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The Relationship between God's Foreknowledge and Human Free Will

One of the hardest things for philosophers to fathom are the ideas of God's foreknowledge and human free will. In an initial reflection of Saint Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*, it appears questionable that the two could possibly coexist. God transcends all time and space. God is the creator of all and has always been. God knows everything that will happen over the course of everyone's life. And yet, God gave each person free will. At first, this seems contradictory and paradoxical. How are people supposed to believe they have control over their lives? However, the readings of Saint Augustine, Saint Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas all help communicate the beautiful harmony between foreknowledge and free will.

The initial quote from Augustine that prompted this reflection was, "(1) God has foreknowledge of everything in the future; and (2) we sin by the will, not necessity" (74). At first glance, Augustine's statement seems incongruous. The fact that God knows every good and bad thing that will happen in people's lives, including when they sin, makes it feel like people have no control over their lives. In a way, God's foreknowledge and human free will seem mutually exclusive — like only one or the other can possibly exist. But what about the idea of "predetermined free will?" This is a reasonable compromise, which allows for the existence of foreknowledge and free will. However, predetermined free will is an oxymoron and contradictory. If a person's actions, thoughts and will are predetermined, that doesn't seem very free. Clearly, the relationship between God's foreknowledge and human free will is not an easy case to crack.

Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will* helps clarify the simultaneousness of free will and foreknowledge. Augustine makes it known that our free will is self-evident and God causes everything. People can't comprehend God's ways when they are incapable of fully understanding Him. And so, by believing that God's foreknowledge interferes with free will, people are making God in their own image. Humans can't try to understand God the way they understand people. His knowledge is a perfect summation of omniscience and omnipotence. Augustine writes, "Just as your memory does not force the past to have happened, God's foreknowledge does not force the future to happen. And just as you remember some things that you have done but did not do everything that you remember, God foreknows everything that he causes but does not cause everything that he foreknows" (78). God's knowledge is not like human knowledge. There is no contradiction between God's creative work and human freedom.

Saint Anselm in *The Proslogion* helps further explain God's foreknowledge in a way that people can better comprehend. God is the creator of everything. And so, God is not bound by space or time, yet all exists through Him. Saint Anselm proclaims, "but you, although nothing exists without you, nevertheless do not exist in space or time, but all things exist in you. For nothing contains you, but you contain all" (Chapter 19). God cannot be contained in space or time because He existed before it and created it. If God were in space or time, He would be limited. Secondly, only material and mortal things can exist in time and space because they are changing and moving. But Got cannot be changed or moved. God is immaterial and immortal, and He is perfectly simple because He is not composed or made by anything else. God has a complete, all-knowing understanding of everything in the entire universe — past, present or future.

Returning to the question of free will, God makes something to be necessary, like the planets in the galaxy, the trees in a forest, or the waves in the ocean. And all of these are free. Therefore, He must have made us free too. If God created our freedom, we know that it exists, and this should serve to be a confirmation of our free will — not the denial of it.

Augustine further explains human free will by describing happiness. We all seek happiness, and it's the fundamental thing every person wants to obtain. But nobody can force someone to be happy against their will, even God. Then it wouldn't be their happiness. Augustine asserts that, "God's foreknowledge…does not take away your will for happiness once you have begun to be happy" (76). Even if God knows exactly when a person will be happy in the future, or what will make him or her happy, it still has to be a free act. God's knowing does not coerce someone into feeling a certain way. In fact, without free will, people couldn't even choose to make friends or be happy.

St. Thomas Aquinas also agrees with Augustine on the existence of free will despite God having foreknowledge. In *A Short Summa*, Aquinas points out that, "Man has free-will: otherwise counsels, exhortations, commands, prohibitions, rewards and punishments would be in vain" (111). Aquinas does raise a very logical point, which helps unite foreknowledge and free will. Saying humans don't have free will is conceding that God has predetermined world leaders, professional athletes, talented musicians, eloquent authors and Nobel Peace Prize winners. Saying humans don't have free will also means God predetermined murderers, thieves, evil dictators and corrupt politicians. This idea is completely false. People who succeed have to work through adversity to achieve their dreams, just as people who commit unthinkable and sinister crimes have turned away from God to embrace evil. Aquinas also adds his own comments on the words of Augustine, "Those words of the Apostle are not to be taken as though man does not

wish or does not run of his free-will, but because the free-will is not sufficient thereto unless it be moved and helped by God" (112). Essentially, God does not interfere with human free will or manipulate it, but rather God made free will possible, and it is only through God's creation and guidance that free will exists.

The fact that evil and sin are in the world is yet another proof of the existence of human free will. God is perfectly good, and He is not at fault for evil. Therefore, evil needs to come from somewhere, and it comes from human free will. People choose to harm others, pollute, lie, cheat and steal. None of those choices are God's doing, which reinforces the notion that human free will exists. If people were forced to do evil, it would not be their action. Or if someone committed evil out of pure ignorance, this is not their action either. Therefore, evil is a free choice and can't be done by chance, mistake or accident.

Through God's foreknowledge, He knows when people sin, just as he knows when they will do good and be happy. However, it is our choice alone when doing evil and sinning against God. Augustine sums up the idea of sin coexisting with God's foreknowledge well, saying, "your blameworthy will…does not cease to be a will simply because God foreknows that you are going to have it" (76). God is not the source of evil and can't be blamed for evil. Yes, God created everything, but He didn't make evil because evil is a lack of good and lack of being. For this reason, God cannot be blamed for evil done (moral evil). God may sometimes be the source of evil suffered (pain), but He cannot be blamed for this evil either because He does it out of justice. If God is the source of someone suffering, it is only because God is punishing someone for doing something wrong. In this sense, God is actually being just and doing good.

In the end, God's foreknowledge and human free will both coexist in perfect harmony. Human free will is self-evident. Humans can't be forced to be happy against their will, or it

would not be their happiness. And humans can't be forced to do evil, or it would not be their action. God knows all and transcends time and space. He knows exactly what will happen during someone's lifetime. However, God's foreknowledge does not interfere with a person's decision making. God can't be understood in the same nature as humans are, and His knowledge is omniscient. In many ways, God is a mystery to humans. Even after reviewing the words of Saint Augustine, Saint Anselm and St. Thomas Aquinas, the relationship between foreknowledge and free will is still a difficult one to wrap our minds around. The truth is, God is perfect, all-knowing and incapable of making mistakes. God's foreknowledge and human free will are just a confirmation of God's perfect love for His children.

Work Cited

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