

PREDESTINATION:
SOME QUESTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS¹

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In my experience as both a student and a teacher, I have noticed that there is near unanimity that the question of predestination and free choice is mysterious and tends to lead one into contradictory opinions. I have also noticed that the reasons people give for the mysterious and apparently contradictory nature of the relationship between free choice and predestination are widely diverse. Moreover, sometimes, a person thinks a problem pertaining to predestination is insoluble when some overlooked distinction might be all they need to overcome the difficulty. That is, they think that the mystery is in one place when in fact it is in another.

The purpose of this short article is: 1) to show that there is no real contradiction between free choice and predestination; and 2) to identify precisely what aspects of predestination are truly beyond the grasp of human reason, and what aspects are within the grasp of human reason: in short, to identify correctly where the mystery lies. To this end, I will attempt to lay out some of the fundamental questions which are often

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asked about predestination and to give a number of key distinctions and considerations which help to avoid unnecessary difficulties and misconceptions about predestination.

QUESTION ONE: What is signified by the word "predestination"?

Predestination is the plan by which God, the Governor of the entire universe and the First Cause of all being, intends to bring a rational creature to eternal beatitude.² This plan implies more than just foreknowledge: for it also signifies a proposal or intention to arrange things so that the plan will be carried out. Hence, the Latin term *prae-destinare*: to propose a destination in advance.

QUESTION TWO: What is meant by the terms "freedom," "free will," and "free choice"?

Freedom, in its broadest sense, means absence of restriction. In this sense, however, it is still based upon nature. A bird is restricted when it cannot fly, and so is not called free. On the other hand, we do not say that a horse which cannot fly is restricted and not free. A horse is restricted and not free when it cannot walk or gallop. Thus, freedom depends upon a thing's nature. Free will is the appetitive power, based upon intellectual knowledge, whereby it is able to choose goods apprehended as opposed to one another.³ Free choice is the act of the will by which one determines a particular means among many to achieve a good apprehended by reason.⁴ It is important to notice then that there is no sense of freedom which implies complete indeterminacy.

² *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 23, a. 1, c.: "ratio transmissionis creaturae rationalis in finem vitae aeternae praedestinatio nominatur."

³ See *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 83, a. 1-4.

⁴ See *Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae, q. 13, a. 1-6.

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QUESTION THREE: Doesn't the very concept of freedom include the notion of being undetermined or uninfluenced by something outside?

As noted above, freedom is relative to a thing's nature. Freedom and free choice belongs to different things in different ways which are determined by their natures.⁵ So if a thing has its nature from some outside cause, its freedom will also be determined in some way by an outside cause. Freedom for a dog means that it can do all the things that a dog is naturally able to do. Freedom for a man means being able to do all the things that a man can naturally do which are somehow ordained to the perfection of man's nature. Only in God, whose nature is not caused from something outside, is freedom absolutely undetermined or uninfluenced by something outside of God. For creatures, freedom and free choice are more limited. This can be seen principally from the fact that the ultimate end for which our choices are made is already determined for us: happiness. And this happiness can be further shown to consist most of all in the possession of God through knowledge and love. The fact that our freedom comes already preconditioned in some way does not result in a lack of human freedom or free choice. Human beings do not somehow feel that their freedom is vitiated because we necessarily desire happiness.⁶ This is part of what it means to be free for a human. The self-determination proper to human freedom involves a determination of the *means* to achieve the predetermined end of happiness. This self-determination of the means involves knowledge of the means as such and the various relationships between the means and the end. Thus,

⁵ See *In II Sent.*, d. 25, q. 1, a. 4, ad 2.

⁶ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 82, a. 1, c.: "Necessity from the end is not opposed to the will . . . nor is natural necessity opposed to the will. On the contrary, it is necessary that just as the intellect adheres to the first principles from necessity, so also does the will adhere to the ultimate end, namely happiness, from necessity."

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human freedom exceeds that which is found in animals since we are able to know the end as such and to propose and determine for ourselves the means to that end.

QUESTION FOUR: Is predestination a philosophical or a theological problem?

Both. It can be known from reason unaided by revelation that God has a plan for rational creatures, and this alone raises many of the problems usually associated with predestination and free choice. However, certain difficulties about predestination belong exclusively to theology since these problems specifically regard God's revealed plan to lead the elect to supernatural beatitude. And since predestination properly speaking regards God's plan to bring a rational creature to an end beyond its natural abilities, the problems about predestination are more properly theological than philosophical.

QUESTION FIVE: Is God uncertain about whether the plan He has for some rational creature will in fact be accomplished? In other words, is predestination uncertain?

Predestination is completely certain.⁷ First, predestination is certain because God's foreknowledge is infallible. All things proceed from Him by way of His intellect so that all things which come to be are conformed to His intellect. Just as an author, for example, is certain about how a character will act in a book he writes since those acts of that character are the result of the intellect of the author, so also God must be certain about the acts of creatures since they are the result of His intellect. Second, predestination is completely certain because God is omnipotent so that His plans cannot be frustrated.

QUESTION SIX: Does predestination work in such a way that

⁷ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 23, a. 6: "The order of predestination is certain."

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God looks to see what choices we make, and then, knowing our inclinations and how we will choose given certain circumstances, He arranges circumstances so that we will end up choosing according to His will?

No. God's knowledge and choices are not and cannot be determined by something outside of Him. God acts, but He never reacts or undergoes some alteration from outside: He is pure act.⁸ By divine foreknowledge God knows in advance from Himself all the choices we are going to make; nor does He need to look and wait to see what choices we will make, as if He were somehow learning from our actions. Nevertheless, sometimes God fulfills His plans through the circumstances He arranges and our inclinations. But even when we freely choose contrary to our inclinations, this is also foreseen as part of His plan.⁹

QUESTION SEVEN: Does God's foreknowledge of our choices and decisions require that our choices and decisions are necessary and not free?

God's foreknowledge does not impose necessity upon the acts of rational creatures. An example from another kind of knowledge is helpful. When I see someone sitting down, it is necessarily true and certain that he is sitting down. Yet that man can be sitting down by his own free choice. There is necessity and certitude in one respect, but freedom in another. There

⁸ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 3, a. 1, c.: "It is necessary that the first being be in act and in no way in ability."

⁹ Students of St. Thomas' teaching on predestination will recognize here and other places references to some of the Scholastic controversies about predestination. I have purposely avoided entering into the details of these controversies in order to present the teaching of St. Thomas in a more serene way. For those who are interested in a detailed exposition of these controversies, I recommend a work by Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., entitled "Predestination;" (tr. Dom Bede Rose. St. Louis, Mo.: Herder, 1939).

is a not a necessary relation between the cause of the fact (e.g., the man's decision to sit) and the fact itself (e.g., the fact of sitting), but there is a necessary relation between the knowledge and the fact known. Knowledge does not impose necessity upon the cause of a fact known, but rather *presupposes* necessity of the fact itself for it to be true knowledge. If something is really known to be so, it is necessarily true: this is a condition for authentic knowledge. In the same way, God knows our actions with complete certitude while our actions remain free. And the fact that God also knows our future acts does not change matters. For even God does not know future acts as future, but as present. For God is equally present to all times and places and does not experience these sequentially.¹⁰ Rather, God, from the perspective of eternity, sees all things in an everlasting present, just as a man from the top of a mountain sees all the travelers on a road below in a single glance, while someone stationed on the road sees them only one at a time.¹¹

QUESTION EIGHT: But God's knowledge is not entirely like our knowledge, since God's knowledge is also a cause of the things He knows. Doesn't this mean that God's knowledge imposes necessity upon the things He knows, and particularly upon our free choices?

Because God is the most universal cause of all being, it belongs to God not only to establish what beings are to be caused, but also the order among causes and the way or manner in which things are to be caused.¹² Hence, God wills to cause some things immediately, such as angels, the human soul and other things immediately created by Him, and God wills to cause other things through secondary causes. Again, some things

¹⁰ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 14, a. 13, c.: "All things which are in time are present to God from eternity."

¹¹ See *In Peri Hermeneias*, Lib. I, lect. 14, n. 19.

¹² *Summa Theologica*, Ia-IIae, q. 10, a. 4.

which come about through secondary causes come about in a necessary way, others in a contingent way and still others in a free way. That is, the relation between a secondary cause and its effect is a relationship of necessity, or of contingency or of freedom. God's causality is so universal that it determines not only the things caused, but also the manner in which they are caused. So whatever God wills to be accomplished through free secondary causes is caused freely. Moreover, since predestination pertains to the plan to lead the rational creature into beatitude, and since God wills to lead the rational creature to beatitude through his own free choices,¹³ as Augustine teaches: "God who made you without your consent will not save you without your consent,"¹⁴ it follows that God's plan to lead us to beatitude (predestination) comes about through our free choices. Thus, predestination does not impose necessity upon our choices.

QUESTION NINE: Isn't it impossible for us to determine our own choices and for God to determine our choices? This seems to be a contradiction.

Aristotle in his *Sophistic Refutations* identifies one of the chief sources in error in thought as ignorance of refutation: that is, thinking you have a contradiction when in fact you don't. This is a good example of the fallacy of ignorance of refutation. The contradictory to the statement "a man determines his own choice" is the statement "a man does *not* determine his own choice." Notice that this is not equivalent to the statement "Someone else determines his choice." So when we say that God determines our free choices, and we say at the same time we determine our free choices, there is not a logical contradiction.¹⁵ The same thing applies when we say

¹³ The human nature of Christ is the sole exception to this principle.

¹⁴ *Sermo* 169, 13 (*PL* 38, 923).

¹⁵ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 83, a. 1, ad 3: "Free will is the cause of its own motion since man moves himself to action through his free will.

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that virtue is good for its own sake and virtue is good for the sake of something else (i.e., happiness). Both statements are true, even though they appear at first to be contradictory.

QUESTION TEN: So if it's true that God determines our free choice and we determine our free choice, then does this mean that we determine one part of our choice and God determines the other part of our choice? Is it sort of like a rowboat where God is moving one oar, while we are moving the other?

No. God determines our whole choice and we determine our whole choice. The key to understanding how this happens is to realize that in relation to the effect which is our free choice, God stands as a universal cause while we stand as a particular cause. Both a universal cause and a particular cause are responsible for the entire particular effect, but in such a way that the particular cause depends upon the universal cause to exercise its own causality. The universal cause is prior to the particular cause. Our Lord gave us a helpful example in this regard when He said "I am the vine, you are the branches."¹⁶ The effect of the vine and the branch is the fruit. Yet the entire fruit is due to the branch, and the entire fruit is due to the vine, but in such a way that the causality of the vine is prior to the causality of the branch. The vine is like the universal cause, while the branch is like the particular cause.

QUESTION ELEVEN: But can't we say that at least the fact that we do not actively resist God's grace is something that is entirely our own and not itself due to God's grace?

Not actively resisting God's grace can be understood in two ways. First, it could mean that we in no way act or choose

Nevertheless, it is not necessary for freedom that what is free be the first cause of itself, just as neither is it required for something to be a cause of another thing that it be the first cause of that other thing."

¹⁶ Jn. 15:5.

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or permit. In which case, not actively resisting God's grace is a non-being, and therefore is not some real thing for which we can claim responsibility. But if not actively resisting God's grace means choosing not to act against it, or permitting God's grace to move our souls, then we cannot say that this is entirely ours and not a gift from God. Since our nature is created by God *ex nihilo*, from itself, our nature tends toward non-being. This means that without God's assistance, we cannot even not actively resist His grace.¹⁷ Just as our nature requires God's active power not only to act, but also to remain in existence, so the life of grace in us requires God's active assistance simply to not resist His grace. God must first dispose us for grace and then grant us His grace. So the very readiness or proximate potency to receive grace is not only from us, but is itself an actual gift from God.

QUESTION TWELVE: But if our causing our free choices depends upon God's causing our free choices, and if whatever God causes infallibly happens, then doesn't this mean that whatever God makes us choose, we necessarily choose? And then doesn't this mean that our choices are not free after all?

No. To understand why God's universal and infallible causality does not remove freedom from our causality, it must be appreciated that more perfect modes of causing unite what is diverse in less perfect modes of causing.¹⁸ Something similar happens in knowledge. For example, in sensation, opposites

¹⁷ "Even the fact that a man places no obstacle to grace proceeds from the grace of God. . . . But this gift of grace is not sanctifying grace." *In Hebr.*, cap. 12, lect. 3, n. 689.

¹⁸ See *Super Librum De Causis Expositio*, Proposition 20: "The goodness of the first cause is its very being and essence because the first cause is the very essence of goodness. Hence, since its essence is one to the greatest degree, because the first principles is the one and good in itself, it follows that the first cause for its part acts on them and infuses them in one way. But things receive its infusion in different ways, some more and others less, each according to its proper character."

cannot be sensed together at the same time in the same place. I cannot sense hot and cold with the tip of my index finger at the same time, nor can I see both white and black on the same spot of the wall. However, I can understand opposites together, as when I understand double together with half and evil together with good. Intellectual knowledge unites what is divided in sense knowledge. In a similar way, a more universal cause can bring together two opposed modes of causing and retain what pertains to perfection in both. God's causality is not merely necessary, nor merely free, but unites both in a higher way which we cannot fully understand.¹⁹ This is where the mystery takes place. God unfailingly causes us to choose freely what we choose without violating our freedom.²⁰ Nor does this involve a contradiction, since what happens unfailingly is not the same as what happens from necessity. That which is necessary *cannot* not be, that which is effected unfailingly *in fact* comes to be, without any reference to ability. For example, God unfailingly has mercy on the contrite, yet this is not because He does not freely choose to have mercy on the contrite.

So in brief, we can say that our salvation is entirely up to us and entirely up to God, but primarily up to God and secondarily up to us since God's causality is prior to ours. And when it comes down to it, isn't it comforting to know that our salvation is primarily in the hands of a God who is goodness and mercy itself (and who even loves us more than we love ourselves), rather than primarily in the hands of a poor creature which has come to be from nothing, and even often fails to love himself rightly?

¹⁹ *In Peri Hermeneias*, Lib. I, lec. 14, n. 22: "According to the condition of their causes, effects are called either necessary or contingent, although all depend upon the divine will as upon a first cause, which transcends the order of necessity and contingency."

²⁰ *Ibid.*, "The divine will is unfailing, yet not all of its effects are necessary, but certain ones are contingent."

QUESTION THIRTEEN: Since God is infinitely good, does that mean that He predestines all to eternal salvation?

God acts primarily for the common good of the universe.²¹ This is the greatest good of the members of the universe, and is greater than the private good of any one individual in the universe. For a private good is exhausted by a single person, while the common good of the universe is so good that it can be shared by all the members of the universe without being in the least bit diminished. And therefore, since God is most good, He always acts to bring about the greatest good, namely the common good of the universe. But among creatures, some of the greatest goods cannot exist unless certain evils are permitted. For example, unless a plant dies and is digested, an animal cannot live. This also holds true in the moral order, unless there are tyrants, there could not be martyrs, unless there were sin, there could not be forgiveness. And so God permits sin, and hence the possibility of damnation, so that He might elicit even greater goods from the elect than would have existed without sin and damnation. God permits evil, even the evil of sin and damnation, to bring about a greater good.²²

In this we can see how often misguided are attempts to attract a soul to God by emphasizing the fact that God loves him as if he were the only person in creation. Often it is said that, even if you were the only sinner, God would have become man and died for you. Perhaps this is true (though there seems to be no explicit revelation on this point), but is that really the important point? Is it better that God saves only one soul rather than many? Think of a child who alone of his family members escapes their burning home. Should the child rejoice especially in the fact that he was the lone

²¹ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III. 24.

²² *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 2, a. 3, ad 1: "This pertains to the infinite goodness of God, that He permit evil to exist so that He might draw out good from it."

survivor? Would it not be perverse to rejoice more at being the sole survivor than if many other family members escaped? The point to emphasize is that God has a personal love for each person, and that because of his personal love, He acts for the common good which is the greatest good of each of the persons. We should be like the child who prefers the salvation of many more than his own private salvation.

QUESTION FOURTEEN: Does God predestine some souls to be damned in the same way that He predestines others to be saved?

No. God positively wills salvation and moves the wills of the elect to choose salvation freely with His grace and help. God only permits, but does not actively will the damnation of souls.²³ It is like the case of a ball which a man throws. There is a big difference between actually throwing the ball, and simply removing one's hand so that the ball will fall on its own power. God so to speak throws the elect up to heaven by the power of His grace within us, but he merely permits the souls of the reprobate to fall into hell under their own power without causing them to fall or assisting them to fall.

Besides this, it is consonant with the Faith to believe that God gives sufficient grace to all: He does not just allow some souls to fall, in no way reaching out to them first. The difference between the elect and the reprobate is that with the elect, God simply won't take "no" for an answer. In most cases, the elect reject Him and sin, but He keeps moving them to repentance and drawing them back to Himself, and won't stop until they are finally with Him. With other souls, He brings them back to Himself so many times, but eventually leaves them in their own final decision. It is hard to see how one could blame God for this.

In short, if a soul gets to heaven, the chief reason he got

²³ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 23, a. 3, ad 2: "From the standpoint of its cause, reprobation is different than predestination."

there is because God chose to bring him there, while the secondary reason he is there is because the soul chose to let Him bring him there. But if a soul goes to hell, the chief reason he got there is because he chose to go there, while the secondary reason is that God decided to let the soul go there.

QUESTION FIFTEEN: What does it mean to say that "God wills for all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4) if some people are not in fact saved?

God loves all rational beings, and therefore brings each rational being into existence with the purpose of bringing about their salvation. This is another way of saying that all rational beings are made for the sake of enjoying God, since this is the ultimate good perfective of a rational nature. Yet God only wills to bring about their salvation on the condition that this can be accomplished without prejudice to the greater good of the entire universe, that is, the good common to all rational beings. Thus, considering each rational creature in itself *antecedent* to the requirements for bringing about the common good of the universe and granting rational beings genuine freedom, God wills for each of them to be saved. But if, *consequently*, we take into account these further requirements of the common good and freedom, God wills in fact that only some be saved and others not. For this reason we can distinguish what theologians call God's antecedent will and God's consequent will: by His antecedent will, God wills all men to be saved, but by His consequent will, He wills only some to be saved.²⁴

QUESTION SIXTEEN: But if God knows in advance who will be saved and who will not be saved, then why does God create a soul which He knows will be damned?

An analogy to a human family can help here. Sometimes a

²⁴ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 19, a. 6, ad 1.

father of a family has to exclude one of the children from the home and the goods common to the family because the child is so obstinate and detrimental to the unity of the family. Yet, the father still loves that child. Moreover, even if he had known in advance, by prophecy, for example, that this child to be born would have to be excluded from the family, the father might still will to bring that child into existence since by the various problems the child caused, the other children would learn patience, mercy, forgiveness and many other virtues that they would never have otherwise acquired. It was better *for that child* if it had never been born, but not for the family as a whole, and so the father permits the child to be born. In the same way, God creates rational beings that He knows will be lost, for the overall occasion for improvement which will benefit the other rational creatures that God saves.

QUESTION SEVENTEEN: Why doesn't God permit sin, but not damnation? Why doesn't he, for example, give final grace to everyone at the moment of death since this would accomplish the same purpose of permitting sin so that certain greater goods will come about?

There may be many reasons for this, but I can think of at least three: first of all, God wants to make it absolutely manifest that our freedom is real and our cooperation with His grace is real. We are real causes in our own salvation and in the salvation of others, and this reality would be obscured by a world in which everyone just happened to end up saved. It would look like a game God played where, no matter what we did, the outcome was going to be the same happy ending.

Second, this would also detract from God's justice. It is hard to see how God's justice would be glorified in a world where Hitler, Stalin, the Antichrist and even Satan have as their final reward the eternal bliss of God. Such things would clearly detract from our appreciation of God's justice.

Third, if God did not permit damnation, then there could be

no revelation of hell or the possibility of losing God through our sinful choices. This would certainly result in great laxity: many more sins committed, less arduous struggles for the good, and many good deeds omitted among the rational creatures whom God would lead to beatitude. It is difficult to imagine even the most virtuous person struggling to do his very best while at the same time considering the fact that no matter what he does, he will receive perfect happiness as his reward. The temptation simply to do what comes easiest all the time would be so overwhelming that very few if any rational creatures would ever reach the heights of sanctity.

QUESTION EIGHTEEN: If before our existence, there is no basis for why God should choose one man rather than another for salvation, why does God choose this man rather than that: Peter rather than Judas?

Here again we must confess ignorance before a mystery. Why a builder chooses to use stones and wood in his building we can know. But why does he choose this stone rather than that? This is reducible only to his particular will and plan for the structure.²⁵ In the same way, we can say why God predestines some and not others, but we cannot say in this life why this man rather than that. The reason for each one's election is found only in the inscrutable judgments of the divine wisdom and therefore is for us a mystery in this life. Does the clay say to the potter, why have you fashioned me in such and such a form?²⁶

By no means do I intend to solve all the difficulties surrounding predestination and free choice by means of these questions and answers. It is my modest aim simply to remove some of the unnecessary ones.

²⁵ *In Rom.*, cap. 9, lect. 4 (Marietti n. 788).

²⁶ Cf. Romans 9:20-21.