

The Will

By “the will” we mean at least this, an efficient cause, a power to bring into existence act that does not yet exist. The effects of this power are two: its own action, namely, a choice or decision, and the action of some other power, e.g., my will causes a decision, its own act and my decision causes me to get up and walk, walking involving the action of any number of other powers.

The will is a created cause; it depends for its existence on the action of another cause, God. But the will depends on God for more than its existence; it also depends on God for its action. For God is the cause of the existence of the action just as much as He is the cause of the existence of the power to act. We call created causes secondary causes and God the primary cause. Secondary causes do actually cause; but the existence of the causality of secondary causes, is produced by God, just as much as the existence of the secondary cause itself is produced by God.

The need for the action of the will to be caused by God can be seen in the following way: Assume your hand is moving. The movement of your hand needs a cause. Why does it need a cause? Because it involves a reduction from potency to act. The causal analysis of how your hand moves may be extremely simple or it may be extremely complicated. Sometimes gravity alone is enough to explain the motion. Most of the time, however, the motor mechanism of the body, nerves, muscles, etc., is involved in the explanation of why the hand moves. This is certainly true, for example, when we move our hands during sleep. But very often a conscious decision of the will also enters into the explanation of the movement of the hand; we reach for a cigarette, we write a letter, we tie our shoelaces, etc. Here in addition to all the causal factors in the body, the action of the will enters into the reduction from potency to act on the part of the hand.

But the will was not always deciding to move the hand; when it does so there is a change, a going from potency to act, on the part of the will itself. What is the cause of this going from potency to act? At the end of every conceivable chain of potency-act, cause and effect, relations are the causality of God. He is the first cause of everything and, therefore, the first cause of every single action of our will.

To put this emphatically--because it deserves to be put emphatically, when we make a decision of our own, we do it only because God has made a decision of His own that -our decision would be made and that it would be made here, now, in these circumstances, with these implications, etc This is the only possible explanation for a decision on our part, namely, that God caused it to exist.

Now then can our decisions be free? And does this not make God responsible for evil?

We can be the primary cause of nothing. This is what follows from the fact that even the action of our powers is caused by God. But the statement that we can be the primary cause of nothing means two things. It means first that everything positive, everything in our action that is in anyway in act, has God’s decision to create it as its first cause. But then there is something lacking in an action, when an action is privated of something, this aspect of the action is nothing positive, is not the existence of any actual thing. And we can be responsible for the lack of something, say the lack of due ordering to their proper ends on the part of our actions. This is the second meaning of the statement that we can be the primary cause of nothing, i.e., that we can be the primary cause of nothingness, of the introduction of a certain privation into our actions.

By “evil” we mean nothing more than a certain kind of privation, the privation of something that should be there rather than something which is merely potentially there. How do we decide what should be there? By the ends of the nature in question. When there is a privation of either the ends, which the nature in question is nothing more than a tendency, or any means, which are necessary to attaining the ends, then the privation is an evil. And when there is such privation on the part of a being that can attain his end by conscious control of his own action, then there is moral evil.

God, therefore, is the first cause of the moral goodness of our actions, we the first cause of the moral evil in them. God causes a good action by creating an impulse of our will toward taking the proper moral order into account consciously in making a choice. We, however, can “nihilate” this impulse by not considering the proper order. If we do not take the moral order into account, if we nihilate, then the decision that follows will be privated of what should be there, due order. But if we do not nihilate, we do not because the primary cause of

any actual being in the action, the decision, that follows. Rather, if we do not nihilate, then the impulse created by God causes us to take the moral order into consideration and a good decision takes place, all of its goodness being due to the fact that 'sod created an impulse this good action at this time. Gut the good act was still a free act on our part because we could have nihilated, introduced a lack of what should be there by taking right and wrong into account.

This is where the distinction, mentioned by Wild, between antecedent and consequent will of God comes in God's will is that we do perform good acts if we do not nihilate. This is what we call His antecedent will. His consequent will decide that a good act actually will be placed in existence, since we have not nihilated. Or His consequent will decide to place in existence all there is of positive perfection and act in an evil decision if we have freely nihilated. This is what is meant by the permission of evil. He does not cause the lack but permits it to exist by causing something that is actual, the decision, but which lacks something it should have, as a result of nihilation on the part of the creature and permission on the part of God. Whatever there is of actuality in the content of the decision is caused by God, the lack of what should be there is caused by us. Thus God is the first cause of the pulling of the trigger by which someone is murdered. He does not cause the fact that the person pulling the trigger has murder in his heart. The death itself is only a physical not a moral evil.

In regard to physical evil, God can be called a cause per accidens. Thus the achieving of a higher good may require a privation of a lower good, e.g.,, eating the antelope is good for the lion but bad for the antelope. Thus by essentially intending the higher good, God's action may have the accidental end of the privation of the lower good. Moral evil, however, being a privation in regard to the highest natural good, can in no way be caused by God even per accidens.

In answer to Wild's question about whether the evil we commit is frustrating God's purposes for history, recall that there are two effects of the will, its own decision, and the execution of the decision which involves the will's moving other power to their acts (e.g.,, the decision to walk and the actual walking). Even when God permits an evil by causing the act there is in the decision, he does not have to allow execution to occur. Think of how many times our good as well as our plans are frustrated. If God wanted JFK to live, He could have caused the bullets to miss the mark. But through the per accidens causing of this physical evil, he is accomplishing the higher good, i.e., the fulfilling of his purposes for history. Therefore, absolutely nothing happens in the order of physical execution of acts, which is not accomplishing his purpose. For absolutely nothing happens in the physical execution of acts which was not caused, and therefore, planned by him.

A final point: notice that the idea that although God is primary cause of whatever moral goodness there is in our acts, still our acts are free because we could have nihilated. This idea has obvious relevance for the theological doctrine that although we merit salvation, still it is completely a gift from God.