

Notes on Predestination



We begin with the Scholastic Distinction Between *Ordo Cognoscendi* (Order of Knowing) and the *Ordo Essendi* (Order of Being): The order in which we come to know things is the opposite of the order in which they exist.

Applied to theology: The basic principle of theology is that God is *in se* who he is in his revelation. In *ordo essendi*, God exists necessarily and freely as eternal Triune identity. In *ordo cognoscendi*, we come to know God through his economic acts in history, recorded and witnessed by prophets and apostolic eyewitnesses. Knowledge of God as Triune follows knowledge of God as incarnate in Christ, which follows the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We know God is and has always been Triune because God the Father raised his Son Jesus from the dead.

Scripture is the inspired prophetic and apostolic witness to the Triune God's economic revelation in history. In the *ordo cognoscendi*, we come to know who God is first through this prophetic and apostolic witness. Scripture is referential in two directions: history (the economy of redemption – the economic Trinity); ontology (God *in se* – the immanent Trinity).

The primary language of Scripture is not the language of ontology, but the language of symbol, metaphor, and narrative.

The proper object of Christian faith is the subject matter of revelation (the Triune God *in se*), but this knowledge is mediated to us through the biblical language of symbol, metaphor, and narrative. Our subsequent knowledge of the Triune God as the subject matter of revelation enables us to re-read Scripture in light of its economic conclusion. We know how the story begins (with the Trinity) because we know how it ends (God the Father raised Jesus from the dead).

The language of Scripture is the language of "common sense" realism (symbol, metaphor, and narrative), of realities in relation to us (*pro nobis*). The language of ontology is the language of "critical realism," of things in themselves (*in se*). In the *ordo cognoscendi*, the move from the economic to the immanent Trinity is the move from common sense to critical realism, from narrative, symbol, and metaphor, to history, and then to ontology. Phil. 2:5-11 and Nicea are not saying different things, but one speaks in the language of common sense realism (narrative and symbol); the other speaks in the language of critical realism (ontology).

What does this have to do with predestination?

The language of Scripture about election and predestination is not the language of ontology, but the language of narrative, symbol, and metaphor (economy). Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ saves; Scripture does not provide a metaphysics or ontology of salvation.

The basic biblical teaching about election and predestination: 1) Jesus Christ is the Elect One; 2) Election is in Christ – there is no election outside of Christ; 3) Some are saved (because of God's redemption in Christ); There is an elect Community (Israel and the Church) and they are chosen in Christ; 4) God has an eschatological goal for his people, chosen in Christ, that they be conformed to the image of his Son (salvation); from all eternity, God predestined his chosen people to attain this goal; 5) Some are lost (through their

own fault) and thus do not attain the predestined goal.

In the history of the church, the discussion of election and predestination has been primarily concerned not so much with the question of God's election of a people in Christ, but with the question of the ontology of the salvation of the individual Christian. How is it that human beings come to have faith? Why do some believe and not others? What is the relationship between grace and human freedom?

In terms of ontology, this is simply one instance of the general problem of the relation between the Creator (eternal, necessary) and creation (dependent, contingent). Other examples in the history of theology: 1) the incarnation (Nicea, Chalcedon); 2) the sacraments; 3) sanctifying grace.

Some basic metaphysical principles:

1) The distinction between God and the world. God is not an item "in the world" and must not be conceived as such. God and the world do not "add up." God is not a competitive "other" in the world. God does not become "greater" because of creation, but neither does creation mean that God needs to "limit himself" for created being to exist.

2) The eternal Triune God is complete in himself and has no unsatisfied needs. God creates freely out of love in order to share with creatures the goodness of the inner Trinitarian life. God is entirely gracious and always acts in accord with his character as good. God does not need us. God does not create because he has an unfulfilled need to demonstrate attributes of "justice" and "mercy."

3) God is the supreme Good (*summum bonum*), in whom there can be no evil—not because whatever is, is good, or because something becomes good merely because God wills it, but because God's nature is inherently good, and God cannot will or create evil.

4) That God is *in se* who he is in his revelation means that God's actions toward his creatures are always for their good. There is no "hidden God" behind God's revelation in Christ where he is not gracious (Barth).

5) In discussing the relation between Creator and creature, not only divine aseity and sovereignty, but also created contingency and genuine created reality, must be preserved. God creates and works through created contingencies in such a manner that they retain their integrity as created contingencies.

6) God is sovereign over his creation. God is present to each creature and each created event in that he gives existence to whatever is. If God were to cease creating and sustaining the universe for even a moment, it would collapse back into nothingness.

7) Sin exists, but God is in no way the cause of it. Sin is completely contrary to God's will. God is in no way the cause of the sinful actions of creatures. God permitted, but did not cause, the fall into sin. God does not decree or "efficaciously permit" the fall to happen in such a way that the existence of evil in the world is inevitable. The existence of sin is an entirely contingent event, and truly might not have happened.

8) Although God is not the cause of evil, God is capable of bringing good out of evil, and does so. (This is the doctrine of providence).

9) Eternity and immutability do not mean that God does not "respond" to human actions in the sense that God's actions never vary as a consequence of human actions. (Among other things, this would be an implication of the personalism of Trinitarian theology. The relation between God and creatures is not that of an irresistible force to a passive object, but of the Trinitarian persons who share their love with created

persons who respond to grace with gratitude.) As mentioned above, the fall into sin was an entirely contingent event, and might not have happened at all. Redemption is a response to this human contingency. Any supralapsarian doctrine of redemption that would imply the necessary existence of sin is contrary to 7) above. (Is this a danger for some Barthian formulations of election?)

10) If God is in himself who he is in his revelation, then God's promise of salvation in Christ and his command to all to repent necessarily imply unlimited atonement. That the incarnate Word assumed human nature means that Christ suffered in and redeemed the humanity that is common to all human beings. (If "what is not assumed is not redeemed" is true, its corollary is that "what is assumed, is redeemed.") God commands all to repent because God wills the salvation of all, and Christ assumed the human nature of, and died for all human beings. The gospel can be preached as good news for all because it is. Every human being is someone who has been created in the image of God, is fallen into sin, is redeemed by Christ, and is summoned to the promise of eternal life in Christ.

11) God's gracious initiative is always prior to human response. Faith is enabled by divine grace and is thus a gift. The analogy of "double agency" (Farrer, Hunsinger) is more adequate here than models of determinism, monergism, or semi-Pelagianism, because it is more consonant with the personalism of Trinitarian theology. In grace, God moves the human will in such a manner that wherever God acts, there is more human freedom, not less. In the words of the scholastic dictum, "Grace does not destroy, but perfects nature." We speak, then, not of grace and free will, but of grace and "freed will." Thus, faith is both a divinely enabled gift, but also a vigorous human response—personalism again. Faith is not merely passive. ("Double agency" corresponds to traditional language of "sufficient" and "efficacious" grace; "operative grace,"

“prevenient” and “concurative” grace, etc.)

12) Because God moves the created will according to its nature as will (double agency, not determinism), it is possible for grace to be refused. Although God does not create evil, hell is a genuine possibility. The paradox here is that the sinner’s grasp at autonomy is vain, since refusal of grace leads not to freedom, but to the slavery of sin.

13) Election and reprobation are not parallel phenomena, and must not be characterized as such. Scripture speaks of a positive election of redeemed sinners to salvation in Christ. but nowhere speaks of a positive choice of particular sinners from all eternity to damnation. No “double predestination”! Redemption is entirely the work of Christ, and grace enables the elect freely to exercise faith. Damnation is a tragedy because contrary to God’s will, and is entirely the fault of those who refuse the divine gift.

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Determinism? It's a heresy,

why?

I think I must be in a cranky mood today. At any rate, the following is also something I originally put on a certain (NeoCalvinist) Anglican(?) blog in response to the following:

The man born blind in John 9 was not an accident of biology. He was born blind so that the Lord Jesus could give him sight. Joseph was not sold into slavery by accident. He was sold into slavery by the express intended purpose of God to redeem many. The Assyrians did not destroy Israel on their own accord. They came as the arm of God to punish. The Lord Jesus was not crucified by fortunate happenstance. The men who delivered Him up and killed him did so by divine decree. There are no random molecules in the universe. Everything is governed by the decretive will of God. Nothing happens except that He has decreed it from the beginning. No death, no misfortune, no suffering, no sorrow, no misery is beyond his reach, or outside the scope of His will. That is why we can say that everything has purpose in this life, and that everything will eventually reveal the glory of God. We do not have to understand. It is sufficient that God understands.

Providence means that God is capable of bringing good out of evil. But God does not decree or create evil. Evil is entirely the result of the rebellion of creatures, which God permits, but does not cause. Certainly “No death, no misfortune, no suffering, no sorrow, no misery is beyond his reach, or outside the scope of His will.” It does not at all follow that “Nothing happens except that He has decreed it from the beginning.”

God does not decree sin. God hates sin, and his Son died to redeem us from that sin which God hates. To state that God decrees sin is to place on God the responsibility for that which he hates, and condemns, and the effects of which his Son

died to alleviate.

The relation between God and creatures is absolutely unique, and not one that any creature can even imagine because all of our knowledge takes place within the finite contingent structures of created reality. But God is not part of that reality at all. We literally cannot imagine the relation between God and creatures, and determinism is as much a case of such an idolatrous attempt to imagine the connection, as are attempts that imply that (as my interlocutor put it), God "struggles with a creation in which random suffering is exactly that – random, devoid of purpose." Both positions are equally "nonsense."

The vast majority of Christians throughout history have not found it necessary to posit determinism in order to assert God's providence and control of his creatures. Indeed, God's sovereignty is more honored if we recognize that God creates creatures in such a manner as to give them a genuine but contingent created integrity. God is quite capable of working through genuine created causality to bring about his intentions. He does not have to be a determinist to do so. God does not create evil, and he does not decree sin. God does not create or cause that which he hates.

Of course, God is quite capable of using the evil that he does not cause, and which he hates, to accomplish his purposes. Of course, God is capable of working through the sins of Joseph's brothers or Pharaoh or Pilate to accomplish his purposes. But God did not determine that Joseph's brothers betray him or that Pharaoh would enslave the Hebrews, or that Pilate would crucify Jesus. To suggest such is close to blasphemy.

I realize such discussions are interminable, and generally raise more heat than light. Rather than enter into endless discussion, I point readers to my philosophical and theological betters. One might read Augustine. But certainly Thomas Aquinas and Richard Hooker have thought through these

things as carefully as have Calvin and his successors.

The language of Scripture is phenomenal when it comes to describing God's relation to creatures, as it is phenomenal when it describes things like the rising of the sun, scientific realities, or God's body parts ("The arm of the Lord is not shortened . . ."). Scripture nowhere provides detailed metaphysical discussion of such questions as the relation between primary and secondary causality, or, how God works through created contingent events in such a manner as to provide not only for his sovereignty but their integrity as creatures. To assume that it does is to make a category mistake, like those Vatican officials who chided Galileo for contradicting the clear teaching of Scripture about the rising of the sun.

There has been in the history of the church reams of paper and gallons of ink spent on discussing questions relating to how divine sovereignty relates to created contingencies. Every metaphysical issue—incarnation, Trinity, creation, grace, sacraments, etc.—is a variation. If it were simply a matter of quoting a few passages of scripture, the issue would have been settled long ago.

Most Calvinists have no idea of just how rich and complex the discussion has been. Needless to say, most Christians have not been determinists. The ecumenically orthodox consensus of the church is that:

1) God is the supreme Good, in whom there can be no evil—not because whatever is, is good, or because something becomes good merely because God wills it, but because God's nature is inherently good, and God cannot will or create evil.

2) In discussing the relation between Creator and creature, not only divine aseity and sovereignty, but also created contingency and genuine created reality, must be preserved. God creates and works through created contingencies in such a manner that they retain their integrity as created

contingencies.

3) Sin exists, but God is in no way the cause of it. Sin is completely contrary to God's will. God is in no way the cause of the sinful actions of creatures. God permitted, but did not cause, the fall into sin.

4) God is sovereign over his creation. God is present to each creature and each created event in that he gives existence to whatever is. If God were to cease creating and sustaining the universe for even a moment, it would collapse back into nothingness.

5) Although God is not the cause of evil, God is capable of bringing good out of evil, and does so. If God could not bring good out of evil, he would not be sovereign.

The above would be agreed to by Orthodox, by Catholics, including Augustinians, Thomists, Scotists, Dominicans, Molinists, Suarezians, by the vast majority of Protestants, including orthodox Lutherans, the vast majority of Anglicans (e.g., Richard Hooker, John Donne, Joseph Butler), Methodists, and, I think, even most Reformed today, for example, the late Thomas F. Torrance, who wrote a huge amount of material on how the patristic doctrine of creation made a radical change in how Christians viewed the world as compared to paganism, and how this has significant implications for the relation between theology and modern science.

The one exception in the entire tradition would be traditionalist Calvinists. Luther himself was a determinist, but orthodox Lutheranism did not follow him in this. There is debate as to whether Calvin was a determinist, or rather, whether determinism was introduced by Beza. In my opinion, a careful reading of the texts indicates that Beza's supralapsarianism was simply a logical drawing out of the implications of Calvin's own understanding of providence.

At the same time, there is no inherent connection between a doctrine of Augustinian predestination and determinism. Augustine was the first advocate of unconditional

predestination, but he rejected determinism until his dying day. Thomas Aquinas embraced Augustine's doctrine of predestination, as have many of his followers, but he emphatically rejected determinism because it would make God responsible for sin.

My own thinking on such matters has been greatly influenced by thinkers like Torrance, but also Thomists like Robert Sokolowski, Norris Clarke, Thomas Weinandy, and numerous others. I would also recommend the writings of Anglicans Austin Farrer and Eric Mascall. And, of course, there is the huge discussion in the entire tradition of the church, beginning with the church fathers. Calvinist determinism is just a tributary, and rather a small creek, in the huge river of Christian metaphysics.

I would add to the above that I grant to Calvinist determinism about the same amount of credibility I give to the Orthodox Essence/Energies distinction, to the Non-Chalcedonian Christologies of Copts or Armenians, to Lutheran ubiquity, Roman Catholic transubstantiation, Scotist possible worlds metaphysics, Molinist middle knowledge, or Openness of God theism. Like the above, it is a metaphysical theory that has been embraced by a sizable group of Christians in an attempt to address certain theological problems raised by Scripture, and, in particular, the way in which particular divine and created realities relate. At the same time, each one of these views is a bit of metaphysical speculation that has been embraced by no other Christian body outside the particular body of advocates. As such, while the theories might be right, one tends to think that their continued adherence within the particular group in which they have arisen has more to do with inertia, and preservation of group identity than with well thought out solutions to the problems raised.

Finally, I am aware that Calvinists not only insist that God decrees everything, but that God is not thereby the author of evil, and I am aware of the various ways in which they try to

reconcile these two claims. To explain why they can't be reconciled would require a rather lengthy syllogistic argument outlining various distinctions between necessity, possibility, impossibility, contingency, and various kinds of necessity. However, in short, if God brings things about necessarily, then they are necessary, and cannot not have been. If God brings things about contingently, then they are not necessary, and might not have been. If God decrees all events in such a manner that the fall or sin cannot not have been, then the fall and sin are necessary, and God is the author of evil. This is true even if the necessity of the fall or sin are contingent on human actions, which, in themselves, are voluntary, but nonetheless determined in their outcome by the divine decree. If those human choices are determined by the divine decree in such a manner that they cannot not have been, then God is the author of evil.

However, that God is the author of evil is a heresy not only contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture, but also condemned universally by the Christian tradition—with the single exception of Calvinist determinism.