

## 9: Free Will

The previous lecture on God's eternity finished our examination of Aquinas's metaphysics. With this lecture, we will begin a section of the course explaining Aquinas's theological anthropology - theology of humans. This lecture will begin that task by examining the concept of free will, and precisely what that means for Aquinas.

**I. Freedom:** Before we can have an articulate discussion of human free will, we must first examine the nature of freedom. Freedom implies a lack of outside determination, an unforced state. Freedom of action, simply stated, is doing what one wants to do. Therefore, if an outside force is coercing one to do something, the one doing the coerced action is not free in doing it. It is not freedom of action.

It follows that freedom of the will is willing what one wants to will. If something forces or manipulates one's will (e.g., manipulating the brain), then one is not freely willing it. Anything that makes one will what one wills has removed the freedom of the will.

God does act on the will, but not in a violent or coercive way. We can therefore say that God acts on the will, but not with efficient causation. Thus, God's acting in us and acting upon our will does not abrogate our freedom of will.

**II. Causal Determinism and Free Will:** A concept called causal determinism comes into play here because in determining whether or not there is freedom of the will, we must figure out whether or not the willing was caused by something else. Causal determination is the idea that everything happens as it does because it was caused to happen in that manner by what happened before in a causal chain (e.g., think of the butterfly effect). If causal determination holds sway in our world, then we will what we will because something else prior caused us to will in that way. We are not free. Aquinas and others who suppose free will hold that nothing acts on the human will with causal determination.

There are four main positions regarding free will as a result of this issue:

1. **Compatibilism:** Some people think that a person can be both causally determined to will what he or she wills and yet still count as having free will (what we experience feels free).
2. **Incompatibilism:** Aquinas and others think that a person has free will only if nothing operates on the will to make one do what one does or will what one wills. One cannot be both causally determined and free.

3. Determinism: Some people suppose that humans are causally determined, and so they simply must not have free will.

4. Libertarianism: These people (Aquinas included) agree that causal determination and free will are incompatible, but think humans have free will. This means that causal determination does not affect the human will. There are two subtypes here: The human will is independent: The first type of libertarian view of the human will is based upon the "Principle of Alternative Possibilities" (PAP). The idea is that the will is free as long as there are alternative possibilities that could have been chosen (not Aquinas's view). The human will and intellect work together: In this view, the human will and intellect must be the sole first cause of one's action. The human will and intellect work together as the originating cause (though the intellect does not govern the will). (Aquinas)

For Aquinas, freedom of the will is not just relegated to the will, but rather is conferred on the whole human being. Freedom of the will is a causal power of the whole human being conferred on the whole human being by the substantial form of the human being.

**III. Aquinas's Position:** Thomas Aquinas ultimately views free will both as an incompatibilist and as a libertarian. Aquinas rejects the Principle of Alternative Possibilities as the basis for human free will. What is necessary for freedom of the will is not necessarily alternative possibilities to every action. The will can be free even if there is only one option available to the will.

Rather, what determines the freedom of the will is that the will is not causally determined by any outside agency beyond one's own intellect and will. One can reject a ridiculous offer freely, even if it is not possible to accept that offer, because one can see that rejecting it is the only option that is not stupid, and the will is not isolated from the rest of one's person (e.g., the nickel example in the lecture). This may seem like splitting hairs, but it is an important distinction because it explains how God can have free will and yet cannot will evil.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Why is Aquinas able to reject the notion that causal determinism prevents the freedom of the will?

2. What is the difference between the two kinds of libertarianism, and why does Aquinas not think that the principle of alternative possibilities is necessary for free will?