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DOES GOD CAUSE SIN?
ANSELM OF CANTERBURY VERSUS
JONATHAN EDWARDS ON HUMAN FREEDOM
AND DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY

Katherin A. Rogers

Hugh McCann, in trying to make libertarian free choice intelligible, advances a position that entails that God is the cause of, though not *at fault for*, sin. William Rowe criticizes McCann regarding freedom, but agrees that God could cause sin without blame, and cites Jonathan Edwards' sustained defense of this view. I argue, along lines first advanced by Anselm of Canterbury, that God does not cause sin. Were He to do so, He would be blameworthy. One might charge that Anselm's view unduly limits divine sovereignty, but I argue that his work offers sufficient resources to respond to this criticism.

Recently Hugh McCann has invoked classical theism as a way to solve the problem of the apparent unintelligibility of libertarian freedom. McCann grants that his position entails that God is the cause of sin, though he denies that God is responsible for sin in the sense of being at fault.¹ William Rowe disagrees with McCann's conclusions concerning freedom, but agrees that God could be the cause of sin without thereby being blameworthy.² Neither attempts a lengthy discussion of the view that God would not be to blame for the sin He causes, but Rowe approvingly cites Jonathan Edwards' exposition of this position. Edwards offers a sustained defense of this view, motivated by the commitment to preserve the absolute sovereignty of God. Here I want to argue that God does not cause sin. Were He, *per impossibile*, to do so, He would be blameworthy, Edwards' arguments notwithstanding. The arguments I will make are not new, having been advanced first nine centuries ago by Anselm of Canterbury.³ But since they are powerful and apparently not common knowledge among contemporary philosophers of religion, it is important to revive them. Anselm's arguments will leave him open to the charge that he has unduly limited divine sovereignty, but I will argue that his work offers sufficient resources to respond to this criticism. I will first look quickly at McCann's view, then at why Anselm emphatically rejects it, and then show that Edwards' attempts to salvage the position that God causes sin without being blameworthy are unsuccessful. I will conclude by defending Anselm's position on divine sovereignty.⁴

The central problem which many philosophers find with libertarian freedom is that it seems to entail that our choices are ultimately lacking any adequate explanation. McCann holds that we can solve this problem if we situate libertarian freedom in the universe of classical theism, the universe



envisioned by Anselm among others. On the classical theist view everything which is truly a *thing* (the qualification will prove important in discussing the relationship of God to sin) is kept in being from moment to moment by the immediate power of God's thought. McCann argues that we can be libertarians and yet hold that our choices are fully explicable if we say that it is God's will that causes us with all our choices. Thus, "...the same act of His will that is responsible for my being puts in place my decisions as well."⁵ Again, "...the same *fiat* that puts my choices in place determines my very existence,..."⁶ Libertarian choice is rendered intelligible because, "...His [God's] reasons for having me decide as I do, whatever they are, will explain fully the occurrence of my decisions, in terms of His perfect goodness."⁷

It might seem strange that a theory which holds that all of one's choices are caused by God should be labeled "libertarian," but McCann's explanation of libertarianism allows for such a move. In McCann's view libertarianism depends on two criteria. First, there are no independent determining conditions of our deeds. McCann argues that since one's choice is caused immediately by God along with one's very existence and is not the product of a natural causal order (secondary causation), this criterion is met. Secondly, we must be fully active in the performance of our deeds "in the way voluntary intentionality requires."⁸ That is, we must act intentionally and we must "feel we are a genuine source of control and spontaneity in the universe."⁹ My own intuition is that, were I convinced that God caused all my choices, I would not feel that I was a genuine source of control; or if I could not root out the feeling, I would judge it to be out of sync with the truth. However we settle the terminological question regarding "libertarianism," the issue which concerns us here is that McCann's position seems to make God responsible for sin and hence to make God do and be evil.

McCann tries to respond to this problem. "My decision, and any evil that lies within it, are predicated of me. What belongs to God is His willing *that* I shall decide as I do, which is an altogether different matter."¹⁰ McCann goes on to argue that God's willing *that* I decide to sin may be fully justified as necessary for some greater good, "...even if my decision is morally defective, God can view my making it as indispensable to a situation that is finally for the best."¹¹

Whether or not one can make sense of this position depends, I think, on how one analyzes the nature of sin. Anselm holds that to sin is to will what God wills that you should not will. But in that case, he goes on, it is logically impossible that God could make you sin, since that would entail that God wills that you should will what God wills that you should not will.¹² Anselm holds that God Himself, His nature, is the absolute standard for value. Sin is a turning away from God, a rejection of God Himself as the standard for value, and something that, in the absolute sense, we ought not to do. How can God possibly be its cause?

On McCann's view it may be true to say that, should someone sexually abuse a child, it is not literally God that does it. Or if God does it, He nonetheless does not do it in exactly the same way the molestor does. (Classical theism, even adding McCann's view that all choices are caused by God, is not simply pantheism.) But it is very difficult to see how, if God

causes the molester complete with his choice to abuse, He is not to blame for the choice and the ensuing act. If one allows that God is responsible for the choice and the act, but justified because He is aiming at some greater good, then it is hard to see that the choice and the act are not themselves justified as necessary means to the divinely desired ends. In that case God would be the cause of all choices, but all choices are justified and so should have happened. There is no sin in Anselm's sense. McCann does not offer an analysis of sin, but if he is in rough agreement with Anselm on its basic nature, it is difficult to see how he can preserve both the reality of sin and the blamelessness of God.

William Rowe has criticized McCann's thesis about libertarianism and classical theism, but he agrees that God could cause a created agent to sin and yet not be "the author of sin" and morally evil Himself. Rowe does not explore the point, but cites Jonathan Edwards as having given the same argument.¹³ Does Jonathan Edwards' sustained defense succeed in answering Anselm's criticism of the view that God causes sin? Edwards grants that God does, in a way, cause sin. He is not the *doer* of sin, but "...if by 'the author of sin,' is meant the permitter, or not a hinderer of sin; and at the same time, a disposer of the state of events, in such a manner, for wise, holy and most excellent ends and purposes, that sin, if it be permitted or not hindered, will most certainly and infallibly follow: ...I don't deny that God is the author of sin..."¹⁴ So God is "the author of sin" in that He sets up the situation in which the created agent sins by causal necessity due to its nature if He fails to prevent it, and then He fails to prevent it.

But God is not culpable for sin Edwards argues. In order to make his case he adopts two key theses from Augustine of Hippo. First he follows Augustine's line that "evil" *per se* is nothing. It has no ontological status. What is "evil" in the choice of sin is simply a rejection of or a falling away from the good. Thus the evil is nothing positive, but simply an abandoning of what one ought to have chosen. Anselm, who in many ways can be viewed as the first great medieval spokesman for Augustinian Neoplatonism, also embraces this analysis of the basic nature of evil. This is important because it enables Anselm to argue that it is the creature that causes evil. If God is the absolute source and sustainer of all things and all their positive properties, it seems at first as if He must be the cause of evil. Anselm grants that whatever in an evil choice has genuine ontological status—the agent, the faculty by which the agent chooses, the operant desires and motives, even whatever has active power in the choice—is caused by God. It is just the bare rejection of the good which is the effect of the created agent. Thus the creature can produce a property of certain choices, their status as evil, but this does not attribute to the creature any real creative power.¹⁵

Anselm and Edwards are in agreement on the importance of analyzing sin as merely a lack or failure. But Edwards adopts a second Augustinian principle which Anselm deliberately and explicitly rejects. Like Augustine, Edwards holds that sin happens *inevitably* because God withdraws his aid from an agent. Though the early Augustine sounds somewhat libertarian in his *On Free Will*, the later Augustine is clearly a compatibilist. The rational creature is drawn to choose what it most wants. If left to itself it will

inevitably be drawn back towards the nothingness from which it was made. Only with extra help from God can it choose the good. And this is the case both after *and before* the Fall. If the creature's choice of the good were ever its own doing, then it could make itself better than God made it originally. And that is absurd, says Augustine.¹⁶ But this means that God is the author of sin only in that He withholds the necessary help, and thus God's willing is only a "defective" cause, not an efficient cause of sin. Edwards offers the analogy of the sun which causes brightness, but cannot truly be said to *cause* darkness merely by setting, since darkness is simply the sun's being absent. He goes on, "It would be strange arguing indeed, because men never commit sin, but only when God leaves 'em to themselves, and necessarily sin, when he does so, that therefore sin is not from themselves, but from God..."¹⁷

Edwards is here making exactly the Augustinian point which led Anselm to produce his dialogue, *On the Fall of the Devil*. (Anselm chooses to discuss the fall of the devil as the purest case of a choice between good and evil, and the most difficult sin to explain since it was the first. What Anselm says about freedom and choice in this context is also applicable to prelapsarian human choice, and, *mutatis mutandis*, to the choice of the fallen human being to cling to or abandon grace.) At the beginning of the dialogue the interlocutor, the "student", explains that he has heard that the original fall of the devil happened because he did not receive from God the perseverance necessary to hold fast to the good God had originally given to all the angels. But if the devil did not receive perseverance because God did not give it to him, then he couldn't help but fall, and the sin would be God's fault. The "teacher", Anselm, agrees that the creature could not be blamed for its failure if it was made by God such that it *must* fall without God's help, and God simply doesn't offer the requisite aid. True, without God's help the creature could not hold to the good, since it is God who supplies both the good and the power to cling to it. But Anselm departs from the Augustinian position and goes on to argue that God *does* give the help, but the creature can choose to abandon God's help, and the choice to retain or reject it must be genuinely up to the creature.¹⁸

Teacher and student do not spend any more time on the initial argument that God would be at fault if He makes a creature such that it must sin should He fail to help it, and then He fails to help it. Perhaps they found it intuitively obvious. It seems so to me. Edwards' attempts to weaken this intuition are not successful. The analogy with the sun fails woefully. The sun did not create the solar system, command the land not to get dark, and then set. Had it done so, it would be to blame for the darkness. Contrary to Edwards' somewhat rhetorical point, it is not "strange" at all to hold God responsible when it is He who created men such that they must *necessarily* sin if He does not help them, and then He does not help them.

If Anselm's intuition needs further motivation, note that a better analogy than Edwards' sun example for the situation Augustine and Edwards envision is that of a magnetic toy. If you built a toy with a magnet inside, placed it near an iron object, and then let it go, the toy would inevitably move to the iron. You might say correctly that you didn't *cause* it to move. It moved on its own. You just ceased to hold on to it. You are at most the "defective"

cause. But since you are the producer of the entire situation, the motion of the toy is your responsibility. You built it to move if you did not prevent it, and you did not prevent it. It would be especially bizarre if you *blamed* it for doing what you built it to do. Augustine and Edwards hold that God has made us with desires which will inevitably draw us to evil if He does not help. And He does not help. Perhaps God has excellent reasons for defectively causing us to choose evil, but on this account we simply do what He creates us to do. The responsibility is His, not ours.

What of Anselm's logical problem that sin would be God's willing one to will what He wills that one not will? Edwards invokes a principle which, to my knowledge, is not found explicitly in Augustine. There is in God a *revealed* will by which He disapproves and opposes moral evil as contrary to His nature, and there is a *secret* will by which He wills and determines moral evil in order to achieve His purposes.¹⁹ Thus God, by His secret will, could will that the agent should will what His revealed will wills that he not will. Anselm does not discuss this distinction, (to my knowledge it is a later development in the history of theology and so unknown to him) but I take it he would find it untenable. In *On Truth* he concludes that God is the absolute standard of truth in which all that is right and true participates.²⁰ He would find it unthinkable that God should determine the rational creature to seek its own destruction, the negation and "falsity" of its nature, and doubly unthinkable that He should secretly do so while overtly commanding it to pursue the good.

Interestingly, a younger contemporary of Anselm's, Peter Abelard, does make some remarks germane to Edwards' distinction between the secret and revealed wills of God. Abelard says that it is possible that God might issue a command which He does not really want to have obeyed. For example, Jesus commanded certain blind men he had cured not to tell people about it, and yet they did. Abelard thinks it unreasonable to hold these men at fault. He explains that Jesus intended to set a good example of humility by issuing the command, but that reason judges that the command should not be obeyed. So there are possible cases in which one ought to do, not what God explicitly commands, but something different which is what He really wants you to do.²¹

Edwards apparently holds, on the contrary, that one has a moral obligation to obey God's revealed will. (I take it that Edwards would not accept the position that "ought implies can" since, on his view, the created agent who sins both ought to obey and cannot obey the revealed will of God). From the perspective of what is properly owed to God by one who worships Him, it is Abelard's position that seems more plausible. It is the secret will which really embodies what God wants to have happen in the universe. If one knew that God's revealed will conflicted with His secret will, wouldn't it be better to obey the more fundamental will which actually expresses the divine sovereignty?

One might think that God's secret will is not knowable by man, but, given Edwards' position, that would be a mistake. Whatever someone *actually does* will, is what God secretly wills that he should will. And whatever someone actually does will is determined by God to produce the good He has in mind. On Edwards' account, one who wants to bring his choic-

es into line with the ultimate, sovereign will of God should find it delightfully easy since, whatever one wills, one wills in accord with and as determined by the secret will of God. And one can rest happy in the knowledge that one's choices were essential for achieving the goals God had in mind. Anselm, on the other hand, holds sin to be against the will of God simpliciter. God permits it, He has excellent reasons to permit it, and He can overcome it in achieving His purposes, but He does not will or cause it. Even from the divine perspective sin should not be.

But now the serious difficulty with Anselm's position becomes apparent. The rational creature is able to bring about states of affairs which God does not choose or want. If it is really up to the creature to hold on to the good or abandon it *on its own*, then God, in fulfilling His purposes in the universe, must *respond* to situations initiated by the creature. But then divine sovereignty seems radically limited. Is this really a much better position than the one which holds that God is "the author of sin"? No. It is not *much* better. But those are the options. Either God absolutely controls everything, in which case sin is His doing, or evil choices really originate with creatures, in which case God must deal with circumstances He did not produce.

Anselm very clearly opts for the latter view. And throughout his work he offers the same defense when the suggestion arises that God's omnipotence is compromised when God "must" take action in response to creaturely choice. In *Why God Became Man*, for example, Anselm argues that God "had to" become incarnate since that was the best way to salvage humanity after the fall. But this is a necessity which arises from God's own nature, in that He, being the absolute standard for value, *must* do the best. (On Anselm's account God, unlike the created rational agent, neither has nor would be improved by having libertarian freedom.)²² In *On the Fall of the Devil* Anselm makes it clear that it is best that there should be creatures with self-causing, libertarian freedom. This is the only way we can be genuine images of God in that, by clinging to the good on our own, we contribute to our own creation.²³ Once He has made us He cannot absolutely control us, but it His own choice to make us arising out of His perfect goodness. He is the absolute author of the original situation. It is not unacceptable to theorize self-limitation as consistent with divine sovereignty. (One might argue that any choice on the part of God is an exercise in self-limitation. God does not violate the laws of logic, so if He makes it that *x* be the case, He cannot simultaneously make it that *not-x* be the case, and an option is closed off for Him.)

And notice that McCann and Edwards, though they intend to be defending the absolute sovereignty of God, may be charged with failure on that score. McCann says explicitly, and Edwards suggests, that God *needs* evil choices to accomplish His ends. But how did He come to find Himself in such an unhappy situation? He is either the absolute author of the situation or He is not. If it is by His will alone that He has chosen, among numerous alternative possibilities, a universe in which His goals cannot be met without His producing Auschwitz and child abuse, one must wonder again about divine goodness. If He simply finds Himself stuck in a world in which some necessity outside of His will requires Him to cause moral evil to achieve His purposes, then He is not really sovereign. If one is

impressed with the reality of evil and sin in our world, it is almost impossibly difficult to reconcile God's absolute goodness and His absolute sovereignty. Anselm will not compromise divine goodness, and so he allows that God may choose to limit Himself, but he will not see this as a diminution of divine power. And, much as one might want to mitigate the apparent unintelligibility of libertarian freedom, Anselm will insist that making God the cause of all choices including sin is not the solution.²⁴

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NOTES

1. Hugh J. McCann, "Divine Sovereignty and the Freedom of the Will," *Faith and Philosophy* 12 (1995) pp.582-59 and "Sovereignty and Freedom: A Reply to Rowe," *Faith and Philosophy* 18 (2001) pp.110-116.

2. William Rowe, "The Problem of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999) pp.98-101.

3. It should be noted that on the issue of God's causing choices, Anselm may not speak for the whole medieval tradition of classical theism. A case can be made that Aquinas' position is roughly that of McCann and Jonathan Edwards (see e.g. *Summa Theologiae* I, Q.14, art. 8).

4. It lies beyond the scope of this paper to address McCann's main concern; the apparent unintelligibility of libertarian freedom. Anselm allows that there is an element of unintelligibility in free choice. He appreciates the intellectual discomfort of this admission, but sees no alternative if one is to avoid the unacceptable position that God causes sin. See *On the Fall of the Devil* especially Chap. 27.

5. McCann (1995) p.590.

6. *ibid.* p.593.

7. *ibid.* p.587.

8. McCann (2001) p. 115.

9. *ibid.* p.113.

10. McCann (1995) p. 589.

11. *ibid.* p. 595.

12. *On the Freedom of the Will* 8.

13. Rowe (1999) p.99.

14. Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will, The Works of Jonathan Edwards* Vol.1, Paul Ramsey, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957) p.399.

15. *On the Harmony of God's Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Grace with Human Freedom*, QI, 7.

16. *City of God* XII, 9; *Unfinished Work Against Julian* V, 57.

17. Edwards (1957) p.404.

18. *On the Fall of the Devil* 1-2. Note that there is no hint of Pelagianism here, since the creature does not produce or even turn to the good on its own. God establishes the proper relationship between creature and Creator, but on Anselm's analysis the creature is genuinely free in that he can reject the good given by God.

19. Edwards (1957) p.406-407. This revealed/secret distinction is found in Calvin's *Institutes*, Book I, Ch.17, pts. 1-5.

20. *On Truth* 13.

21. *Ethics or Know Thyself* 3. Abelard's distinction is not exactly the same as Edwards'. Abelard takes it that the rational agent could see why the

“revealed” command should not be obeyed and hence appreciate the moral preferability of the “secret” will. Under these circumstances one rightly sees no moral obligation to obey the “revealed” command.

22. See *On the Freedom of the Will* 1. Open, morally significant options are necessary for the created agent to become good “on its own”, but God exists on His own as the absolute standard of value, and does not choose between open, morally significant options. Anselm scholars debate the extent of “necessity” in God. Some hold, for example, that according to Anselm, God had genuinely open options with regard to creating the actual world. I have argued that there is strong textual evidence that in all instances, including the original creation, God simply does the one best thing (*The Neoplatonic Metaphysics and Epistemology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997) pp.55-89). I respond to the argument that if God must do the best He is not really praiseworthy in, “Anselm on Praising a Necessarily Perfect Being,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 34 (1993) 41-52, reprinted in *The Anselmian Approach to God and Creation* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997) pp.61-75.

23. *On the Fall of the Devil* 18.

24. I would like to thank my colleagues Jeff Jordan and Bob Brown and anonymous readers for this journal for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.