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PH203 Philosophy of God
Aquinas on God's Will

One of the most difficult aspects of God to grasp fully is the nature of His will. Aquinas addresses the question of God's will in question 19 of book I of his *Summa Theologiae*. It is true a complete understanding of God's will or any other attribute properly said of Him is impossible for humans short of the beatific vision, and many Christians have little use for a detailed philosophical understanding beyond the simple faith they are to have in God's providence. At the same time, it is absolutely necessary for the Church to have an understandable explanation of this seeming contradiction and for those entering pastoral ministry to have a solid understanding of that explanation for those members of the faithful who are justifiably uncomfortable with a superficial solution. To that end, the Church looks to Aquinas to clarify that God's will is always fulfilled, but, at the same time, man retains his free choice in his actions. This discussion assumes that portion of the faithful who will need or demand a better explanation and the priests and other ministers or teachers who will need to be able to provide that explanation. The discussion will focus on articles 6 and 8, which are the most common misunderstandings or causes for concern to these. It will first identify the importance of this question, that is, the reason some members of the faithful will seek an answer and the risks of an incorrect or overly simplistic approach. Next, this discussion will outline Thomas' explanation and responses to the objections related to it. Finally, it will the greatest limitation to the application of Thomas' approach.

As noted above, most Christians do not plumb this question to its depths, and a superficial answer is sufficient. However, for those who do approach this question seriously, a complete answer is necessary if they are not to abandon their faith all together. An overly simplistic answer will serve to either remove free choice in man, as it did in Calvin, or leave God impotent, or at least something less than omnipotent, since man can directly affect or control God's will or actions or at least act independently from His will. John Calvin took the former possibility to its logical conclusion when he asserted his theory of predestination. The latter is essentially proposed by modern proponents of Process Theology in which God learns of the world at the same time that it unfolds in time. Neither of these is compatible with Christian doctrine, and Aquinas effectively refutes both possibilities. It should be clear from this, though, that God's very identity as God is at stake in this question. As previously noted, Thomas excellently addresses these concerns in the *Summa Theologiae*.

In Question 19 Article 6, Thomas addresses the question of if God's will is always fulfilled. Since Christians speak of the universal salvific will of God, it would seem that His will is not always fulfilled since Christians also acknowledge that some are not saved in the end. Alternately, since sin is viewed as a departure from God's will, it seems contradictory to assert that God's will is always fulfilled and, at the same time, that man can freely depart from that will. Aquinas resolves this question by drawing a distinction between God's antecedent and consequent will. It must be understood that this is not applied to God's will itself, but rather to that which is willed. Aquinas goes on to explain that a thing, taken in the abstract, may be

good or evil, but, when it is discerned in a concrete situation, these may be otherwise. In Thomas' example, a man's existence, taken abstractly, is good. That this man should be killed, taken abstractly, is an evil. However, if that man is a "murderer or dangerous to society", then it becomes clear that for that man to live is evil and for him to be killed is good. Hence, God wills all men to live antecedently, but, consequently, he wills that man who has warranted such to be killed in justice. Similarly, God "wills all men to be saved, but consequently wills some to be damned, as His justice exacts." Therefore, it can be said that God's antecedent will refers to his will taken conditionally, and His consequent will is that will taken in light of secondary causes. The free nature of men's actions is addressed separately, and this discussion will address it in the summary of Article 8. However, this article addresses the possibility that actions can be contrary or entirely outside of God's will, the weak version of His will that is found at one extreme in this debate.

In Article 8, Thomas addresses whether or not God's will imposes that things should happen necessarily. This question is necessary because it addresses the possibility that the assertion in Article 6, that God's will is always fulfilled, seems to easily take away the notion of freedom in human action. In this, God would become little more than a divine puppet master, and it would be unjust to condemn men for their actions since each action was willed by God. Thomas asserts that God's will is necessary in some things, but not in all things. Again, Aquinas preserves secondary causes for things while God remains the primary cause. God creates natures, and those act as secondary causes. In this way, some things that God wills are necessary, some contingent, and others free through the proximate instead of the first cause.

For example, when God wills fire to exist, it is necessary that the fire be hot because this is necessary to its nature. However, when God wills that a squirrel should eat an acorn, since that action is part of the squirrel's nature, it remains contingent which acorn the squirrel should eat. Finally, in the case of man, God wills a human person to exist, but that person's actions remain free. In this way, Thomas retains God's will as the first cause of all that occurs, but the proximate cause as necessary, contingent, or free. The end result of this conclusion is that acts are not predestined, nor is the salvation of a given man.

Thomas' approach resolves these questions effectively in a Christian context, however, if the underlying assumptions are rejected, as they often are in the modern world, this solution will not stand. That means that, to many philosophers in the modern era and many of the faithful, these solutions are unacceptable. The underlying reason for this failure is the rise of nominalism since the time of Descartes and Spinoza. In the mindset of many of those in the modern world, the idea of natures has been rejected and replaced by brute existence. In this case, one cannot speak of first and second causes since there is no cause to speak of for a nature, but only the direct cause of an effect. Therefore, if a person's starting point is built on the modern nominalist mindset, then building an argument based on the Aristotelian realist idea of being is untenable. Instead, it is first necessary to identify the shortcomings in the nominalist groundwork of that person. A full discussion of the shortcomings of nominalism is outside the scope of this discussion, but with sufficient effort, it is possible to identify them and resolve them. As was previously noted, most Christians will not find the necessity to delve into this question, but for

those that do, it will be necessary to undertake to correct this starting point to understand the nature of the will of God. Those for whom a deeper discussion of the topic is necessary and those capable of engaging in a meaningful argument on first principles are generally an overlapping set, and, to an honest questioner, this should not prove an insurmountable obstacle to adoption of Thomas' explanation.

Thus, Thomas Aquinas has addressed the solution to one of the most challenging dilemmas to understanding God's relationship to his creation. For those members of the faithful for whom this question is a topic of discussion, Thomas' approach provides a complete answer to avoid both extremes of setting God as taking direct control over every action and leaving Him less than God. While there is a challenge in applying Thomas' approach that one must first abandon the nominalism that is prevalent in the modern approach to the world, that person who is willing and able to honestly approach this question will be able to, with some guidance, identify the failures in nominalism and accept the solution offered by Aquinas.