



Time travel is tricky. While the prospect of seeing the future or reliving history is extremely enticing, there are a whole host of dangers including the prospect of reliving the same events over and over until you get them right. Perhaps you accidentally intervened in some past event that has corrupted the present and you feel the need to repeatedly go back and try to fix things. Or maybe the repeated time travel is out of your hands and you have to tread a perfect path to break out of the cycle. It is one of those undeniable truths of science fiction that it takes extremely careful planning, along with a lot of trial and error, to manipulate the circumstances and make sure everyone else acts in exactly the way you need them to in order to break out of a time travel loop.

As odd as this fictional conceit can be, it is not so far from the way that some have tried to understand the relationship between God's providence and human freedom. In a previous essay we described God's providence as the intimate knowledge of every aspect of creation down to the smallest detail and adverted to the fact that, for St. Thomas, this foreknowledge does not conflict with human freedom. We touched on some difficulties with this claim but they deserve a closer treatment.

The first difficulty is this: If God knows what choices I will make in the future, how can I be free to make those choices? Here, we need to recall that God's knowledge and action isn't like the knowledge and action of creatures. God knows everything about us, but not in the way that Bob, our nosy neighbor, knows everything about us.

When Bob watches us cut our lawn, he knows infallibly that we are cutting our lawn right now. This knowledge does not impinge upon our freedom because it is simply an observation of what we have freely chosen. If Bob tries to predict

what we will do at 9:30 on Saturday morning he can guess with some plausibility, particularly because Bob is nosy and knows that we usually cut our lawn at that time every week, but his knowledge of our future is contingent. Specifically, it is contingent upon our free choice in the matter as well as all sorts of unpredictable circumstances that might influence that choice.

If God has infallible knowledge of our future then it may seem like our free choices are not really free but already chosen for us. St. Thomas insists that God's infallible knowledge of

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our future is not some secret predictive power because there is no such thing as the future for God. Rather, in His transcendent eternity, which is outside the flow of time, all events from any time are present to Him in one eternal now. Thus God's infallible knowledge of our future free acts is less like Bob's guess about our whereabouts on Saturday morning and more like what he knows while peeping over the fence at us. "Hence it is manifest that contingent things are infallibly known by God, inasmuch as they are subject to the divine sight in their presentiality; yet they are future contingent things in relation to their own causes."¹

While this may help us understand how God's knowledge is reconcilable with human freedom, there is still something problematic with thinking about God as nothing more than a very observant neighbor. In His wisdom He also orders all things as part of his loving plan for creation. This involves not only knowing what will happen but also directing it to come about. God works through His creatures in this act of governance, giving them true roles of causality, but never in such a way that anything is beyond His reach.




THE IMAGE OF GOD HE CREATED THEM.

Here is where a second difficulty with providence and free will arises: If God is able to execute a particular plan for creation, how can our free actions be part of this plan and still truly remain free? Some have argued that for human freedom to remain free it must be off limits from the direct causal action of God. To get around this problem they propose that God never acts directly to move us to a particular end, but knows exactly how we would freely act in any possible circumstance and so orders the circumstances to bring about the particular free act that fits into His plan. While God is clearly not stuck in one of those time travel loops of science fiction, on this view He is still constrained in a similar way to indirectly manipulate human action, not based on trial and error but on His infinite knowledge of how we would act in different situations.

St. Thomas is much more direct in how he sees God ordering man's free actions as part of His providential plan. As the creator of human nature and creator of our rational souls, we are utterly dependent on God for our existence and espe-

cially for our ability to think and to choose. "God moves man's will, as the Universal Mover, to the universal object of the will, which is the good. And without this universal motion, man cannot will anything. But man determines himself by his reason to will this or that, which is a true or apparent good."² God's Divine plan includes not only the fact that certain things happen, but that they happen according to the nature of the creatures which, in the case of man, includes self-determination.³ The results of this self-determination never catch God off guard and would not be possible if He did not actively empower us to choose.

The fact that God's infallible knowledge of our actions and His involvement in our very act of willing does not destroy freedom can seem contradictory. For us, certain knowledge only comes by removing all contingency and inducing others to act always involves a certain coercion or violence. God does not act like us though and His infallible knowledge and omnipotent will are gentle enough to preserve true freedom on our part such that, even though we are utterly dependent upon Him for our ability to act, we are truly responsible for the results. Even here, though, God does not leave us alone to the whim of our fallible desires, for by the mystery of grace, which would take us far beyond the scope of this article, He can help us to choose the true and highest good, namely Himself. 

¹ *Summa Theologiæ*, I.14.3.

² *Summa Theologiæ*, I-II.9.6.

³ *Summa Theologiæ*, I-II.10.4.

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