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THE PROBLEM OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY AND HUMAN FREEDOM

William L. Rowe

According to the Westminster Confession, "God from all eternity did . . . freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass. Yet . . . thereby neither is God the author of sin or is violence offered to the will of the creatures." It is hard to see how these two points can be consistently maintained. Hugh McCann, however, argues that by placing God's decisions outside of time, both propositions are perfectly consistent. I agree with McCann that God's determining decisions do not make him the author of our sins. But I think that God's determining decisions, whether temporal or outside of time, preclude our possessing the libertarian free will that McCann's believes we do possess. In fact, so I argue, if we possess libertarian free will, then elevating God's determining decisions outside of time only results in God's eternal decisions being within our power to determine.

According to the Westminster Confession, "God from all eternity did . . . freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass."¹ This remarkable expression of God's total sovereignty over all that comes to pass might seem to make God the creator of the moral evil in the world. Moreover, it might also seem to preclude any free will on the part of his creatures. For if God has from all eternity unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass, it is hard to see how it can ever be genuinely up to us what we shall do or even decide to do. These two rather disturbing results that may appear to follow from such an uncompromising affirmation of God's absolute sovereignty did not, of course, escape the notice of the framers of the Westminster Confession. For they hasten to add in the very next sentence: "Yet . . . thereby neither is God the author of sin or is violence offered to the will of the creatures."

Recently, Hugh McCann has also endorsed a view of God's total sovereignty over all that comes to pass.² He sees as a merit of this view that it satisfies the principle of sufficient reason with respect to our free decisions. For although our reasons do not provide a full explanation of our free decisions, God's deciding that we shall so decide does provide a full explanation of our free decisions, and God has sufficient reasons for deciding that we shall so decide. In addition, McCann endeavors to show by careful analysis and argument that such an uncompromising affirmation of God's absolute sovereignty has neither of the consequences that the Westminster Confession assures us it does not have: neither is God himself thereby morally evil or



the author of sin, nor does God's total sovereignty deprive his creatures of libertarian freedom. I propose to evaluate the success of his efforts to establish these two important claims.

I shall be very brief concerning whether God must be morally evil, or the author of sin, if he decides that I shall make a sinful or morally evil decision. McCann is right: the answer is no. It does follow, I believe, that God is responsible for the existence of a morally evil decision, but the morally evil decision is mine, not God's, as McCann points out. Jonathan Edwards gave the very same response to the question of whether God is the author of sin.³

I do want to discuss more fully McCann's views on whether God's exercising total sovereignty over all our decisions has the merit of fully satisfying the principle of sufficient reason without endangering libertarian freedom. I'll begin by saying something about the issue as it arises in the Westminster Confession.

If God has ordained from all eternity every decision I shall make, how can it sometimes be up to me what I shall decide? Jonathan Edwards was not deeply troubled by this problem because he did not believe that we possess libertarian freedom. But it is difficult to see how someone who believes in libertarian freedom can agree with the view of total divine sovereignty expressed in the Westminster Confession. Thomas Reid, for example, was a good Presbyterian who accepted libertarian freedom. I don't think he could have fully accepted the account of divine sovereignty presented in the Westminster Confession. For the idea there seems to be that before I even existed God had already decreed exactly what decisions I would make. But how then can it have been genuinely in my power to decide to do something other than what I did decide, or not to decide to do what God has already decreed I shall decide to do? If God already decreed what decisions I would make, then my decision was necessitated by his earlier decree and it cannot have been in my power to decide otherwise. Since Reid would think that some of my decisions are genuinely up to me, I doubt that he could have believed that before I existed God unchangeably decreed each and every decision I shall make. Does Reid then deny that God is sovereign over his creatures? Not in any really significant way. For the power we possess over our acts of will is quite limited. And our possession of this power is moment by moment at God's discretion. For this power is given to us by God and he may enlarge it, diminish it, or discontinue it as he sees fit. As Reid remarks:

No power in the creature can be independent of the Creator. His hook is in its nose; he can give it line as far as he sees fit, and, when he pleases, can restrain it, or turn it whithersoever he will. Let this be always understood when we ascribe liberty to man, or to any created being.⁴

Perhaps we can say that Reid holds a *moderate* sort of divine sovereignty. Not all of our decisions are fully determined or explained by God's decisions, for he has given us power over some of our decisions. *Extreme* divine sovereignty holds that absolutely all of our decisions are fully determined by God's determining decision that we shall so decide.

McCann thinks there is a version of extreme divine sovereignty that is fully consistent with libertarian freedom. The chief difference between the version he advocates and that which I've attributed to the Westminster Confession concerns whether God's determining decrees or decisions occur at a time *earlier* than the decisions of ours that are determined by God's decisions. By taking God's creative act in deciding what our decisions shall be as itself not a temporal act, McCann believes he can postulate a full, determining account of each of our decisions without depriving us of the power to decide otherwise. And it is not difficult to see what he has in mind. If there is no divine decision that occurs temporally prior to our decisions, then the problem we confronted with the Westminster Confession does not seem to arise. Of course, McCann is faced with the problem of explaining how there can be decisions that occur at no time whatever. He also has the problem of explaining how these timeless decisions can fully determine decisions that occur in time. Reid could make little sense of such ideas. But allowing that McCann's view of God's timeless decisions is coherent, the problem of how we can have control over decisions that God timelessly determines seems to vanish. But two problems, I believe, do emerge in its place: first, the problem of how God's total sovereignty can be maintained; second, the problem of whether McCann's view can ultimately satisfy the principle of sufficient reason. I'll begin with the first of these.

It is necessarily true that I shall decide what God timelessly wills that I shall decide. But if at some time prior to my decision it is *up to me* what decision I shall make, then it must be *up to me* what God timelessly wills that I shall decide. If it is in my power to decide to vacation this winter in Colorado or New York, but not both, then it must be up to me whether God timelessly wills that I shall decide to vacation in Colorado or timelessly wills that I shall decide to vacation in New York. Once we insist that for every decision we make God timelessly wills that we shall so decide, I don't see how this conclusion can be avoided. But I suspect McCann would view our conclusion as compromising God's absolute sovereignty over my decisions. For instead of God's hook being in my nose, it now appears that my hook is in God's nose. God's absolute sovereignty is meant to preclude the creature's having power over what God wills. But, to repeat the point, once we insist on a logical connection between what I decide and what God timelessly decides I shall decide, we can sustain genuine libertarian freedom over some of our decisions only by placing what God timelessly decides within our power. So, if we want to insist that what God timelessly decides is not in our control, I don't think we can possibly say, as McCann does, both that we have libertarian freedom with respect to some of our decisions and that for every decision we make God timelessly wills that we shall so decide.

The second problem concerns the satisfaction of the principle of sufficient reason. If I freely decide to vacation in Colorado this winter, as opposed to vacationing in New York, McCann says that my reasons for so deciding do not constitute a full explanation of my decision. But he thinks that God's decision that I shall so decide does provide a full explanation of my decision. For God will surely have sufficient reasons for deciding that I shall decide to vacation in Colorado. Thus we seem to be left with no embarrassing exception to the principle of sufficient reason. But is this really

so? After all, it was in my power to have decided to vacation this winter in New York. Suppose I had made that decision. Would there then have been a full explanation of it? McCann will say yes. For there would then have been God's timeless decision that I shall decide to vacation this winter in New York. And, of course, God would have had sufficient reasons for so deciding. But the question I want to ask is this: who determines which of these divine decisions is actual? As I've already indicated, given libertarian freedom it seems to me that I do. Look at it this way. There is the state of affairs consisting of God's timeless decision that I shall decide to vacation in Colorado, and there is the state of affairs consisting of God's timeless decision that I shall decide to vacation in New York. It is up to me which of these two states of affairs is actual. For which of them is actual depends on how I resolve my deliberations. And it is in my power to resolve them by deciding to vacation in Colorado, and also in my power to resolve them by deciding to vacation in New York. That being so, we can hardly explain why I concluded my deliberations by deciding as I did by appealing to the *actuality* of one of these states of affairs about God's timeless decisions. If anything, the explanation goes the other way. It is my resolving my deliberations as I did that figures in the explanation of why the state of affairs consisting in God's timeless decision that I shall decide to vacation in Colorado is *actual*, rather than the state of affairs consisting in God's timeless decision that I shall decide to vacation in New York. Thus, I'm very doubtful that McCann has succeeded in his efforts to satisfy the principle of sufficient reason by providing a *full explanation* for our free decisions in terms of God's timeless decisions.

In conclusion, it does seem to me that McCann has forcefully and ingeniously argued for the perfect harmony of three ideas: (1) God's absolute control over every decision his creatures make, (2) the requirement of the principle of sufficient reason that there be a full explanation even for our free decisions, and (3) the requirement of libertarian freedom that it is sometimes genuinely in our power to have decided and acted otherwise. Moreover, it seems to me that he has made significant progress on the path to establishing that goal. But, for the reasons given, I very much doubt that it is a goal that can possibly be attained.

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NOTES

1. "The Westminster Confession of Faith," *The Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (New York & London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 347.

2. Hugh J. McCann, "Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995): 582-598.

3. *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), Sect. IX.

4. See the 1983 printing by Georg Olms Verlag of *The Works of Thomas Reid*, D.D. 8th edition, edited by Sir William Hamilton (Edinburgh, 1895), 601.