient cause (through being reduced from potency to the actuality of willing).


\(^{42}\) Ibid., 113-114.
compatibility of providence and human freedom, is that God, as a transcendent primary cause, works in and through created causes in a way not contrary to their nature, but rather in a way which preserves their nature:

As Dionysius says (Div. Nom. iv) it belongs to Divine providence, not to destroy but to preserve the nature of things. Wherefore it moves all things in accordance with their conditions . . . . Since, therefore, the will is an active principle, not determinate to one thing, but having an indifferent relation to many things, God so moves it, that He does not determine it of necessity to one thing, but its movement remains contingent and not necessary, except in those things to which it is moved naturally. 43

The human will is free. And God, it has been argued, moves the human will as an efficient cause, both for the working out of His providence, and also for the actualization of the will’s causal power. Yet this does not mean that the human will is therefore determined, because God’s efficient causation is transcendent, creative, and immanent. His providence “moves all things in accordance with their conditions,” and this includes moving the human will in accordance with the condition that it remains truly free. Because divine causation stands in such an utterly unique relation to the created and self-determined causation of the human will, there can be no other relationship of causality between the human will and another creature that would allow for the possibility of the will’s freedom in the same way as the primary-secondary relationship between divine providence and the human will allows for that freedom. Indeed, causal independence from any and every other creature is a necessary condition for human freedom. This is why, when we want to know “whether or not Fred acted freely in eating his left sock,” we search for created causes which acted upon him in such a way as to determine his behavior: “We look round to see what might have accounted for his behavior by acting upon him, we look for drugs and hypnotism and infection of the brain, we look for blind powers

43 ST I-II.10.4.
operating from below the level of consciousness. What we don’t do is look for God.” 44 And this is because, while the human will must maintain causal independence from any and every rival agent within the created universe in order to remain free, causal independence from God is not a necessary condition for human freedom: “Freedom does require causal independence from any other creature, but not from the Creator.” 45

Section 8: Transcendence and Omnipotence Meet: The Divine Ordering of both Ends and Means

The central thesis of our account of divine providence and human freedom thus far has been that the transcendent, creative, primary causation of God stands in relation to all secondary created causes, not as a rival agent stripping those causes of their genuine causal power, but rather as a constitutive and immanently present cause which works through created causes without threatening or destroying their natural causation. And this is just as true concerning the relationship between divine causation and human causation as it is of the relationship between divine causation and any other created causation: when God moves the voluntary human will, He does so in such a way that He does not destroy the voluntary nature of that will. Having now considered both the relationship between divine providence and created causality in general, and between divine providence and human causality in particular, we are in a position to provide a more sweeping account of divine providence and its work through the various secondary causes which exist in the world. This account considers all created causality under the categories of necessity and contingency (two categories which we considered in the previous chapter).

The human will, as self-determined, falls into the category of a contingent cause: given that \(X\) comes about as a result of a human choice, we are right to say that \(X\) has been caused

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44 This charming example is taken from McCabe, 13-14.
contingently, i.e. that it did not have to be caused, but could just as well have not been caused. The will could have chosen instead to cause $Y$ to come about. So, for example, if Isaac is struck in the head by an apple which was thrown by me, we are right to say that this event was caused contingently – I could just as well have chosen not to throw the apple at poor Isaac. My throwing of the apple is a contingent cause of his correspondingly bruised head.\(^{46}\) Now if Isaac, while sitting under a tree, were to be struck in the head by an apple which fell from that tree, we would say that this event was caused necessarily. By the necessary law of gravity, we can be sure that an apple will accelerate towards the largest mass near it (in this case the earth) at a rate directly proportional to the product of the two masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them. In other words, we can be sure that the apple will fall to the ground. If Isaac happens to find himself between the apple and its path to the ground, then the bump which will result upon his head will be brought about by the necessary cause of gravity.\(^{47}\)

While being either conditional or necessary, of course, each and every cause in the universe does not cease to be a secondary cause, precisely because each and every cause in the universe is a created cause dependent upon God both for its esse as well as for its causal power. We have seen that God’s primary causation, if it acted through secondary causes, would do so in such a way as to preserve their genuine causality, and that this is so because His causality is

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\(^{46}\) Of course, it is necessary that the apple will travel in a parabolic path through the air once I throw it, and that a bruise will result on Isaac’s head once it is hit by the apple. These are necessary effects, resulting from laws of physics and biology. But the first cause which originated these corresponding necessary causes (i.e. the choice to throw the apple) was itself contingent. Likewise, there is a sense in which we can say that necessary causes (such as the force of an apple causing a bruise on Isaac’s head) are themselves contingent upon other causes and factors (the throwing of the apple at a particular force and angle, the weight of the apple, the thickness of Isaac’s skin, etc). But this is not what we mean when we say that a cause is a contingent cause. By saying a cause is contingent, we mean not that it depends on other causes for its existence (in this sense all created beings and actions are contingent upon their Creator), but rather that it brings about an effect which is contingent, which need not have happened.

\(^{47}\) It is precisely the necessary causation of inanimate forces operating in the universe which make possible the discoveries of the sciences, such as Isaac Newton’s discovery of gravity. The more contingent the causes which operate within a particular body of scientific study, the less certain the knowledge of that science – thus, for example, the laws of chemistry are much more certain and have fewer exceptions than the laws of psychology, because the chemist needs to take into account little or no contingent causation within his data, while the psychologist must deal with a great deal of contingent causation by free human choice.
utterly transcendent. But it is also clear that God’s causation is completely efficacious – this is what it means to be omnipotent. Why, then, would God choose to work out His eternal plan through secondary causes? Why not simply bring about His will directly through supernatural, miraculous acts? In short, why providence? The answer which Aquinas gives to this question is one which follows directly upon his metaphysics of participation and upon the overflowing gift of being, the “ontological generosity,” which was God’s motivation for creating in the first place: “He governs things inferior by superior, not on account of any defect in His power, but by reason of the abundance of His goodness; so that the dignity of causality is imparted even to creatures.”48 In other words, God abounds so much in goodness that He allows for secondary causes with genuine efficacy to bring about the temporal execution of His eternal will, bestowing upon them the dignity of reflecting His own causal power. In the moving dictum of Pascal, God works out His will through secondary causes, including through free human choices, in order “to communicate to His creatures the dignity of causality.”49

So God has imparted real secondary causality to creatures, not on account of a lack of omnipotence, but on account of an overflowing goodness which creatively bestows upon creatures their genuine causality. Furthermore, whatever He wills is efficaciously worked out through this secondary causality, and in such a way as to preserve the nature of that causality. But we have just seen that the nature of every created cause is to be either necessary or contingent. Therefore it follows that God’s will is worked out through secondary causes in such a way that it takes into account not only the end which is willed, but also the means by which it is to be accomplished. What God wills to be accomplished necessarily will be accomplished necessarily; what God wills to be accomplished contingently will be accomplished contingently.

48 ST I.22.4.
49 Pascal, pensée 930, p. 296.
In both cases, what has been willed by God will come about without fail – divine omnipotence ensures this. But we must also maintain that in both cases how the event is to be caused will also come about without fail, and that this, too, is due to God’s omnipotence. As Aquinas explains, it belongs to a perfectly efficacious cause not only to bring about the end which it wills, but also to bring about that end in the way in which it wills:

It is better therefore to say that this [the fact that some causes are necessary, others contingent] 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. . . . Since then the divine will is perfectly efficacious, 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 has prepared contingent causes for them, it being His will that they should happen contingently.50

Surprisingly, then, far from overpowering the contingency of free human choices, it is the omnipotence of God which is the ultimate foundation for the very contingent nature of those free choices. How this can be the case has already been explained at length: the compatibility of divine causation and contingent causation, like the compatibility of divine causation and any created secondary causation, is only possible because of the transcendent role of the former as causa esse. The causality of God “transcends the distinction that we make within the world between necessity and contingency.”51 Indeed, it was the creative causality of God which brought about these modes of created causation in the first place. And it is for this reason, because God is the causa esse not only of the causing agent which brings about an effect, but also of the manner in which that agent brings about the effect, that God can work through both

50 ST I.19.9.
51 Mansini, section III.
contingent and necessary causes without destroying their genuine mode of causation. His providence is accomplished through free and determined creatures alike, working in each according to the mode of causality proper to that creature’s being.

Section 9: The Compatibility of Divine Providence and Human Freedom

God operates in each thing according to its own nature – this is the fundamental principle upon which any genuinely non-determinative account of divine providence must rest, and it is a principle which depends completely upon God’s transcendent and interior role as causa esse.\(^\text{52}\) “Everything turns,” says Burrell, “on the ability to characterize the creator of all things as the cause of being, and to understand the capacity to act on the part of self-determining creatures to be a participation in existence freely granted by that primary cause.”\(^\text{53}\) It is, in the end, the doctrine of creation which safeguards the compatibility of divine causation and the human will. On the one hand, God’s creation ex nihilo entails a transcendent causality, one which allows God to act as the efficient primary cause working in and through every secondary cause; on the other hand, creation also entails an interior causation of esse, one which allows God to operate in each thing according to its own nature.

Paradoxically, however, it is also the transcendent and constitutive nature of God’s activity in creation which inherently prevents any possible means of understanding the way in which this non-determinative divine causation works. There can be no hope of comprehending the manner in which God’s divine causation operates within the human will in such a way as to preserve its freedom; no chance to discover the how of divine causation, the mechanism of its operation. This is so because the compatibility of divine causation and human freedom depends

\(^{52}\) The principle Deus operatur in unoquoque secundum eius proprietatem (God operates in each thing according to its own nature) runs through every account Aquinas gives of divine providence. See, for example, ST I.83.1, ad 3.

\(^{53}\) Burrell, 114.
completely upon the transcendence of the former, a transcendence that by definition precludes understanding by finite minds: “The nature of this non-determinative *motio* whereby God causes the will to be *causa sui* [cause of itself] and self-determinative remains opaque . . . it is not at all like any other motion and it is easier to say what it is not than to explain what it is.”54 In the end, as with God Himself, we can know *that* divine causation exists and operates in such a way as to be compatible with human freedom, but we cannot know *how* that causation works – the best we can do is employ the language of the mystics: “Not this, not that.” Nevertheless, while descriptive language fails us here concerning the *manner* of divine causation, still the metaphysical language of primary-secondary causation allows us to confidently defend the compatibility of divine providence with human freedom: “the mode or manner of divine activity will ever escape us, yet we will be able to speak of it consistently, provided we keep referring any divine action to the constituting and originating activity of creation.”55

This is why, because we set out to have a rigorously consistent understanding of the compatibility between divine providence and human freedom, we had to undertake with such pains the arduous task of drawing metaphysical distinctions and thinking in difficult abstractions. As Herbert McCabe has remarked, “I do not think that these are particularly easy thoughts, but it would be strange if thinking about God were easy and obvious.”56 For, if we let it, our imagination would gladly step in and reduce to concrete and physical images the abstract and metaphysical relationship of primary-secondary causation, involving us in a “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” which would prove disastrous for the project of showing the ultimate compatibility of providence and human freedom. But now reason has done its job; faith has found an understanding. It may be a partial understanding which falters and fails utterly before

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55 Burrell, 123.
56 McCabe, 11.
the transcendent mystery of God. Nevertheless, it is one which has provided enough light so that the question of divine providence and human freedom need no longer be a dark obstacle to faith.57

And, perhaps, it has provided something more? For we can now say with Boethius, “There is no such thing as chance … I consider it an empty word. For what room can there be for random events since God keeps all things in order?58 The theist may confidently assert that, whether brought about as the necessary result of a natural chain of events, or as the contingent result of a free human choice, every situation is also brought about by God according to His providential plan. This, of course, raises some difficult theoretical problems for theodicy (the question of evil in the world). At the same time, however, the knowledge that there is in all of creation no causal independence from God, that no moment or situation can exist outside of God’s providential order and care (no matter how horrible or overwhelming), this knowledge can also provide the believer with resolute and steadfast hope in moments of trial or temptation: “In everything God works for good with those who love him.”59

God’s transcendent and constitutive providence, far from overpowering the freedom of His creatures, rather upholds and bestows upon them the dignity of their own causation, a dignity which allows them to participate in His divine providence.60 And here, as in the very act of creation itself, God reveals His “ontological generosity”:

57 Grisez has pointed out that, historically it was Judeo-Christian thought (and faith) which raised the difficulty of divine providence and human freedom in the first place by simultaneously developing the idea of human freedom and steadfastly maintaining the doctrine of divine providence: “It is worth noting that the difficulty which must be resolved originated within Judeo-Christian thought. Outside this religious tradition no one developed any very clear conception of human free choice. The notion of freedom of choice for human persons is related closely to the conception of God as a free creator, of man as made in God’s image, and of God confronting man with the Covenant or the Gospel, and demanding that man freely respond by a commitment of faith or a rejection. Thus, paradoxical as it may seem, the doctrines of free choice and universal divine causality tend to go together” (Grisez, 277).
58 Boethius, Book 5, Prose 1, p. 91.
59 Romans 8.28.
God seems to be all there is, or have all the agency there can be, or all the freedom there is. To the contrary, infinite being does not preclude finite being; transcendent causality does not preclude ordinary causality; divine freedom that is not diminished or limited by choice does not preclude a freedom that is limited by choice.⁶¹

The dignity of causality communicated by God to His creatures, rather than being precluded by His own transcendent and creative causality, actually finds the fullness of its meaning and expression through participation in that very causality. In the case of the necessary causes we find in nature, each cause was moved by a previous cause, and we can trace the chain of causation back to the beginning of the universe, and ultimately to God’s originative gift of being in the creation *ex nihilo*. Thus God grants the dignity of causality to a subhuman creature by causing other beings to cause that creature’s act. Yet by that act, the creature nevertheless reflects in some way the creative act of God, though at the distance, so to speak, of the causal chain between its causation and God’s creation of all that is.

But the causality of the human person is free, and it is free precisely insofar as it consists of a choice which is independent from a chain of necessary causes. Therefore, the dignity of causality which God communicates to the free human person is one which, unique in all creation, consists of sharing in the most intimate way in the very creativity of God:

God brings about my free action, however, not by causing other things to cause it, he brings it about *directly*. The creative act of God is there immediately in my freedom. My freedom is, so to say, a window of God’s creating; the creativity of God is not masked by intermediate causes. In human freedom we have the nearest thing to a direct look at the creative act of God (apart, says the Christian, from Christ himself, who *is* the act of God) . . . God is not acting here by causing other things to cause this act, he is directly and simply himself causing it. So God is not an alternative to freedom, he is the direct cause of freedom. We are not free in spite of God, but because of God.”⁶²

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⁶¹ Mansini, section VI.
⁶² McCabe, 14-15.
By directly communicating to human beings the dignity of causality, God, in a special way, lifts the human person above all creation to participate most fully in His own perfect and eternal creative act. This is the most fundamental way in which man is said to be made in the image and likeness of God, an image and likeness which requires genuine causal freedom guaranteed by a participation in the eternally free creative act of God. Far from determining human choices, therefore, it is the transcendent and creative providence of God which gives those very choices their freedom. And, in turn, we must each freely choose whether or not to use this freedom to cooperate with God’s providence by willing what we know to be good. For we have truly been given the dignity of causality through the freedom of choice, a dignity which allows us to participate in God’s providential plan in a special way, not as unwitting and unwilling tools, but rather as free and willing agents in the divine plan:

He gives us the will wherewith to will, and the power to use it, and the help needed to supplement the power; . . . but we ourselves must will the truth and for that the Lord is waiting. . . . The work is His, but we must take our willing share. When the blossom breaks forth in us, the more it is ours, the more it is His.63

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Appendix

An Existential Approach to Grace and Human Freedom

The following essay, originally entitled “Existentialism and Human Freedom: A Study of the Rival Conceptions of Freedom and Grace in the Existentialist Philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel,” differs widely in approach from the main body of this paper. Existentialism is a philosophy concerned not with a systematic study and defense of metaphysical realities, but rather with a concrete and personalistic approach to human existence. Such an approach can either prove utterly destructive for the compatibility of divine involvement and human freedom, or it can be extremely illuminating. By comparing both “versions” of existentialism (embodied by the atheist existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre and the Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel respectively), this Appendix has two aims: (1) to move the study and defense of the compatibility of divine involvement and human freedom onto a more “modern,” personalistic and existential plane; and (2) to open up new levels of meaning and depths of understanding which such a different approach can provide.

What is Existentialism? Defining That Which Resists Definition

Providing a clear and precise definition of existentialism has always been a notorious problem. This is the case precisely because one of the few things that existentialist philosophers agree upon is that we should always be suspicious of definitions. Indeed, if existentialism is to be defined at all, it will not do to ask for a rational and a priori definition of the term, since existentialists are also unanimously united against rationalism in its many forms. Instead of searching for a clear and distinct idea of our term, we must content ourselves with mapping out a general picture of that which existentialists have in common. As we have already observed, existentialism is strongly opposed to rationalism and, as a direct result of this, to definition. The best definition, argues the existentialist, is an example. This distrust of rationalism naturally leads to another feature of existentialism: there is no shared doctrine to which all existentialists ascribe. Thus we find atheist and theist existentialists alike, those who see only absurdity and despair in the world, and those who leave room for hope and meaning.

But what unites existentialists, even more than their distrust in definition, doctrine, and rationalism, is a common method, a way in which they go about thinking and philosophizing. The existentialist is profoundly concerned with subjectivity, with focusing on self-consciousness,
and with asking questions that pertain not to the world considered in itself, but rather to the human person considered in himself. If existentialism, as its name implies, has to do with existence, it has to do with human existence, and with the particular questions which human existence naturally raises. And it does not seek an answer merely about human nature or about the human person considered in the abstract as a universal concept or form; existentialism is intensely and passionately concerned with the individual, particular subject. When I ask, “What is the meaning of human existence?” as author C. Stephen Evans has pointed out, I am not seeking the answer to a mystery which I can hold apart from my life and myself. “This mystery does not merely concern some vague entity called ‘human existence.’ The real mystery [is] my existence: Why [do] I exist at all?”¹ Meaning, death, absurdity, despair, God’s existence – these are all themes which are repeated over and over in existential philosophy and literature, and it is a common obsession with asking and answering such questions which have become the hallmark of not only existentialism, but also modern consciousness.² To see this, we need not go further than to call to mind such popular and provocative titles in the 20th century as Walker Percy’s Lost in the Cosmos or Viktor Frankl’s Man’s Search for Meaning.

God is Dead: Modern Despair and the Starting Point of Existentialism

“The uniqueness of the twentieth century lies not in the universe that faces man, but in the man who faces the universe. For the first time man faces his problems alone in the universe – God is dead.”³ Friedrich Nietzsche’s rallying cry, “God is dead,” which he claimed was a glorious opportunity for man to become God and to throw off the tyranny of an oppressive moral lawgiver, became for the existentialists not a cause for joyous celebration, but rather a starting

¹ C. Stephen Evans, Existentialism: The Philosophy of Despair and the Quest for Hope (Grand Rapids: Zonderman, 1984), 1.
² Ibid., 2.
³ Ibid., 3.
place for despair. Nietzsche said, “‘God is dead,’ not ‘There is no God.’ *God was once alive, but he has died. His specter haunts the mind of the twentieth century.* . . .” and in the novels and philosophy of atheist existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, “God plays a central role, not by his presence, but by his absence. God ought to exist, but he does not, and his absence pervades Sartre’s world.”

“God is dead” means not that God does not exist, but that for modern man God is absent, even if he pays lip service to a God in whom he no longer truly believes.

This absence of God, made so evident by modern man’s utter and stunning loss of security and assurance about meaning and morality, both the atheist and theist existentialist alike take as their starting point. For either God really exists, as the theist maintains, and He created man in His image; or, as the atheist contends, God does not and never did exist, and man created God in *his* image. In either case, the death of God in the twentieth century world of the modern philosopher naturally entails the death of man. For if God really exists, and modern man now thinks Him dead, then man has abandoned the meaning and purpose which God had provided him; if God does not exist, and modern man has now come to realize that He was always dead, then man has lost the meaning and purpose which he mistakenly *believed* God had provided him. In either case, man now sees himself as completely alone in the universe and totally unnecessary; as a result he is tempted to, and often does, despair. The possibility and reality of this despair both the atheist and the theist existentialist alike must take as a given, but its mere presence is not proof of its triumph: “The question that we must put to existentialist writers concerns the status of hope in this modern world: Is despair the final word, or can this honest facing of man’s plight be the prelude to an authentic hope?”

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4 Ibid., 4.
5 Ibid.
What Light Can Existentialism Shed Upon Freedom and Grace?

What contribution can existentialism, in both its atheist and theist forms, make toward our understanding of human freedom and its compatibility with the grace of God? We have already seen that, in the philosophy of such atheists as Jean-Paul Sartre, no room is left for God—we can expect no attempt at reconciliation between freedom and grace. For Sartre, there is no God, and thus there is no problem to reconcile. However, Sartre claims that since God is dead, man is the author of his own existence and thus is completely and absolutely free, is in fact “condemned to freedom” (we shall examine this concept at length shortly). The implications of Sartre’s atheism for man’s freedom are immense, and because Sartre places this freedom at the very heart of his philosophy and anthropology, a study of his concept of freedom will be elucidating, if for no other reason than to point out and steer us away from an incomplete view of human freedom.

Among the theist existentialists, the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, a contemporary of Sartre, stands out in stark contrast to Sartre’s conception of man and his ultimate fate in the universe: “The keynote of Marcel’s vision of life is hope. For Marcel the experience of despair can become the prelude and vehicle for an authentic hope that far transcends mere naïve optimism.”6 Marcel’s philosophy takes into account and explains the possibility and choice of despair as well as of Sartre’s conception of human freedom, but it also provides us with an alternative and a higher, or rather deeper, understanding of freedom. In addition, as a theist Marcel is able to consider the mystery of human freedom and divine grace, and he offers a positive and fruitful exploration into the metaphysic of gifts and generosity and their bearing upon grace and freedom.

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6 Ibid., 6.
Thus Sartre will represent for us atheistic existentialism and its presentation of human freedom and the lack of divine grace; Marcel will provide us with a quintessential example of theist existentialism and its explanation of freedom and its relation to divine grace. In both cases we should already be anticipating a very *concrete* philosophy which will focus not upon the abstract principles or concepts of freedom or grace, but rather upon the human experience (or lack thereof) of both. If it turns out that either freedom, or grace, or both can only truly be understood as lived experiences of a human person and not merely as abstract concepts, then the immense value and importance of the existential method of approach for these questions will be established. There is nothing left, then, but to journey along with our two existentialists to the very end of their considerations of freedom and grace. Only then will we be in a position to discover whether or not they have anything of value to offer us concerning our present inquiry.

**The Implications of Sartre’s Atheism: A Paradoxical Freedom**

Sartre claims that God does not exist, and that as a direct result of this fact man is a being whose existence precedes his essence. To see this, let us think about what it means to say that God exists and that, as a result, man is a creation of God. As a creation of God, God would first have thought of the essence “man” before he created men, and thus man’s essence would have preceded his existence. Just as a man first thinks of an object (such as a paper-cutter, to use Sartre’s example) which he wants to create, thereby giving it its essence, and then creates the object, thereby giving it its existence, God would do with man. But, Sartre asserts, God does not exist. Man is not the creation of God, for there is no God. Therefore, there is no divine mind in which the essence of man in general or an individual man in particular could possibly exist before the man himself was created. In other words, a man is not like a paper-cutter – his
existence precedes his essence. To put it in the words of William Barret, “As [God’s] existence precedes all essences, so man’s existence precedes his essence; he exists, and out of the free project which his existence can be he makes himself what he is. When God dies, man takes the place of God.”

Sartre is quick to draw out the full implications of this notion (that existence precedes essence) for the freedom as well as the responsibility which it places squarely upon the shoulders of man. He says, “If existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom.” This is not an easy freedom, however. It carries with it the heavy price of complete responsibility for one’s own essence: “But if existence really does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, existentialism’s first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him.”

Utterly alone and without any excuses – this is our first glimpse of Sartre’s conception of freedom for man. Man has before him at every moment the full weight of creating for himself who he is. There is no human nature for man to point to in explanation of his actions, since there is no God to give such a nature. First we find ourselves existing in the world, and then we must set about, by means of our own freedom, to create our very selves. If this is true, then we might now express a fundamental anxiety man faces in light of such a freedom: this freedom, carrying with it such complete responsibility, seems too heavy to bear – do I have any escape from such freedom? Is there any way I can escape the complete responsibility I have for what I am and will become?

Sartre’s answer, in short, is a resounding ‘No.’ Man, Sartre says, is condemned to be free: “Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects he is free; because,
once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does.”¹⁰ That is to say, man cannot help but to freely choose his essence, to create his self, in each and every choice he makes. Even the choice not to choose does not provide an escape for man: “in one sense choice is possible, but what is not possible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing.”¹¹ Thus Sartre’s portrayal of freedom is one that is fraught with anxiety for man in its responsibility, and yet it is an inescapable anxiety: man finds himself in the paradoxical situation that he is free to completely make himself, and yet he cannot choose to be other than free, since to do so would itself be a free act. He is condemned to freedom.

The Implications of Atheism for Morality: If God is Dead, All Things are Permitted

In addition to the general paradoxical freedom by which man, in every choice, creates for himself his very essence, we must also take into account the implications of Sartre’s atheism in the sphere of moral values. It is of extreme importance to note that Sartre has nothing but contempt for a secular humanism which attempts to deny God’s existence (and thus the existence of a moral lawgiver) while nevertheless maintaining the existence of objective moral laws. As Sartre has the protagonist of his novel Nausea, Roquentin, exclaim to a humanist, “It is quite easy to love mankind, quite impossible to love individual people. And why should one do so? . . . To be a humanist, one must believe in a God who guarantees that people are worth loving.”¹² Evans, in summarizing Sartre’s novel, makes the point this way: “Humanism is possible only on the premises that humans are indeed significant and possess intrinsic worth. It therefore

¹⁰ Ibid., 23.
¹¹ Ibid., 41.
¹² Evans, 7.
presupposes that human existence is meaningful; it cannot make human existence meaningful.”\textsuperscript{13}

The secular humanist is not worried about the fact that God does not exist, because he does not think that moral values depend upon Him – but he does not realize that it is precisely God who grounds the possibility of such moral values in the first place. Sartre is quick to point this out:

The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an \emph{a priori} Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. Dostoyevsky said, “If God didn’t exist, everything would be permissible.” That is the very starting point of existentialism.\textsuperscript{14}

What is perhaps most startling about this line of reasoning is that, unlike enlightenment humanists, Sartre agrees with the first premise of the following traditional argument of theists:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(1)] If God does not exist, everything is permissible
  \item[(2)] Not everything is permissible
  \item[(3)] Therefore God does exist.
\end{itemize}

But rather than denying the consequent, as theists do, and insisting that there really are objective moral values, Sartre instead insists, by affirming the antecedent, that God does not exist! Thus Sartre is willing to “pay the price” of atheism, namely the loss of objective moral values:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(1)] If God does not exist, everything is permissible
  \item[(2)] God does not exist
  \item[(3)] Therefore everything is permissible.
\end{itemize}

This loss of objective moral values which accompanies the loss of God Sartre also equates with freedom: the freedom of creating one’s own moral values. Yet this type of freedom is necessarily accompanied by what even Sartre himself sees as a heavy loss: that of objective moral values. It is, in a deeper sense than a mere freedom of choice, precisely this sort of moral freedom which Sartre really had in mind when he said that men are condemned to be free:

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Sartre, 23.
On the other hand, if God does not exist, we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses. This is the idea I shall try to convey when I say that man is condemned to be free.  

Choice and Value: An Explanation of Sartre’s Moral Theory

As we have seen, with the disappearance of God, so too have disappeared all objective moral values which could be “given” to man. How then are we to explain the fact that men live and behave as if moral values do, in fact, exist, and the fact that men do hold themselves accountable to moral standards? Sartre, rather than denying the existence of moral values, instead insists that man himself is “the being by whom values exist.” That is to say, moral values, those things which we judge to be good, exist precisely insofar as each individual human being chooses them for himself: “To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose, because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good.” Sartre’s statement that we can “never choose evil” only makes sense when we realize that it is in choosing X that I create it as valuable/chooseable, and therefore good, precisely in my very act of choosing it. And thus I also create non-X as evil, as not valuable/chooseable. Since in every choice I always choose X, and never non-X (for non-X is created precisely because I chose X in the first place), therefore I can never choose evil – evil is an a priori impossibility for Sartre.

Perhaps a comparison to other moral systems will help us to better understand Sartre’s conception of morality. If we define ‘reason’ broadly, to include the mind, the intellect, and the understanding as well as mere logical reasoning; if we define ‘choice’ in a commonly understood way, namely, as free-will; and finally, if we define ‘value’ as moral value and meaning, the

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15 Ibid., 23
16 Ibid., 94.
17 Ibid., 15.
diagram below (Figure 1) illustrates the difference between classical moral theory and Sartre’s
moral theory, as well as Marcel’s moral theory, which we will also briefly discuss here.

In classical moral theory, objective moral values were known by the reason, which then
provided the moral agent with a means of judging which free choice should be made in
accordance with the moral value. However, in the moral systems of both Sartre and Marcel,
choice is given priority over reason (in fact, for Sartre reason does not even play a role). For
Marcel, there are still objective moral values, but they are not known first by the reason and then
chosen; rather, they are understood only once they have been chosen and only insofar as they are
chosen. It is by doing what is good that we come to see that it is good in the first place, argues
Marcel. But for Sartre, moral values are not a given, but rather are created in each and every
choice. It is in creating such moral values, Sartre says, that, “man makes himself. He isn’t ready
made at the start. In choosing his ethics, he makes himself, and force of circumstance is such
that he cannot abstain from choosing one.”

There are, of course, a number of objections to this view which Sartre takes it upon
himself to answer. The most memorable passage along these lines is Sartre’s defense against an

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18 Ibid., 43.
objection that the man who chooses without reference to objective moral values is simply making an arbitrary choice. This is unfair, Sartre maintains, offering us a memorable analogy between ethics and art which helps us to understand his moral system more fully and clearly:

Let us say that moral choice is to be compared to the making of a work of art . . . may I ask whether anyone has ever accused an artist who has painted a picture of not having drawn his inspiration from rules set up a priori? . . . It is clearly understood that there is no definite painting to be made, that the artist is engaged in the making of his painting, and that the painting to be made is precisely the painting he will have made. It is clearly understood that there are no a priori aesthetic values, but that there are values which appear subsequently in the coherence of the painting, in the correspondence between what the artist intended and the result. . . . What art and ethics have in common is that we have creation and invention in both cases. We cannot decide a priori what there is to be done. 19

Indeed, Sartre maintains that it is actually contradictory to assert that there are a priori ethical rules: “I maintain that there is also dishonesty if I choose to state that certain values exist prior to me; it is self-contradictory for me to want them and at the same time state that they are imposed on me.”20 While thus far we have merely presented Sartre’s philosophy without attempting a critical critique of Sartre’s position, we must here make the following observation, which will be expanded upon later: Sartre can only claim that it is self-contradictory to want certain values and at the same time have them imposed upon me if freedom is defined merely as the negative ability to say “No.” If this is our definition of freedom, then accepting something imposed upon us from the outside is dishonest since it would not be free. But if freedom also involves the possibility of freely saying “Yes” to our situation, even if that means accepting something which comes to us from the outside, then in no way is the above statement contradictory.

Let us now sum up Sartre’s moral theory in his own words: “If I’ve discarded God the Father, there has to be someone to invent values . . . to say that we invent values means nothing

19 Ibid., 42-43.
20 Ibid., 45.
else but this: life has no meaning *a priori*. Before you come alive, life is nothing; its up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing else but the meaning that you choose.”

Ontology and Negative Freedom: Being-for-itself Faces Being-in-itself

We have already seen, in addition to a sort of creative freedom by which Sartre argues we create our moral values, hints of a purely negative conception of freedom which Sartre argues precludes the possibility of freedom when something is presented to us from without. In order to understand this purely negative freedom and its sources, we must first understand a little of Sartre’s ontology. Briefly, Sartre divides all of being into either *being-for-itself* or *being-in-itself*. Being-for-itself is a human person, an ‘I,’ a subject who can not be reduced to the status of an object. Being-in-itself, on the other hand, is an object in the world of nature which has no consciousness or freedom. Now when Sartre reflects upon himself and his status as a being-for-itself, he states that, “I am the being which *is* in such a way that in its being its being is in question.”

Unlike beings-in-themselves, I, as a being-for-myself (due to my consciousness and my freedom) can choose at any moment to act *as if* I am a being-in-itself; thus I can forfeit my being precisely insofar as it defines me as a being, as a being-for-myself. In other words, I can *playact*, pretending to be the role or object which is expected of me by another:

Let us stop a moment to consider this notion of playacting. The performer inevitably performs not only for others, but also for himself; he is therefore acting rather than being what he is. . . . How is it possible, [Sartre] asks, to *be*, while, as it were, being at the same time consciousness of one’s being? . . . The important point is that . . . being-for-itself is defined as not being what it is.

Now while it is true that I may allow myself to lose my status of being by acting in such a way as to fall from that of a being-for-itself into that of a being-in-itself, it is also true that in as

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21 Ibid., 49.
22 Ibid., 58.
much as I am a self, I am not a being-in-itself. What is it that distinguishes me from the entire world of objects? It is nothing more than my freedom to say ‘No’ to such an objectification: “[man] is beyond nature because in his negative capability he transcends it. Man’s freedom is to say ‘No,’ and this means that he is the being by whom nothingness comes into being.”24 Because only being-in-itself is defined as not being what it is, and because man’s freedom to say ‘No’ means that he is the being by whom nothingness comes into being, Sartre can say that, “Freedom in fact . . . is strictly identified with nihilation. The only being which can be called free is the being which nihilates its being. . . . Freedom is precisely the being which makes itself a lack of being.”25

Rising above the plane of ontology, on the plane of human interaction and psychology Sartre fiercely maintains the pure negativity of freedom. We sympathize with Sartre and agree with him when he describes the oppression of the French under the German occupation who, nevertheless, “were never more free.” For, as Sartre says (and rightly so), even though the French had lost their rights and faced death every day, their choice to resist (if only mentally) was an authentic and free choice insofar as, and precisely because, they were able to answer “No” to the German occupation (if only in their minds and wills).26 Nevertheless, while there is certainly a legitimate place for such negative freedom, Sartre’s insistence that this is the only type of freedom which men have seems absurd. Especially in relation to other human beings, it seems to be too small a view of freedom:

As he can find in his philosophy no field or region of Being in which the subject, Being-for-itself, and the object, Being-in-itself, really meet, so when he comes to psychology the self must remain irremediably opposed to the Other, and there is no area between in which I may genuinely say Thou to the Other.”27

24 Barrett, 239.
25 Sartre, 65.
26 Barrett, 240.
27 Ibid., 257.
This eternal opposition to the other is the necessary outcome of Sartre’s ontology and purely negative conception of freedom: in as much as I am in relation to you, another being-for-itself, I will necessarily either reduce you in my treatment of you to an object in my world, a mere being-in-itself, or else you will do the same to me. The only way for me to maintain my being, my status as being-for-itself, is to stand in opposition to you and, through my “No” to your attempts to reduce me, I will establish and perpetuate myself as a being-for-itself. Thus psychology and ontology are, for Sartre, inextricable from one another – they are both united in their pure and complete negativity and opposition to the other, whether this other exists on the ontological plane of being-in-itself or the psychological plane of other human persons.

**Why is Sartre’s Freedom Purely Negative? The Beginnings of a Critique**

If we have followed Sartre’s account of the world and of human beings within the world very carefully, we have seen that Sartre believes man’s freedom to be *necessarily* negative due to the inescapable ontological and moral structures of reality. That is to say, Sartre claims to be first reporting on the very nature of human experience and the world, and then arriving at certain conclusions from this report, such as the negative freedom of the human person. However, we must consider whether perhaps “Sartre’s choice of despair is, like other metaphysical stances, the result of an existential decision,” which would mean that his despair actually “antedates the discovery of meaninglessness.” If this were the case, then it would be true that “his ‘report’ as to the nature of human experience is conditioned by his own despair.” In other words, we must ask whether Sartre’s ontology, for example, truly corresponds to human experience – is it really true that the only two categories of being we experience are being-in-itself and being-for-itself,

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28 Evans, 17.
29 Ibid.
and that these categories in no way overlap? Or will the gaze of the other necessarily and always paralyze and reduce me to a being-in-itself?

Marcel, in an essay on Sartre, argues in precisely this way. Sartre’s theory of the awareness of others, he says, does not take into account the whole of human experience:

What, in fact, is Sartre’s approach to the theory of the awareness of others? . . . It is clear that the whole of this dialectic, with its undeniable power and agility, rests upon the complete denial of we as subject, that is to say upon the denial of communion. For Sartre this word has no meaning at any possible level, not to speak of its religious or mystical sense. This is because in his universe, participation itself is impossible: this, philosophically, is the essential point. There is room only for appropriation, and this in a domain where appropriation is impractical or where, if it is achieved, it fails of its object.  

Precisely because communion is possible, precisely because it is a part of the human experience, Sartre’s account of the other falls short and thus so does his account of reality. It therefore also follows that a conception of my freedom towards another as necessarily negative must also fall short of reality. Marcel also addresses Sartre’s account of freedom head-on in his claim that we are “condemned to freedom.” I can only be condemned, Marcel points out, to something which is a depravation or a loss; thus I can only be condemned to freedom if freedom itself is a depravation or a loss. “And indeed, for Sartre freedom is . . . a deprivation, a defect; it is only by a kind of paralogism that he later represents this defect as the positive condition of the emergence of a world and thus bestows upon it creative value.”

An Atheist on Grace: Sartre’s Metaphysic of the Gift

It should be clear by now that Sartre’s conception of both freedom and “the other” (two concepts which are necessarily wrapped up in each other) combine to preclude the very possibility of God, or rather, combine to preclude the possibility of interaction between Sartre

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31 Ibid., 78.
and God, even if he were to concede that God could exist. We have seen that Sartre, insisting upon a negative freedom, would necessarily have to reject any moral law given by God if he wanted to retain his freedom. And it goes without saying that God is the ultimate and eternal Other, whose very existence would be enough, if we were to accept Sartre’s categories of being-for-itself and being-in-itself, to threaten Sartre’s very being. What then might Sartre have to offer us in terms of his understanding of and rejection of grace?

Let us begin with a passage from Sartre which Marcel calls to our attention. Sartre states, “For a human being, to be is to choose himself; nothing comes to him either from without or from within himself that he can receive or accept. He is wholly and helplessly at the mercy of the unendurable necessity to make himself be, even in the smallest details of his existence.”

This statement by Sartre that “nothing comes to him either from without or from within himself that he can receive or accept” is the clearest formulation we have seen yet of Sartre’s negative conception of freedom. Here we have a complete and utter rejection of all that is not the self (even, notice, the unconscious and innate drives contained within man but not freely chosen by man). And this includes the rejection of grace in particular, as Marcel astutely points out:

This passage from *L’Etre et le Neant* seems to me one of the most significant and explicit in all Sartre’s work. I do not believe that in the whole history of human thought, grace, even in its most secularized forms, has ever been denied with such audacity or such impudence. Having taken this step, Sartre naturally finds himself under the necessity to establish that every human action, even when it appears to be determined, is in reality free – that is to say, the result of choice. Note that for him freedom is equivalent to choice (I believe this to be a fatal error).

If Sartre thus rejects grace in all its forms, and denies to a being-for-itself the ability to receive or accept anything from the outside, what is his explanation of the human experience of gifts, which Marcel terms “secularized forms” of grace? “To give,” Sartre tells us, “is to

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32 Ibid., 79.
33 Ibid.
appropriate by means of destroying and to use this act of destruction as a means of enslaving others” (Marcel points out that this “destruction” does not consist in breaking the object but in destroying it “in so far as it ceases to be mine”).34 This shocking metaphysical exposition of the gift by Sartre is completely consistent with his ontology and his conception of freedom: since I cannot accept anything from the outside without losing my freedom, those who would give me gifts would necessarily be attempting to take that freedom from me, i.e. to enslave me. But, it goes without saying, this definition of gift by Sartre in no way whatsoever conveys the genuine human experience of giving or receiving a gift, and thus it confirms for us that his conception of freedom does not correspond to the genuine and actual human experience.

In ending here our discussion of Sartrean freedom and grace, we would be remiss if we did not mention Marcel’s fundamental and penetrating observation of the relation between gift and freedom in Sartre: “What it comes to is this (and it is an attitude which seems to me to lay bare the roots of metaphysical pride): for Sartre, to receive is incompatible with being free; indeed, a being who is free is bound to deny to himself that he has received anything.”35 Sartre’s conception of freedom, drawn out in all its consequences, forces him in the end to reject the very possibility of grace in any and every form. Having examined the philosophy of Sartre now at length, and the conceptualizations and conclusions it necessarily entails for freedom and for grace, we now turn to the philosophy of Marcel, whose bright sparks and glimpses into being seen thus far we will now attempt to bring more fully into the light.

Marcel’s Existentialism as a Philosophy of Being

Marcel’s approach and attitude towards philosophy and metaphysics is undeniably existential, and as such it involves first and foremost beginning with experience and allowing

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34 Ibid., 82.
35 Ibid.
experience to dictate metaphysical conclusions: “The [attitude I have] on the metaphysical plane . . . consists in saying: granted that this or that fact has been proved experimentally, how can we account for it? . . . On the metaphysical plane experience is the decisive factor.”

This having been said, an even more foundational starting point for the entire philosophy of Marcel is not his method (which he shares with phenomenology and existentialism alike), but rather his complete and entire focus upon discovering what being is. For years, Marcel confesses, he was obsessed with one concern: “What I wanted to know was not so much what reality is, as what we mean when we assert its existence, and when we say that it cannot be reduced to its outward appearances, or that these appearances probably conceal more than they disclose.” In other words, Marcel’s central metaphysical concern (as is indeed the central concern of all metaphysicians) is “What is being?”

What makes Marcel unique in his exploration and ultimate answer to this question is that he is concerned not with the objective structures and nature of being as considered apart from the subject, but on the contrary seeks to “discover how a subject, in his actual capacity as subject, is related to a reality which cannot in this context be regarded as objective, yet which is persistently required and recognized as real.” This is what makes Marcel’s metaphysical inquiry existential in nature, and it is why he defines being as “that which withstands – or what would withstand – an exhaustive analysis bearing on the data of experience and aiming to reduce them step by step to elements increasingly devoid of intrinsic or significant value.” Marcel’s philosophy is an exploration into being, by which is meant precisely an exploration into that which is truly and irreducibly meaningful and full of value.

37 Ibid., 108.
38 Ibid., 25.
Freedom in Human Involvement: Problem and Mystery

Marcel insists that, in the realm of philosophical exploration and inquiry, we must once and for all do away with “the idea that the mind can, as it were, objectively define the structure of reality and then regard itself as qualified to legislate for it . . . on the contrary . . . the undertaking [has] to be pursued within reality itself.” Marcel is convinced that the philosopher cannot treat reality as if he stands in relationship to it as an onlooker stands in relation to a picture – for the philosopher is involved in reality, as an essential and necessary part of the very reality which he is attempting to completely objectify and hold out before himself. All attempts to proceed in this way will necessarily fail, because they will never take into account the whole of the human experience of reality. Instead we must conscientiously make the following two observations: (1) where we begin in our philosophical quest will necessarily determine where we end, and (2) we must be careful to distinguish between those questions which necessarily involve myself (mysteries) and those which do not (problems).

Our first observation is a realization that, “Since metaphysics is not a search for a particular object within experience, but for the ultimate implications of experience itself, then by definition the end is implicit in the beginning.” In other words, Marcel argues that here in the very beginning of metaphysical inquiry there is an opportunity either to despair or to hope in a primitive assurance of the meaningfulness of being, and it is one which comes before all exploration of reality. This is, perhaps, the most fundamental freedom of choice in all of Marcel’s thought: we can begin with either primitive assurance regarding the existence of being, or we can begin with doubt and despair of all meaning. But we must realize that whichever starting point we choose, “it is not an affirmation that we make, but an affirmation by which we

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are made . . . . Being affirms itself in us. In our being there is the presence of the Being by which we are.” 42 In other words, being offers to us from the very start an invitation, a summons to respond – but it is one which we can reject just as well as we can accept, and this rejection or acceptance then determines the whole of our philosophical inquiry and examination of reality.

We can, in this consideration of our response to being, already see the importance of and need for Marcel’s fundamental distinction between a problem and a mystery. Briefly, a problem can be defined as “an inquiry which is set on foot in respect to an object which the self apprehends in an exterior way,” while, “a mystery, on the other hand, is a question in which what is given cannot be regarded as detached from the self. There are data which in their very nature cannot be set over against myself, for the reason that as data they involve myself.” 43 Questions such as “What is being? What is freedom? What is the self?” are questions which are mysteries, since they contain in their very data not just exterior factors, but also my very self. As such, we cannot proceed as if we could hold the whole of the matter out in front of ourselves to be examined and then solved. Rather, “the best we can do is locate ourselves within the mystery.” 44

If we are to proceed in our inquiry into freedom and grace, we must understand that these concepts necessarily involve my involvement in them in order to have any meaning whatsoever, and thus we cannot treat the reconciliation of freedom and grace as a problem, but rather must recognize that it exists in the realm of mystery.

Marcel’s Higher Freedom: Participation and Creative Belonging

Nothing can better help us to understand Marcel’s conception of freedom than to realize that it is the complete and utter opposite of Sartre’s negative conception of freedom. Marcel, like

42 Ibid., 2.
43 Ibid., 32.
44 Ibid., 36.
Sartre, believes that man creates himself; but he does not believe that man creates himself *ex nihilo* by creating his own values. Rather, being (i.e. meaning and value) is at all times present, waiting to be discovered by man. It is precisely man’s *response* to being that is his freedom:

> The ontological order can only be recognized personally by the whole of a being, involved in a drama which is its own, thought it overflows him infinitely in all directions – a being to whom the strange power has been imparted of asserting or denying himself. He asserts himself in so far as he asserts Being and opens himself to it: or he denies himself by denying Being and thereby closing himself to it. In this dilemma lies the very essence of freedom.\(^{45}\)

To put another way, unlike for Sartre, for Marcel, “freedom is not a matter of clenching my fists against intrusion from the outside. It is a relaxation, a letting-go, a letting-be of being (to shift into Heideggerian terminology).”\(^{46}\) This necessarily means that values, such as truth or justice, are not something other than being (such as created values are for Sartre), but rather are glimpses that we have of being itself.

Thus, freedom for Marcel is precisely the response of man to being, the assent to values and the being of which they are a glimpse. Insofar as I choose to assent or to withdraw from this invocation of being, it is true that I am making an autonomous and thus free decision. But in reality, it is the distance between myself and being that is the true measure of my freedom: in so far as I freely choose being, then I create myself and become free. “Liberty is not an anarchic affirmation of the self, but an acknowledgement, a welcoming of ontological belonging – or, says Marcel, of what we might as well call, ‘creative belonging.’”\(^{47}\)

**Freedom and Grace: Marcel’s Metaphysic of the Gift**

We now stand in a position to consider Marcel’s conception of grace and its relation to freedom. As we have already seen, freedom for Marcel must be something much more than


\(^{46}\) Gallagher, 92.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 90.
simply a free choice; in saying, “we must once and for all break with the idea that freedom is
essentially a liberty of choice,” Marcel explicitly argues that the freedom of choice upon which
Sartre based both his moral theory and his fundamental response to others (and indeed to being
itself) is not a deep enough freedom.\textsuperscript{48} Instead, Marcel insists that,

\begin{quote}
We can speak of freedom only when . . . we can see that the stake has a real
importance. The truth would seem,” Marcel argues, “to be that I must realize \textit{in concreto}
that I should be betraying or denying myself if I failed to set this value
on the stake. In this line of thought we must say that the free act is essentially a
significant act.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

In the end, freedom cannot be thought of as a mere choice between two contingents which
determines their value in the choice itself, but rather as a betrayal or acceptance of that which is
of true meaning and value in my life, namely, of being itself.

Marcel’s deeper conception of freedom is a realization that freedom is not in itself purely
negative but rather is, at its very depth, a profound surrender to being which is supremely active
and creative. This deeper sense of freedom in Marcel’s philosophy is what allows for a possible
meeting between freedom and grace. For grace, as a gift, can be either freely rejected or (Sartre
not withstanding) truly and freely received.

Marcel’s consideration of grace is a three-step process: (1) he considers the nature of a
gift; (2) he moves from the meaning of gift to the meaning of generosity; and (3) he moves from
the meaning of generosity to the reality and meaning of grace. So what is a gift? Marcel
observes that a gift cannot merely be a simple transfer, but is in fact much more. For if I give
someone a gift and he starts to thank me, and I in turn reply, “No, no, this is only a transfer,” I
would be profoundly insulting him and simultaneously would be betraying the very nature of the
gift. Instead, Marcel points out, “we have only to consider that a gift is in some way a giving of

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{48}{Gabriel Marcel, “Freedom and Grace” in \textit{The Mystery of Being: Faith and Reality}, trans. G. S. Fraser (South
Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001), 115.}
\footnotetext{49}{Ibid., 116.}
\end{footnotes}
oneself, and that, however difficult it may be to think of a gift of oneself, such a gift cannot on any showing be compared to a transfer.”

This is why Marcel can move from considering a gift as a gift to considering generosity, because the very essence of the gift lies not in its “objecthood,” nor in the fact that it was transferred to another, but rather in the fact that it was given with generosity.

What, then, is generosity? “Would not a fairly accurate definition of generosity,” asks Marcel, “be a light whose joy it is in giving light, in being light?” The metaphor of light here is deliberate and irreducible to such a concept as “consciousness”; for light has this particular attribute, that it is illuminating, and that it is illuminating not for itself but for others. Light, Marcel says, “goes beyond the boundaries which contemporary philosophy attempts to fix or lay down between the for self and the for the other. One might even say that this distinction does not exist for light, but that if its joy is in being light it can only wish to be always more so.”

So too with generosity: the peculiar property of genuine generosity is that it exists for others and that it has joy in this existence for others. Now we are but a short metaphysical leap from generosity to grace, as Marcel outlines for us: “Light as a physical agent helps us to think of generosity: but in return as soon as we turn our attention to generosity in its essence, generosity shows us the road to the metaphysical light, which is indeed the light of which St. John speaks as enlightening every man who comes into the world.”

How, then, is my freedom related to this “metaphysical light” which is grace? Precisely in this way: only insofar as I freely respond with gratitude to the gift of my own life will I come to apprehend that my own life is a gift. This is the mystery that lies at the heart of freedom and

50 Ibid., 118.
51 Ibid., 121.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
grace: not only on the one hand is my freedom given to me by God and thus by grace, but on the other hand I will not apprehend this grace in my life unless I first freely respond to its invitation in my life to do so. And rejection is always possible:

On the other hand it always remains possible for me to deny myself such a view of life and my own life: by that I mean I can interpret either of them as absurd phenomena, freaks, a sort of flaw in the diamond which is Being in itself. In our own day such an interpretation is embodied in the words . . . of Sartre. For my own part I may say that it presents itself to us a temptation, like the poisonous berries which a little child is tempted to pick and put in its mouth.54

We must resist the temptation to reduce this choice, this “affirmation of grace,” to an arbitrary and thus merely pragmatic choice. On the contrary, Marcel maintains, it is absolutely essential that we realize that all of our values – such as freedom and truth – cannot be arbitrary separated from each other without losing their very character as value. If we place ourselves outside of the affirmation of grace, which provides the very grounds for our freedom, we would also find ourselves outside the realm of truth. And furthermore, outside of the affirmation of grace, it is impossible to even speak of values: “I may add that they [freedom and truth] cannot be looked at as values except by a man who has placed himself, if I may so put it, within the axis of intelligible light . . . I mean a light . . . which is at the root of all and every understanding.”55

Cosmic Toilet or Cosmic Fountain? Who is Right?

Marcel and Sartre are both in agreement that the rationalist conception of the universe, in which everything which is real is both necessary and known, is completely inadequate for explaining the world. The rationalist is content in his Cosmic Pool, to which nothing is added or taken away. Sartre, on the other hand, maintains that everything which is real in the world is in fact profoundly and sickeningly unnecessary and unknown. There is a deep and complete lack of

54 Ibid., 122.
55 Ibid., 124.
meaning in the world of Sartre, a draining of value from the world. Extending the metaphor, Sartre’s conception of the world is that of a Cosmic Toilet in which the only meaning is that we can either flush or be flushed. And in the end, of course, we go down the pipes along with everyone and everything else – but along the way we maintain our freedom only insofar as we use it to protect ourselves against everyone and everything else. Marcel, in contrast to both Sartre and the rationalist, sees reality as much more than is necessary or than can be known. The heart of being is mystery, a plentitude which springs up forever, never to be exhausted. For Marcel, being is a Cosmic Fountain which offers to me the possibility of tasting its waters, or is a Cosmic Ocean which invites me to surf upon its waves. In a sense I am free to reject this offer, but I am more free, and more profoundly so, when I bend to sip from the fountain or throw myself upon the waves of being. Here we have neatly summarized the three major philosophies of the world: Cosmic Pool, Cosmic Toilet, or Cosmic Ocean.

So which of these metaphors correspond to the correct philosophy? Or rather, which of these philosophies correspond to reality itself? In the end, of course, we must each of us decide this for ourselves. But, warns Marcel, if we are genuinely concerned with discovering the true nature of reality, it will do us no good to close ourselves off in despair from the start. The only position that makes any sense, indeed the only position that permits of the possibility of discovering meaning (which we all deeply want and need), is to remain open and listening for this possibility itself. But did not Sartre show us that there is not even a possibility of such meaning, that the very ontological structures and psychological principles observable in experience preclude the very possibility of objective value and positive freedom? This is precisely what is up for debate, and as Marcel observes:

This raises the whole question of values as they are conceived by Sartre. From his standpoint, values cannot be anything but the result of the initial choice made
by each human being; in other words, they can never be ‘recognized’ or ‘discovered.’ ‘My freedom,’ he states expressly, ‘is the unique foundation of values. And since I am the being by virtue of whom values exist, nothing – absolutely nothing – can justify me in adopting this or that value or scale of values. As the unique basis of the existence of values, I am totally unjustifiable. And my freedom is in anguish at finding that it is the baseless basis of values.’ Nothing could be more explicit; but the question is whether Sartre does not here go counter to the exigencies of that human reality which he claims, after all, not to invent but to reveal.56

Marcel accuses Sartre of creating categories and principles which are contrary to reality as it is experienced, which are really set up by him in order to justify an original and primitive despair of being without first being open to the possibility that such being really exists. Look and listen first, says Marcel. Stay open to the possibility of being, and respond to its summons when they come. Only in this way can we be sure that reality and meaning will be discovered and truly experienced rather than merely invented.

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