

# PELAGIANISM *REDIVIVUS*: THE FREE WILL THEODICY FOR HELL, DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE, AND THE END OF CLASSICAL THEISM

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## *Abstract*

This article argues against the “free will theodicy” for hell. It demonstrates how St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas considered this theodicy to be Pelagian and opposed to divine transcendence. It is shown that by claiming that God cannot cause the conversion of sinners without violating their freedom, the free will theodicy denies divine omnipotence, empties divine predestination of meaning, undermines the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and implicitly abandons key tenets of classical theism.

## *Introduction*

Recent academic discussions on the doctrine of universal salvation appear to have reached a stalemate. By this I mean that most of the decisive and basic issues have been adequately sketched out. For the supporters of dogmatic universalism—the view that Christians must affirm that God *will*, and not just *may*, save all<sup>1</sup>—to deny universalism is to render vacuous any talk of God as good: the God who can, but does not, finally rescue all of his children made in his image and likeness is not good in any sense analogically comprehensible to us. To say he is, in spite of his permission of hell for innumerable souls, is to fall off a cliff of equivocation.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, therefore, and perhaps after untold aeons, all persons will know God as their true good, and they will freely turn to their God in joy and salvation. Opponents of this view, on the other hand, judge that if dogmatic universalism is correct, then our will is not really free at all, since its own desires can be evacuated by the God intent on smothering us with his love, whether we welcome his embrace or not. According to critics of universalist doctrine, one must choose: uphold the centrality of free will

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “dogmatic” to distinguish this species of universalism from “hopeful” or “subjunctive” universalism, associated primarily with the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

<sup>2</sup> David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 73-75; 87-88.

with the mainstream, historic Christian tradition, or make a mockery of the moral life and the drama of sin and redemption. This appeal to free will, then, preserves the integrity of Christian anthropology as well as the claim that God is good—for what good person compels another into love?

What is it that critics are doing when they invoke free will as a riposte to the universalist doctrine that God will save all persons? This appeal to human free will and its inviolability functions as an *explanatory account* for why people end up in hell—or more precisely, why God permits this evil for the condemned creature, namely damnation, to occur. It is a theodicy. Take Joseph Ratzinger in his influential book on eschatology: “Heaven reposes upon freedom, and so leaves the damned the right to will their own damnation.”<sup>3</sup> More well known is the articulation of the free will theodicy in C. S. Lewis’s classic work, *The Problem of Pain*: “I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*.”<sup>4</sup> Kallistos Ware, in his influential introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy, maintained the same position: “It is heretical to say that all *must* be saved, for this is to deny [human] free will; but it is legitimate to hope that all *may* be saved.”<sup>5</sup> In these statements from members of diverse Christian traditions, the ultimate explanation for why a person ends up in hell is that person himself, or more specifically his obdurate will that rejects and resists God’s offer of rescue and mercy. God and God’s activity play no determinative role in this explanatory account for damnation, except perhaps by highlighting the perversity of the will that would so refuse God’s extended and helping hand. When I refer to the *free will theodicy*, it is just such an explanatory account for hell that I have in mind.<sup>6</sup>

Universal salvation, too, is a theodicy, or at least an anticipatory one. Its proponents hold that if God were to permit everlasting torment for sinners despite having the power to overcome it, God would be evil. But God does not permit everlasting torment; in the end, he conquers the sinfulness of sinners that brings hell into being. Notice what these two theodicies share. They both consider everlasting damnation, the ultimate loss for the human spirit, to be an evil (whether it is ever actualized or not) that sits in tension, at least *prima facie*, with the goodness of God. The two also believe that such a

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 216. On the same page, Ratzinger attempts to defend (in just two sentences) his claim against critiques that his view is Pelagian. The reader’s estimation of the success of that defense will likely be the same as his judgment of the merits of this article.

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 130.

<sup>5</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Eastern Christianity* (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 255.

<sup>6</sup> The free will theodicy for hell is thus a species of the free will theodicy (or defense) for why God permits moral evil more generally. Broadly speaking, the free will defense argues that the existence of rational agents who can choose good or evil makes for a better universe than one without such agents and so justifies God’s permission of the evils that flow from their free choices. “Free will defense,” however, is said in many ways. As Theodore J. Kondoleon showed in his article (“The Free Will Defense: New and Old,” *The Thomist* 47, no. 1 [1983]: 1-42), contemporary free will defenses (of the sort sampled above) differ from their more ancient counterparts insofar as they deny God’s causality of free choices, with troubling implications for the Latin theological doctrine of grace and the philosophical/theological doctrine of divine omnipotence. Similar points have been made more recently by Steven A. Long in “Divine Causality and the Mystery of Predestination,” in *Thomism and Predestination*, edited by Steven A. Long, Roger W. Nutt, and Thomas Joseph White (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2016), 51-76. In important respects my own interventions in this article track closely with Kondoleon’s and Long’s, although with distinct emphases. For the purposes of this essay, the key point is that neither Augustine nor Aquinas considered this defense the *ultimate* explanation for why one sinner is damned and another saved. The free choices of sinners are a necessary but not sufficient reason for their damnation. More on this below.

grave evil accordingly requires some explanatory account to reconcile it with God's goodness. For the free will theodist, however, the universalist explanation is off the table, for God's omnipotence cannot encompass causing a sinner to freely repent.<sup>7</sup> Human freedom of will and divine agency are two primordial principles that must remain counterpoised in any analysis of final fates.

I have hardly done a fraction of justice to the complexity of this debate on universalism as it has unfolded in the past few years.<sup>8</sup> I highlight these two fault lines in the competing theodicies—the cogency of our analogical speech about God's goodness and the inviolability of human freedom—only in order to introduce a third that I believe deserves greater stress in the discussion. What I have in mind is *divine transcendence*. How one conceives of the nature of divine transcendence, and more specifically the quality of God's activity vis-à-vis God's creatures, determines what kind of theodicy for hell a theologian will offer. Accordingly, attending to this question and getting clear on what the classical account of divine transcendence teaches, as well as what rejecting it would entail, brings with it the promise of progressing the contemporary debate on universalism.

Divine transcendence is, as William Placher notes, "what makes God God."<sup>9</sup> Drawing on Kathryn Tanner's work, Placher writes that any understanding of God, and God's activity, that pits divine agency over against human agency misunderstands transcendence, looping it into a contrastive and so dialectical relationship with immanence. To respect the utterly unique character of divine activity one must see it not as competing with but enabling free creaturely agency. Accordingly, Tanner gives us a rule for thinking the divine transcendence: "avoid in talk about God's creative agency all suggestions of limitations in scope or manner."<sup>10</sup>

It is my contention that if one understands the nature of divine transcendence in line with this classical understanding, exemplified in the metaphysical thought of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, with their commitment to doctrines such as divine omnipotence, divine impassibility, and *creatio ex nihilo*, then the free will theodicy for hell appears incoherent and unacceptable as an ultimate explanatory account for why God permits sinners to be damned.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, its insolvency is particularly acute for those whose commitments align with the historic Latin Catholic theological tradition. This becomes most

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, it may be off the table for the more fundamental reason that free will theodists could believe universalism to be unscriptural or heretical, condemned by the magisterial teaching of their tradition. This article does not treat this aspect of the universalist debate.

<sup>8</sup> See, among others: Michael J. McClymond, *The Devil's Redemption: A New History and Interpretation of Christian Universalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018); David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); Roberto J. De La Noval, "Divine Drama or Divine Disclosure? Hell, Universalism, and a Parting of the Ways," *Modern Theology*, 36, no. 1 (January 2020): 201-10; Joshua R. Brotherton, "That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation by David Bentley Hart," *Nova et Vetera* 18, no. 4 (2020): 1394-1399; Mats Wahlberg, "The Problem of Hell: A Thomistic Critique of David Bentley Hart's Necessitarian Universalism," *Modern Theology* 39, no. 1 (January 2022): 47-67; Eleonore Stump, *The Image of God: The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), esp. 256-310; and in popular journals, see the trilogy of anti-universalist articles in *Church Life Journal* by James Dominic Rooney, beginning with "The Incoherencies of Hard Universalism," *Church Life Journal* (2022): <<<https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-incoherencies-of-hard-universalism/>>>.

<sup>9</sup> William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 111.

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 47. Quoted in Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 125n73.

<sup>11</sup> It is not my aim in this short article, and neither would it be possible within its limits, to defend this classical account of transcendence over its rivals. The interested reader may see Tanner's work noted above for detailed argumentation.

evident when the implications of this theodicy for various core Latin Catholic doctrines are spelled out, doctrines such as predestination and grace. It will be the burden of this essay to unveil these implications. Particularly salient for this universalist debate will be my conclusion that the central assumption of the free will theodicy, namely that God cannot cause creatures to *freely* choose, is false.<sup>12</sup> Here we see a clear restriction of the “scope or manner” of divine agency, the very move to which Tanner’s rule alerts us. Whatever other reasons a theologian may have for rejecting dogmatic universal salvation, the violation of human freedom that universalism purportedly entails cannot be one of them—if the divine transcendence is to be respected. Conversely, the opponent of universalism who remains committed to the traditional doctrine of hell as everlasting but also wishes to retain the vision of divine transcendence in Augustine and Aquinas, along with its attendant metaphysical and theological doctrines, must, on pain of incoherence, find another theodicy for hell.

A question can serve as an entry way to considering how conceptions of divine transcendence play a pivotal role in the universalist debate. Why did Augustine and Aquinas, arguably the two central architects of Latin Catholic theology, deny the free will theodicy for hell? For it must be clearly said that they did consider the free will theodicy as an explanatory account for a double-outcome eschatology, only to reject it. The answer is that both took the theodicy to be *Pelagian*.<sup>13</sup> That is, they understood it to undermine what I call the “divine priority,” God’s active pose towards creatures as both their creator and redeemer. This divine priority is precisely what the Pelagian doctrine denied, which is why the latter was rejected by the Catholic magisterial tradition.<sup>14</sup> If it can be shown that the free will theodicy is irredeemably Pelagian, then that will furnish a potent reason for contemporary theologians concerned to avoid Pelagius’ error to reject this theodicy as well. This is especially so if, as I argue below, the Pelagian denial of divine transcendence proves deformative of other doctrines, such as the doctrines of God’s omnipotence and impassibility, as well as the doctrine that God creates *ex nihilo*. But these implications of the Pelagianism of the free will theodicy will become clear in the telling.

One final word of introduction: this article is not directly an argument for universal salvation; neither is it an argument in favor of the double-outcome eschatology of Augustine and Aquinas. It is instead a step back, a critique of the presuppositions of the free will theodicy performed with the help of two major theologians of grace. Let

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Alvin Plantinga’s influential articulation of the limits on God’s power in this domain. “Now God can create free creatures, but He can’t *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren’t significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*.” *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1974), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Brown notes that “Pelagianism” became a theological system or coherent position only in the mind of Augustine as he refuted it. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 346. When I refer to “Pelagianism” in this essay, I have in view as well the “semi-Pelagianism” that Augustine combatted, which held that both God and personal choices serve as *co-equal* explanatory accounts for why someone achieves salvation. So, for example, God may initiate conversion with the gift of grace, but the sinner must bring it to completion by his own future unaided efforts. It was in response to this semi-Pelagian conviction that Augustine invoked the notion of the gift of perseverance (cf. the treatise *de dono perseverantiae*).

<sup>14</sup> *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC) §406 refers to the Council of Orange II and the Council of Trent as definitive rejections of Pelagius on original sin.

us, then, examine Augustine and Thomas, each in turn, to see the difficulties they identified in the free will theodicy for hell that seems so intuitive and self-evident today.<sup>15</sup>

### Augustine

Turning to a work of St. Augustine's late period, the *Enchiridion*,<sup>16</sup> we find Augustine weighing the free will theodicy for why some end up damned, despite St. Paul's affirmation that God wills the salvation of all (1 Timothy 2:4).<sup>17</sup> While today many read God's "will" to save all in this passage as something on the order of a divine wish or hope, Augustine and his implied interlocutors clearly read it as speaking directly to the divine *omnipotence* or to God's efficacious will; otherwise, the verse would have presented no problem for Augustine to resolve. Indeed, Augustine's discussion of the question of universal salvation appears precisely within a discussion of the divine omnipotence. If we claim that something which occurs in creation is not willed or permitted by God—the latter a distinct species of divine willing, after all<sup>18</sup>—then, in Augustine's estimation, we have denied the first line of the creed: *credo in deum patrem omnipotentem*. No creature can ultimately resist the divine will, lest the latter not be truly all-powerful. And since not all are saved (a point Augustine takes as a given) then God does not will

<sup>15</sup> In what follows, the reader will hear echoes of the *de auxiliis* controversy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The purpose of this article is not to stump for the Bañezians, despite the fact that the position argued for below more closely resembles theirs—including their critique that Molinism undercuts divine universal causality and entails Pelagianism. Rather, the aim is to return to Augustine and to Thomas to find variations of contemporary free will theodicy arguments in their writings, but to find them *as positions they reject*, and so to examine the metaphysical and doctrinal principles motivating their dismissal of the theodicy. Even if the *de auxiliis* controversy is not the focus of this article, the argument in its pages does, however, have implications for illuminating the mystery of divine grace and human freedom, a question that, as R. J. Matava has rightly written, "deserves the kind of sustained reflection and clear formulation that has been given to such mysteries as the Trinity and the Incarnation." R. J. Matava, "A Sketch of the Controversy *de auxiliis*," *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 7 (2020): 417–46, at 444. His suggestion in the same article (446) that a way through the impasse should be sought in conceiving divine creative causality in light of divine simplicity is carried forward below, albeit in a different (though complementary fashion) through my retrieval of Bernard Lonergan on the Thomistic teaching of God's simple creative act being one primarily of creating a "world order" as opposed to merely discrete existents.

<sup>16</sup> Composed ca. AD 421. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Belief*, The Works of Saint Augustine, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2005), 266.

<sup>17</sup> Jesse Couenhoven has argued forcefully that Augustine, despite being considered the originator of the free will defense for God's permission of evil (a distinction in fact better applied to the universalist Origen of Alexandria—on which, see below), was, in his later period, a fierce critic of the view. "Augustine's Rejection of the Free-Will Defence: An Overview of the Late Augustine's Theodicy," *Religious Studies* 43, no. 3 (2007): 279–98, and especially at 293, speaking specifically of the damnation of sinners as not explicable by God's respect for persons' free choices. A central consideration—one too often ignored in readings of Augustine as a free will theodicy—is that the kind of freedom necessary for this view was enjoyed, in Augustine's earlier view, only by our first parents, but by no humans afterwards (280–81). Even this freedom to defect from God, however, was only a freedom to cooperate with the grace of a good will already given by God to Adam at the moment of creation; *posse non peccare* exists always within the context of grace, even if this first grace was only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for perseverance. Augustine is clear, however, that this sort of grace is denied to Adam's progeny as a penalty for sin. But for the elect, a greater grace is given: one that is both a necessary and sufficient condition for doing and persevering in the good unto salvation. *de correptione*, 32; 36. See n21 below for further detail on Augustine's mature, anti-Pelagian account of humanity's original sin.

<sup>18</sup> "For the great works of the Lord are sought out according to all his purposes in order that even what happens against his will should in a wonderful and inexplicable way not be done despite his will, since it would not happen if he did not permit it, and he does not permit things unwillingly but willingly (*nec utique nolens sinit sed volens*)." Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 100. Augustine, *On Christian Belief*, 331. Latin text from *Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina. XLVI* (Turnholti: Typographi Brepols, 1969), 103 [henceforth *CCSL XLVI*].



the salvation of all. Whatever “God wills all people to be saved” means, Augustine concludes, it cannot mean that God’s desires are, in the end, frustrated by his creatures.<sup>19</sup> “The effectiveness of the will of the almighty is not impeded by the will of any creature whatsoever.”<sup>20</sup>

Augustine argues that we must think of God as an agency that does not compete with creatures but rather disposes reality as it wills; any other being would be potent but not *omnipotent*. To preserve God’s true otherness, the divine difference, thus requires that we affirm certain explanatory accounts concerning human destinies and deny others. Among those Augustine believes we must deny—for the sake of the coherence of our philosophical and faith commitments (e.g., the first line of the creed)—is the idea that the ultimate explanation for why all are not saved is the freedom of the rebellious human will to conquer the divine will.<sup>21</sup> This denial by Augustine says nothing as yet of the nature of human freedom or of the relationship between it and divine causality; more on that momentarily. The point is simply to note that from Augustine’s perspective the first casualty of the free will theodicy is divine omnipotence. In this view, God, like creatures, can have his own will frustrated by others. But the question arises: does not every instance of sin in the here-and-now represent a frustration of the divine will? Augustine’s answer in the *Enchiridion* (100) is that God’s permission of evil is part of the divine plan itself, and that these attempted rebellions would only count against the divine omnipotence if God could not turn that evil into a greater good: either into a manifestation of divine

<sup>19</sup> Augustine offers two readings of the passage in *Enchiridion* 103: first, that it means, “Whoever is saved, is saved because God willed it,” and, second, that the *all* refers to “all sorts of persons,” indicating diversity of nations. These readings are far from straightforward, with the first not corresponding to the literal sense of 1 Timothy 2:4 at all.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 96. Augustine, *On Christian Belief*, 328. “Nec voluntate cuiuspiam creaturae voluntatis omnipotentis impeditur effectus.” CSSL XLVI, 100. Cf. Aquinas in ST Ia.19.6. co: “Since, then, the will of God is the universal cause of all things, it is impossible that the divine will should not produce its effect (*Cum igitur voluntas Dei sit universalist causa omnium rerum, impossibile est quod divina voluntas sum effectum non consequatur*.)” English translation by Laurence Shapcote, found at aquinas.cc, as are all subsequent English citations of the ST, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine applies identical reasoning to the question of humanity’s original sin: the defection from the first grace is possible only due to God’s withholding of the divine help Adam needed to stand, not because God was incapable (for logical or moral reasons) of causing Adam to persevere. “In fact it was not even possible for [Adam] to trust in God’s help [to ward off the devil’s temptation] *without God’s help*, but this does not mean that it was not in his power to turn away from the benefits of divine grace by pleasing himself [...] For who would dare to believe or to say that it was not in God’s power to make sure that neither angel nor human being would fall? But God preferred to leave this issue in their power and thus demonstrate how greatly their pride avails for evil and how greatly his grace avails for good (*de civ. dei*, XIV.27).” Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, The Works of Saint Augustine, ed. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013), 136, emphasis mine. (A similar explanation for the angelic fall, that the fallen angels lacked sufficient grace to persevere, appears in *de. civ. dei*, XII.9.) And to anticipate our analysis of Aquinas, we note that Thomas follows Augustine explicitly on this question: by the fact of his sin, Adam, although created in a state of habitual grace, revealed that he had not received from God the further *auxilium* of perseverance that would have prevented the original sin. ST Ia-IIa.109.10 ad3. While God does not *cause* original sin, God nonetheless *chooses* not to prevent it. Both authors therefore reject, in their mature works, even a Pelagian account of the first sin, with Augustine appealing instead to God’s non-impairment of the grace of perseverance as fulfilling God’s aim of glorifying the beauty of grace in the eyes of fallible creatures.

Although delineating alternatives to the free will theodicy (that would be consonant with the account of divine transcendence in Augustine and Aquinas) is not the purpose of this essay, it is well to note that here in this account of humanity’s fall Augustine presents *in nuce* his own eschatological theodicy: the ‘aesthetic’ or ‘chiaroscuro’ theodicy, in which the darkness of evil (natural and moral) serves as the necessary condition for particular goods God wills to bring into this world order (such as knowledge of the evil of pride and the power of grace), thereby beautifying the whole.

justice or of mercy. But since the fate of each person has been decided eternally by divine predestination—or God’s passing over of a sinner in reprobation—free sinful choices in fact serve as the basis by which God justly condemns those predestined to eternal punishment, while in the redeemed they work for the purpose of magnifying God’s salvific grace operating in the elect.<sup>22</sup> We will be treating in more detail soon Augustine’s doctrine of predestination and its relationship to divine omnipotence and the divine priority, but it is necessary to mention it here in order to show that for Augustine (and for Aquinas after him), the meaning of sin and its relationship to the divine order can be understood only from the *end*: if God could not turn evil to good, then it would truly constitute a frustration of the divine will, but since God can, then it does not. In other words, it is the nature of divine omnipotence to sublimate human freedom, preserving it while turning it to whatever end God should purpose, and this fact is disclosed to our knowledge only eschatologically even while today it is held by faith. And so, human freedom, even in sin, can no more subvert the omnipotent will of God than a character’s free decisions can subvert the plot its author is writing.<sup>23</sup>

To confute those who would resist his logic that divine omnipotence precludes a free will theodicy, Augustine in the *Enchiridion* marshals several arguments, but focusing solely on one will suffice for the moment. His argument is an appeal to the rather obvious ecclesial datum that God turns the hearts of those who once willed against him. That God can and does convert persons was a fact Augustine knew well and one that he attempted to convey at length in his *Confessions*. It is worth dwelling momentarily upon the implications of God’s conversion of hearts through the impartation of grace. Why was Pelagius so vexed by Augustine’s autobiography, and especially by his *cri de coeur*, “give what you command, and then command whatever you will”?<sup>24</sup> Because it seemed to him to eradicate human agency in the drama of salvation. For Augustine, on the other hand, divine conversion of hearts only demonstrated the scope of divine omnipotence, since “who is so irreligious and foolish as

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<sup>22</sup> “To those whom he predestined to eternal life, he most mercifully gives grace, and to those whom he predestined to eternal death, he most righteously assigns punishment, not only on account of sins which they most willingly add, but also on account of original sin.” *an. et or.* IV.16. Saint Augustine, *Answer to the Pelagians III*, The Works of Saint Augustine, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 544. The reader of Augustine (and Thomas) will notice a potential inconsistency in the fact that Augustine denies that God predestines the sin that serves as the just foundation for eternal punishment for the reprobate (e.g., *de praedestinatione*, 19), while also making clear that the reprobation of the non-elect is eternally ordered to the good of the elect (e.g., *de praedestinatione*, 16), in order to manifest the value of divine mercy in the face of divine justice (i.e., the chiaroscuro theodicy), and that this predestining of the elect for glory is accomplished *ante praevisa merita*. Is this eternal divine ordering of the reprobate to the good of the elect logically anterior or posterior to the fact of sin? It seems unlikely that it can be posterior for the following reasons: 1) God chooses not to grant persevering grace to Adam, fully aware of what would follow from that choice (*de civ. dei*, XIV.27), and so God willingly permits the fall; and 2) God would prove in this scenario *reactive* to human choice in how God concludes the destiny of creatures—a reactivity that Augustine was at pains to refute throughout the Pelagian controversy (see below). If it is anterior, however, then it is unclear how God can fulfill God’s creative purposes (on Augustine’s view) of showing forth both divine justice and mercy without needing sin as part of the world order. Neither Augustine nor Aquinas addresses this aporia head on, although Aquinas certainly takes reprobation to be logically anterior to the occurrence of sin (see below).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence*, 125, for the author-character analogy (modified in my telling of it).

<sup>24</sup> *Conf.* X.29. Saint Augustine, *The Confessions*, The Works of Saint Augustine, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 263. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 343.

to say that God cannot turn to good any of the evil wills of men he wishes, when and where he wishes"?<sup>25</sup> In Augustine's view, getting this question right is a matter not only of metaphysical solvency but of piety. And if the graced conversion of sinners functions for Augustine as a prime example of divine power in action,<sup>26</sup> this means that God's salvific and efficacious grace cannot be interpreted as a gift that waits for its addressee to take the decisive step to receive it. Were that true, Augustine and Pelagius fought over nothing, their dispute merely an unfortunate mix-up. This would be an awkward conclusion to affirm for the Catholic theologian especially, given that for the Catholic magisterial tradition, Augustine is the very doctor of grace.<sup>27</sup>

Yet one may wonder whether Augustine has purchased divine omnipotence at the cost of human freedom. Does not conversion, in Augustine's telling, represent divine interference against the freedom of the human person? Augustine thought not. He spilled much ink, in fact, to show that God's impartation of grace could not be a violation of the integrity of human freedom, precisely because God works *in* and *through* the will by turning it to himself. In his twenty-sixth *Tractate on John*, Augustine interpreted Christ's words in John 6:44, "No one comes to me unless the Father has drawn him" by appealing to God's work in transforming the human heart's loves: "Do not think that you are drawn unwillingly; the mind is drawn also by love."<sup>28</sup> If we act willingly when we pursue our loves, and if God converts us by granting us to love him through the Spirit, then God works not against our freedom but through it. Real human causality is retained under the influence of grace.<sup>29</sup> Now, no merely finite agent can change us *freely*, by converting our loves from within. Those who come to believe "are drawn, then, in marvelous ways to willing by the one *who knows how to work interiorly* in the hearts of human beings."<sup>30</sup> Augustine's breakthrough in the struggle against Pelagianism, as James Wetzel has convincingly suggested, was in recognizing that divine action on the will is not comparable to the action of one finite will upon another. God is no agent of external compulsion. What grounds this truth is the divine transcendence itself, the fact that God and God's action are a "wholly other kind of reality."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 98. Augustine, *On Christian Belief*, 329. "Quis porro tam impie desipiat ut dicat deum malas hominum voluntates, quas voluerit quando voluerit ubi voluerit, in bonum non posse convertere?" CCSL XLVI, 100.

<sup>26</sup> A position echoed by contemporary Catholic magisterial teaching: CCC §277.

<sup>27</sup> CCC §2006.

<sup>28</sup> *St. Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John 11-27, The Fathers of the Church*, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 262.

<sup>29</sup> Katherin A. Rogers provides an illuminating discussion of Augustine on genuine secondary causality as enfolded within God's primary causality in *Anselm on Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 31-33.

<sup>30</sup> Saint Augustine, *Answer to the Pelagians II*, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998), 135, emphasis mine. In this account of grace, God does not appear as "the forlorn, neglected lover, the eternal bore," in Sebastian Moore's words. "No, God is not the infinite exemplar of unrequited love. God is the love that, utterly surprisingly, creeps up *on the inside* of our sense of ourselves as desirable which normally is awakened *from the outside* by the person who excited our longing [...]. What we call grace, or the new creation, is that movement within people whereby the infinite desire which constitutes them in being (the 'first creation') *happens for them*, happens in their consciousness, happens as a new empowering of the heart." *Let This Mind Be in You: The Quest for Identity Through Oedipus to Christ* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985), 45-46.

<sup>31</sup> James Wetzel, "Snares of Truth: Augustine on Free Will and Predestination," in *Augustine and His Critics*, edited by Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (New York: Routledge, 2000), 134.



Thus we find that the confession of divine transcendence, of God's true otherness as an agency, goes hand in hand with a Catholic understanding of God's converting grace. Augustine dispatches with the free will theodicy for hell precisely in order to preserve the latter.<sup>32</sup> Against claims that God *cannot* turn a free will, or that God *would* not, lest in so doing he violate the integrity of human freedom, Augustine upholds the omnipotence of God, whose will cannot be frustrated by any finite reality; equally he advances the supernaturally *other* character of God's grace working in human hearts and its preservation of human freedom. The conclusion from Augustine's work is that the free will theodicy for hell contradicts divine transcendence, both in its denial of divine omnipotence and in its rejection of the corollary doctrine of grace as converting persons freely.

What explanatory account for damnation does Augustine put in its place, then? The biblical doctrine of predestination. Predestination for Augustine locates in eternity the priority of God's omnipotent choice regarding the salvation and damnation of persons. Nowhere for Augustine is this divine priority in grace and predestination more manifest than in the fates of baptized and unbaptized children. Augustine marveled at the mysteries of God's ways in the fact that one child dies before bathing in that salvific font while another makes it safely there to receive the grace necessary for eternal life.<sup>33</sup> What can explain this marvelous fact save divine election? The reason that Augustine so often invoked this *argumentum ex baptismo* is that it incapacitated the alternative explanatory account that the Pelagians gave for why God imparts grace: human merit. But if human merit cannot explain why one child boards the ark of salvation through baptism and another does not—for a child has no merits to speak of—then what can? Fate? Chance? Augustine considers such a notion absurd, unworthy of the Christian who affirms God's universal providence.<sup>34</sup> And divine providence, as God's governance of the world, is nothing other than God's omnipotence in motion.<sup>35</sup> The true explanation, the only one that Augustine considers compatible with the divine priority—meaning divine omnipotence and its corollary doctrine of converting grace—lies in God's inscrutable will that elects, from all eternity, who

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<sup>32</sup> Free will theodicians for hell will invoke God's grace as a necessary cause of salvation, but not a *sufficient* one—precisely because of the assumed logical or moral impossibility of God causing a free choice. ("Grace" in these accounts can refer to the Christ event, the inner promptings of the Spirit convicting and calling sinners, the preaching of the Gospel, or all of these together. Whichever rendering is given, the key commonality is that grace remains something external to a person's will.) This rendering of grace, however, reproduces in exact logic the Pelagian argument that grace does not cause our conversion and meritorious good works but instead only exhorts us to them—hence the Pelagian appeal to God's giving of the Law as *grace*. Augustine's response invoked St. Paul's teaching that for the unregenerate heart, the Law (*the letter kills*) brings only further condemnation (*de grat. et lib. arb.*, 23–34). So too, in the free will theodicy, does God's gift of grace: it is reduced merely to an external call, and so becomes a second Law that is equally impotent to save us from sin but condemns us for our failure to respond to it. After the Christ event, therefore, things have remained fundamentally the same as they were in the Old Covenant, only with a new specification of the Law we must obey: faith in Christ. Augustine grasped that the Pelagian account of grace implied that the sinner who cooperates with this grace external to the will establishes his own righteousness. The entailment is the same for the free will theodicy for hell. The sufficient cause of salvation is we ourselves if our independent response is what distinguishes "sufficient" from "efficacious" grace.

<sup>33</sup> E.g., Augustine, *de merit. et lib. arb.*, I.30; *de praedestinatione*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> The same logic applies even in a post-Vatican II doctrinal framework, in which the visible sacrament is no longer considered a conclusive sign of whether one belongs to the body of Christ or not. See CCC §846–848.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *de dono*, 31.

will receive the graces necessary for eternal life and who will not.<sup>36</sup> That divine election is predestination, and apart from being a biblical given,<sup>37</sup> it is also the only logical conclusion of the trajectory Augustine began with his doctrine of converting grace. “Without the theology of predestination, there is no Augustinian theology of grace.”<sup>38</sup> Grace is simply the effect, the temporal manifestation, of that eternal predestination.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the ultimate explanation for why one person is saved and another condemned lies not in the sinner but in God’s transcendent primary causality as manifested in the impartation or withholding of grace. The culpability of sinners is certainly a necessary condition for their ending up in hell, but it is not a sufficient one.

The Pelagians resisted Augustine’s argument that predestination represented an instance of what I have called the divine priority. Instead, they claimed, predestination followed upon God’s foreknowledge of merits. What is not to be missed is that this response is essentially just a version of the free will theodicy. Verbally acknowledging that God disposes earthly affairs, the Pelagians nonetheless argued that God did so *on the basis of how those affairs turn out independently of his gift of grace*. The reader who has followed the argument thus far may be able to anticipate Augustine’s answer to this last effort to block the divine priority, this Molinism before Molina. Predestination is certainly a result of God’s foreknowledge, but it is foreknowledge of what God himself will do; only derivatively is it foreknowledge of creatures.<sup>40</sup> As one commentator has written, “Augustine insists—implacably and not without certain formal grounds—that God’s foreknowledge is also his predestination and is thus identical with it in one pre-eternal act.”<sup>41</sup> Rightly so, and because it is God’s knowledge of himself and his will for creatures, it follows that it is infallibly certain: “This predestination of the saints is nothing other than the foreknowledge and the preparation of the benefits of God *by which he most certainly sets free* whoever are set free.”<sup>42</sup> By contrast, the free will theodicy necessarily reduces divine predestination from a teaching about *God* into a report about *us*, effectively doing away with the heart of the doctrine altogether.<sup>43</sup>

We can now state the matter clearly. The free will theodicy for hell is Pelagian. It denies the divine omnipotence as well as its corollary doctrines of grace and predestination, which is in fact the same doctrine seen either from the vantage of time or of eternity. Fundamentally, it denies divine transcendence.

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<sup>36</sup> Augustine, *de praedestinatione*, 16.

<sup>37</sup> E.g., Ephesian 1:4-5; Romans 8:28-30.

<sup>38</sup> Wetzel, “Snares of Truth,” 125.

<sup>39</sup> “Between grace and predestination, however, there is only this difference, namely that predestination is the preparation for grace, while grace is its actual bestowal (*de praedestinatione*, 19).” Saint Augustine, *Answer to the Pelagians IV*, The Works of Saint Augustine, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), 165.

<sup>40</sup> “For to arrange his own future works in his foreknowledge which cannot be deceived or changed is nothing other than to predestine them” (*de dono*, 41); “To have predestined is to have foreknown that which he himself was going to do (*de dono*, 47).” Augustine, *Answer to the Pelagians IV*, 219; 224.

<sup>41</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, “Augustinianism and Predestination,” in *The Sophiology of Death*, trans. Roberto J. De La Noval (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), 110.

<sup>42</sup> Augustine, *de dono*, 35. Augustine, *Answer to the Pelagians IV*, 213, emphasis mine.

<sup>43</sup> Contemporary proponents of the free will theodicy perform this same transmutation of the doctrine of predestination: “Even God’s decision to predestine someone to glory allows them to resist God’s grace.” Rooney, “The Incoherencies of Hard Universalism.” (<https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-incoherencies-of-hard-universalism/>).

### Aquinas

Augustine was not alone in rejecting the free will theodicy for hell. Thomas Aquinas followed him, for he too understood what Augustine had grasped: the incongruence between the free will theodicy and an affirmation of God's omnipotence. Aquinas's account, however, is deeper and subtler, enriched as it is by the Aristotelian philosophical superstructure that Thomas had assimilated. We can discover this richness by considering Aquinas's explanation for how God can cause free human actions. Better to present the argument *ex negativo*, by indicating the conclusions that follow for the doctrine of the divine attributes—divine omnipotence, divine impassibility, and divine omniscience—from the major assumption of the free will theodicy, namely that God cannot cause a creature to choose without violating that creature's freedom.

As is well known, Aquinas believes God to be omniscient as well as omnipotent. God knows all that can be known, including future contingents (future, that is, from the perspective of those within the realm of time).<sup>44</sup> Whatever else lies within the category, certainly human free acts belong under the umbrella of future contingents. But here is where the problem arises: if God knows these acts, and if the free will theodicy's assumption is true—that these free acts are truly outside of the domain of divine causality—then how does God know these acts? It follows necessarily that if God knows free acts that he does not cause, then God must be *epistemically* passive with respect to the free choices of human beings; the source of his knowledge is ultimately outside of him. One more casualty of the free will theodicy: divine impassibility.

For Thomas, however, in God there is no passive potency at all, no capacity to be acted upon by another.<sup>45</sup> Unlike human knowers, who are in an important respect *moved* to understanding and so altered by their knowing,<sup>46</sup> God is not changed or enriched by knowing; learning is not something God needs to do. And so Aquinas upholds the lofty claim that in God, knowing involves no passion but is instead wholly *causal*: God knows all things by causing them; God knows all things by knowing himself; and God does not know any creaturely reality that he does not create.<sup>47</sup> And among the "all things" that can be known are human free actions, for they are not nothing. Aquinas here proves from purely philosophical considerations what Augustine had argued theologically in his final works concerning eschatology: divine foreknowledge is divine predestination

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<sup>44</sup> SCG I.67. English translation and Latin text drawn from [isidore.co/aquinas](http://isidore.co/aquinas), as are all subsequent English citations of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, unless otherwise specified. The translator of Book 1 is Anton C. Pegis.

<sup>45</sup> ST Ia.25.3 ad1.

<sup>46</sup> See Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), chapters 1–3 for a detailed study of Thomas's cognitional theory.

<sup>47</sup> ST Ia.14.8 co. Norman Kretzmann has pointed out that Aquinas in fact has *two* strategies for ensuring God's knowledge of future contingents without compromising the divine simplicity or introducing potency into God. The first is the Boethian appeal to the divine eternity, which places God outside of the flow of time and so makes the entirety of the world order present to him at once. The second is the doctrine of divine knowing as causal, and more specifically, the teaching that God knows all things by knowing himself as their cause. I agree with Kretzmann's conclusion that this latter explanation renders the former superfluous, although I would add that without the latter account, God would remain epistemically passive with respect to the world order. "Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy in the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas," *The Journal of Philosophy* 80, no. 10, pt. 2 (1983): 631–49, at 644–45.

and vice versa.<sup>48</sup> Even divine knowing must be construed in accord with the divine priority.

It appears that God must be the cause of human free choices, lest the doctrine of divine impassibility be contravened. But is not a “caused” free choice a *contradictio in adjecto*, and does not Aquinas also argue that the will is free? In various places in his writings where he asks whether the divine will imposes necessity on its created effects, Aquinas answers with a clear no.<sup>49</sup> It belongs to voluntary creatures to be free—meaning “not determined”—with respect to alternative choices, unlike created realities in which the necessity of nature rules (e.g., a pear tree can only produce pears, but it is within the power of a human will to choose to plant a pear tree or an apple tree).<sup>50</sup> This indeterminacy would seem to preclude God’s ability to incorporate free choices into the divine providence. And yet Aquinas vehemently insists that free choices do not fall outside of providence.<sup>51</sup> Thomas’s solution lies—once again—in divine omnipotence, this time specified as producing not just the effects it desires, but producing them in the *mode* in which God desires them to arise. If God wills for a decision to be taken freely, that is, for it to arise contingently, then God wills it to be taken freely: “The efficacy of the divine will does not remove contingency.”<sup>52</sup> What makes God’s activity of knowing and causing truly other, truly transcendent, is that God can infallibly cause the contingent without violating its character as contingent.<sup>53</sup> One surprising implication of Aquinas’s position is that the infallibility of divine willing does not remove the status of “possible” from what God concretely wills to be contingent. Such possibility is still correctly predicated, logically speaking, of every contingent reality that God has ordained. John F. X. Knassas sums up Aquinas’s position: “[U]nder God’s causality, that something *will* not happen does not mean that it *cannot* happen. It is simply a modal confusion to think that *will not* equals *cannot*.”<sup>54</sup> This is precisely the modal confusion brought forward by contemporary free will theodiscists who insist that if God *will* save all, and if that salvation entails the free choice to love God, then human

<sup>48</sup> In other places (e.g., *de praedestinatione*, 19), however, Augustine distinguishes divine predestination and divine foreknowledge in order to avoid the conclusion that God causes sin. It is doubtful that this distinction is tenable: if Augustine can distinguish mere foreknowledge from active predestination in the matter of sin, then why can the Pelagian not do the same concerning salvation? A similar problem attends Aquinas’s argument that God’s knowledge of creatures is wholly causal (see below); does this not make God the cause of sin? Lonergan presents his own option for responding to this question, one which sees the divine permitting of sin in Thomas as a *tertium quid*, neither a causing nor a non-causing (ST Ia.19.9 ad3), yet still a form of divine willing. The uniqueness of divine permitting correlates precisely to the unique sort of “nothing” that sin is, what Lonergan calls a “surd,” the absence of intelligibility where it ought to be (*privatio boni*). See Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 111-18 and 339-44, for elaborations of this account that act as rejoinders to the Molinist-Bañezian answers on this question. Yet the crucial point to recognize is that divine permission is still a species of divine willing; accordingly, appeals to the *privatio boni* account of evil—of the non-being of sin and so of the impossibility of sin having a cause in God—as an attempt to absolve God from responsibility for sin fail to reach to the ultimate level of explanation for the occurrence of sin in the one world order that God wills, given divine omnipotence and God’s creation of free choices. To address these critical questions would require a far lengthier treatment than is possible here, one tangential to the more restricted goals of this essay, but see n75 and n77 below.

<sup>49</sup> E.g., SCG I.85; ST Ia.19.8.

<sup>50</sup> ST Ia.83.1 co.

<sup>51</sup> ST Ia.22.2 ad4. Quoted in John F. X. Knassas, *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel: Thomistic Reflections on the Problem of Evil* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 218. Cf. also ST Ia.103.5 ad2; ad3.

<sup>52</sup> SCG I.85.2.

<sup>53</sup> ST Ia.22.4.

<sup>54</sup> Knassas, *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel*, 220.

choices are turned from contingent into necessary realities.<sup>55</sup> But the importance of this modal distinction for our eschatological question is brought home by Aquinas himself. In *De Veritate*, he states unequivocally that God's will for the salvation of a person cannot be thwarted, even if it remains valid to call that salvation "possible" insofar as it is a contingent reality: "These two are not impossible: God wills this person to be saved and he is able (*potest*) to be damned; but these two *are* impossible: God wills this person to be saved and he is damned."<sup>56</sup> One could not ask for a more decisive rejection of the free will theodicy for hell. What ensures its cogency is the divine transcendence, the scope of divine power to include willing infallibly a creature's contingent and free choice.<sup>57</sup>

To deny this conclusion that God can create free choices violates not just the traditional doctrine of God, namely God's omnipotence and impassibility as well as the transcendent character of divine causality, but also the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. For consider: if God's knowledge is causal, then God creates all things precisely by his act of knowing all things in himself.<sup>58</sup> This "all things" refers not just to all natures or discrete existents but to the totality of the world order, which is what God chiefly wills in his act of creating.<sup>59</sup> As Bernard Lonergan defined it, developing Aquinas's account of the *forma universi*,<sup>60</sup> a world order is "a single intelligible pattern of completely determinate existents and events."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "[T]he necessity implied by divine omnipotence is not the sort that excludes freedom from the created order. Rather, it is the very basis of the existence of creaturely freedom. In short, the 'necessity' implied by divine omnipotence is not univocal with 'necessity' as juxtaposed with freedom or contingency." R. J. Matava, *Divine Causality and Human Free Choice: Domingo Báñez, Physical Premotion and the Controversy de Auxiliis Revisited* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 288.

<sup>56</sup> "Non enim sunt ista impossibilia: Deus vult istum salvari, et iste potest damnari; sed ista sunt impossibilia: Deus vult istum salvari, et iste damnatur." *De Veritate* 23.5. ad3, translation mine. Quoted in Knassas, *Aquinas and the Cry of Rachel*, 220.

<sup>57</sup> Compare Eleonore Stump's recent treatment of the issue, which construes divine transcendence in such a way that God cannot be the cause of a person's willing union with God. "When God creates human beings with free will, God judges it acceptable to him that possibly some human beings might not be united with God and that human beings have control over whether this possibility is actualized. If God had not willed to create human beings with free will, then all states of affairs would have been up to God alone. But then union with human beings would have been precluded for God, since union requires two wills to unite. So it is God's will that it lies ultimately within the control of human beings whether God's desire for union with each human being is fulfilled." *The Image of God*, 299. On this account, it cannot be said that God directly wills the salvation of any person, in fact: rather, what God primarily wills is that human persons should exercise a choice for or against union with God. This understanding of the divine will cannot be reconciled with Thomas' claim that it is impossible for God to will a person to be saved and that person still be damned (quoted above), or with Thomas' insistence that divine providence oversees every particular, including in matters of salvation (ST 1a.22.2 ad4).

<sup>58</sup> "By knowing Himself to be the cause of things God knows things other than Himself." SCG I.69.2. As Thomas Joseph White makes clear, "For classical theism, God knows all that is because he is the author of all that is, and indeed he knows all things by virtue of the knowledge he has of his own essence. This must be the case, as God creates all that is based on the knowledge he has of himself and from himself, without prior reference to any other preexisting entities." "Catholic Predestination," in *Thomism and Predestination*, 113-14.

<sup>59</sup> "[T]he good of the order of things caused by God is what is chiefly willed and caused by God." SCG III.64.9, English translation by Vernon J. Bourke.

<sup>60</sup> SCG II.39.6.

<sup>61</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works, volume 3, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 685. That God's creative act must be of the whole and not simply of discrete particulars, either of essences or events, is clear from Aquinas's argument for why providential oversight of the world can be attributed to God. The good of the whole that God wills in creation is the good of *order*, which includes, Aquinas shows, the order of things not just statically but dynamically, in their movement towards their end. It is precisely this that pre-exists in the divine mind as the prototype "by which" God creates. ST Ia.22.1 co.



Free choices are such determinate events, and so they are caused by God; once again, free choices are not nothing. "God is the cause of every action, insofar as it is an action"<sup>62</sup>; "All intellects and wills are ordered under God, who is the primary intellect and will, as instruments under a principal agent."<sup>63</sup> But if free choices do indeed fall outside of God's causal knowing, then God does not create them.<sup>64</sup> And if free choices exist, and God does not create them, then God does not truly create *ex nihilo* the sum total of all things in their intelligible relation, namely the world order. Instead, on this view, God creates *some* things—whatever is not a free human choice—and then also creates whatever flows from these, in response to these free choices themselves. Logically even if not temporally, these choices would therefore "pre-exist" God's creative activity. Thus in the free will theodicy for hell, God becomes the demiurge working with the pre-existent matter of our choices, whose recalcitrance he cannot finally master. Or rather, God here is merely one demiurge among many, that is, amidst all other persons in the world order, whose free choices render them in some way a *causa sui* and so outside the scope of God's causal knowing.<sup>65</sup> However fine his craftsmanship, a demiurge is not omnipotent. Once more under the influence of the free will theodicy, the divine priority gives way to divine reactivity, and divine transcendence is undone.

Wise to these philosophical and theological complications attending the idea that God cannot cause human free choices—complications intrinsic to the free will theodicy for hell—Aquinas avoids it. And so in the realm of eschatology, Aquinas instead appropriates Augustine's doctrine of predestination. This doctrine gives him an account of how God's omnipotence is never threatened by the obstinacy of those who will their eternal separation from God. "The Divine intention is not frustrated either in those who sin, or in those who are saved; for God knows beforehand the end of both; and He procures glory from both, saving these of His goodness, and punishing those of His justice."<sup>66</sup> The same divine intention that wills the entirety of the world order also wills the diverse fates of the elect and the reprobate, for reprobation and election are simply the teleology of the providential order of the world.<sup>67</sup> These diverse eschatological fates are brought about by the effect or withholding of God's grace, which grace is the necessary and sufficient condition for a person to turn to God, to persevere in the good, and to perform the supernatural works that merit the supernatural end of the beatific vision.<sup>68</sup>

One text from Aquinas' mature thought that seems to suggest otherwise, that God in fact imparts grace universally and that the failure of such grace to bring about its

<sup>62</sup> ST Ia-IIae.79.2. co. Quoted in W. Matthews Grant, "How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing the Sin Itself," *The Thomist* 73 (2009): 455-96, at 455.

<sup>63</sup> SCG III.147.6, translation mine.

<sup>64</sup> That free choices are included under divine causality has been argued by several authors in the last decades (e.g., Germain Grisez, Hugh McCann, Kathryn Tanner). For a robust argument for the position that God's causation of free choices is included within God's creative act, as well as bibliography on earlier articulations of the view, see Matava, *Divine Causality and Human Free Choice*, 242-319. My account largely agrees with Matava's, with the key difference that here I emphasize the entirety of the world order as the primary object of God's creative act, which includes free choices as intelligible realities (and so possessing *being*) within that one intelligible pattern that God wills.

<sup>65</sup> Long ("Divine Causality and the Mystery of Predestination") has winsomely called such an idea of human freedom that would constitute a "no-fly zone" for God (72) an "impossible antinomy of 'created aseity'" (52).

<sup>66</sup> ST Ia.63.7 ad2.

<sup>67</sup> For election, predestination, and reprobation as components of providence, see SCG III.163.2.

<sup>68</sup> ST Ia.23.5 co.

due effect is located in the impediments to grace that the sinner offers, can be found in SCG III.159. But let us continue with Aquinas's argument in the following chapters. There one reads that it is impossible for a person in the state of sin—that is, all born under original sin—*not* to provide an impediment to this original grace.<sup>69</sup> (This teaching, that we as Adam's progeny are morally impotent to avoid impeding grace, is often ignored by free will theodiscists for hell.<sup>70</sup>) While God owes no sinners the additional grace that would dismantle their embargo on God's universally imparted grace, he nonetheless chooses to give that saving help only to the elect. "Now, although the man who sins puts an impediment in the way of grace, and as far as the order of things requires he ought not to receive grace, yet, since God can act apart from the order implanted in things, as He does when He gives sight to the blind or life to the dead—at times, out of the abundance of His goodness, He offers His help in advance, even to those who put an impediment in the way of grace, turning them away from evil and converting them toward the good."<sup>71</sup> Witness Aquinas here grasp the Pelagian implication of his quasi free will theodicy and then overturn it on account of his commitment to divine transcendence, divine omnipotence, and the divine priority.<sup>72</sup>

This is why Aquinas makes it clear that God both elects *and* reprobates. Both are kinds of divine activity and willing—the former the will to "confer grace and glory" and the latter the will to "permit a person to fall into guilt and to impose the punishment of damnation for it."<sup>73</sup> For Thomas, election entails preferring one person to another, and so eschatological election logically implies eschatological reprobation: they are inseparable.<sup>74</sup> If election is *ante praevisa merita*, then reprobation is *ante praevisa*

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<sup>69</sup> SCG III.160: "Now, this statement of ours, that it is within the power of free choice not to offer an impediment to grace, is applicable to those persons in whom natural potency is integrally present. But if, through a preceding disorder, one swerves toward evil, it will not at all be within his power to offer no impediment to grace." It is precisely this state of natural integrity that is lost after Adam's sin. Cf. ST Ia-IIae.109.6 ad1: "Man's turning to God is by free-will; and thus man is bidden to turn himself to God. But free-will can only be turned to God, when God turns it."

<sup>70</sup> Compare Lawrence Feingold's alternative interpretation of this passage, which bypasses human moral impotence resulting from the fall: "The work of salvation must begin with the grace of God, an operative grace. However, man can block the effect intended by that grace through his own resistance, through which that first grace fails to progress as cooperative grace. Therefore, it is not absurd for God to reprobate man who does not have grace, precisely because he has culpably resisted cooperating with God's gratuitous gift, and for that very reason does not have grace so as to be saved." <https://www.thomasaquinas.edu/news/lecture-dr-lawrence-feingold-aquinas-predestination-grace>.

<sup>71</sup> SCG III.161.1; translation by Vernon J. Bourke (translation altered).

<sup>72</sup> It is under pressure to exculpate God from the evils of sin and hell that Aquinas introduces here this proto-distinction of what becomes in his later interpreters the categories of "sufficient" as opposed to "efficacious" grace. But speaking categorically, to claim that God gives sufficient grace to all, and yet also to affirm that for its intended recipient not to block God's gift from doing its work there is required a further *auxilium* to make the first grace efficacious, is just to say that God does not give sufficient grace to all. *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*. In any case, Aquinas certainly does not think that sufficient and efficacious grace are distinguished solely by extrinsic denomination, depending on whether a sinner chooses to accept that grace or not. That, again, is Pelagianism.

<sup>73</sup> ST Ia.23.3 co., translation altered.

<sup>74</sup> *Commentary on Romans*, chapter 9, 763.

*demerita*.<sup>75</sup> Seeing as all persons who receive the grace that brings them to glory are those under sin (excluding Christ), it follows inexorably that since not all are saved, then God's saving, efficacious grace is selectively given.<sup>76</sup> Here again Aquinas reflects Augustine in giving God the priority in the eschatological conclusion of the world order that God wills from all eternity. "So, since we have shown that some men are directed by divine working to their ultimate end as aided by grace, while others who are deprived of the same help of grace fall short of their ultimate end, and since all things that are *done by God* are foreseen and ordered from eternity by His wisdom, as we showed above, the aforementioned differentiation of men must be ordered by God from eternity."<sup>77</sup>

Consider once again the alternative. If predestination refers not to God's activity, but rather to how things "shake out" at the end of time based on who responded freely to God's offer of grace (which in this view is *not* converting grace), then the doctrine of predestination is gutted once more. For "predestination is not anything in the predestined, but in the person who predestines,"<sup>78</sup> or, following Augustine once more,

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<sup>75</sup> Long, "Divine Causality and the Mystery of Predestination," 52. Is there not an asymmetry between election and reprobation, however, insofar as God positively wills glory for the elect, and so causes the graces for the good works that merit it, whereas he only wills the *malum poenae* of hell for sinners without willing the moral evil that merits it? (For Thomas' argument that God cannot will moral evil, even indirectly, see ST Ia.49.2 co.) To allow such a distinction, however, would make the final revelation of God's goodness—in all the distinct grades of being manifested within the world order that God wills (the *chiaroscuro* theodicy we earlier saw in Augustine)—dependent on the priority of creatures. But God positively wills to reveal both his justice *and* his mercy as distinct orders of goodness (Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, chapter 9, 788; SCG II.44.26), and since justice cannot be revealed without punishment (SCG I.96.8), and punishment cannot exist without sin, then God must—on pain of contradiction with Thomas' own explanation for the diversity of eschatological outcomes in light of divine omnipotence—will sin indirectly. To explore this question would take much more space than this article affords, but one first step in thinking through this quandary of God's willing moral evil indirectly to manifest justice is to recognize that God does not will A for the sake of B, but rather wills that B should result from A; for God does not possess multiple acts of will, but instead wills one world order, in all its intelligible relations, as ordered to himself (cf. ST Ia.19.5 co). Bernard Lonergan, *The Redemption*, Collected Works, vol. 9, edited by Robert M. Doran, H. Daniel Monsour, and Jeremy D. Wilkins (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 381. See n77 below.

<sup>76</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on Romans*, chapter 9, 773.

<sup>77</sup> SCG III.163.1, emphasis mine. Once again the question of *Deus causa peccati* surfaces—is God not the cause of sin on Thomas' scheme? A full answer would expand this article beyond its intended target. Yet it is worth examining briefly Thomas' answer to this question (ST Ia-IIae.79.1 co): "For it happens that God does not give some the assistance, whereby they may avoid sin, which assistance were He to give, they would not sin. But He does all this according to the order of His wisdom and justice, since He Himself is Wisdom and Justice: so that if someone sin it is not imputable to Him as though He were the cause of that sin; even as a pilot is not said to cause the wrecking of the ship, through not steering the ship, unless he cease to steer while able and *bound* (*debens*) to steer. It is therefore evident that God is nowise a cause of sin." The crux of the matter for Aquinas is that God's non-doing—in this eschatological case, not dispensing salvific grace to the reprobate—could be counted as causative of sin only if God were obligated to give such grace. But seeing as God has no obligations towards creatures, God's withholding of grace cannot be reckoned as causal. (For a thorough defense of Thomas' position that God's withholding of good will—and, *a fortiori*, grace as well—does not implicate God in sin, see W. Matthews Grant, "How God Causes the Act of Sin without Causing the Sin Itself," *The Thomist* 73 (2009): 455-96.

In my view, Thomas' introduction of the category of moral obligation obfuscates rather than illuminates the matter. Or rather, the implications of the category are not taken to their logical conclusion: precisely because God owes nothing to creatures, how God freely disposes the eschatological fates of creatures becomes perfectly expressive and disclosive of God's very moral nature (cf. Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 69-70). The question is not whether creatures merit, or could merit, creation or salvation—they do not and cannot—but whether God can coherently be said to *be* the highest divine name, love itself (1 John 4:8), and not just selectively loving, if God efficaciously wills the salvation of some but not all.

<sup>78</sup> ST Ia.23.2. co.

“[God’s] predestination is [God’s] knowledge of God’s benefits.”<sup>79</sup> God becomes epistemically passive, and the order of providence—which just is identical (from the divine vantage) with the world order that is the primary object of God’s creative will<sup>80</sup>—devolves from God’s wise governance over all things into God’s make-shift contingency plan. What the proponent of the free will theodicy cannot affirm is the certainty of divine providence, since God is ultimately reactive and passive with respect to the free choices of creatures. But for Thomas, *all* that occurs in the world order, both contingently and necessarily, results from divine providence, and so is not only preordained but “quasi fore-spoken.”<sup>81</sup> Once one has grasped that God’s creative act is the creation of an entire world order in all its constitutive parts and moments, then it becomes apparent that predestination and reprobation, as God’s eternal and efficacious election of certain persons to beatitude, are an integral component not only of the doctrine of providence but of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*: the irresistibility of God’s will in bringing creation to his desired end is identical with God’s creative will facing no impediment whatsoever from pre-existing “matter” of any sort. The doctrine of predestination is thus the safeguard and hidden meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*; to deny the former is to undercut the latter.

Apart from these philosophical consequences of the free will theodicy, there is the theological fallout: Pelagianism. Thomas’s writings on grace, both in the *Summa Theologiae* and in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, take great pains to refute the Pelagian heresy in all its varieties. Reduced to its core, this heresy proclaims that God’s free gift of grace is not in fact free, not a result of the divine priority; it is given by God reactively, on account of human activity that earns some independent merit before God. That Pelagianism concerns most basically the question of divine priority with regard to creatures is especially apparent in the question on predestination in the *Summa Theologiae*, where Aquinas deconstructs the free will theodicy for hell in multiple guises (ST Ia.23.5 co) and thereby ties together the various domains of divine priority we have been considering.

It is striking that Aquinas brings forward Origen of Alexandria as the first proponent of this mistaken view of free will, despite the fact that Aquinas knew full well that Origen had affirmed universal salvation. The reason Origen appears here as Pelagius’s proxy is that Origen believed that God imparted destinies to human persons based solely on their merits—in this case, the merits of their behavior in their pre-existent state before embodiment in this world. For Aquinas, this view is identical with that of the historical Pelagians who taught that God’s grace rewards the merit of faith, which is the first movement towards God that we make on our own. No different is the view of the Pelagians who sought to ground God’s impartation of grace to some and not others in God’s foreknowledge of how such grace would be used by those who received it. Aquinas’s refutation of this last variation of Pelagianism bears quoting: “these seem to have made a disjunction between what flows from grace and what flows from free will, *as if the same thing cannot come from both.*”<sup>82</sup> What the Pelagians cannot understand is that merit follows God’s grace; it does not precede it. But even more fundamental is that they fail to grasp what follows from

<sup>79</sup> Augustine, *de dono*, 34, quoted in abbreviated form in ST Ia.23.2. co.

<sup>80</sup> ST Ia.22.1 co.

<sup>81</sup> ST Ia.116.1 co.

<sup>82</sup> ST Ia.23.5 co, translation altered, emphasis mine.

divine transcendence: that God's wholly other causality can cause our free actions. "Now there is no disjunction between what flows from free will, and what is of predestination; as there is no disjunction between what flows from a secondary cause and from a first cause. For the providence of God produces effects through the operation of secondary causes, as was above shown. Wherefore, that which flows from free-will is also of predestination (*Unde et id quod est per liberum arbitrium, est ex praedestinatione*)."<sup>83</sup>

#### *Divine Transcendence or Free Will Theodicy: A Crossroads*

Proponents of the free will theodicy attempt to alleviate the burden that the traditional doctrine of hell puts on our concept of God as good. They do this by placing outside the scope of God's power the ability to prevent certain kinds of evil, namely the evil of persons freely willing their own damnation. More specifically, they affirm that for God to create a person's free choice is something on the order of God creating a square circle—that is, a logical impossibility and so not falling under divine omnipotence. Proponents of this free will theodicy may avail themselves of the possibilities that this delimitation of divine omnipotence offers them, but then they must also concede that the traditional understanding of divine omnipotence is false. They ought also to disown the traditional understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*, that there is no reality that is not created by God, and that God is not constrained to work with anything pre-existing alongside him in achieving his creative goals. Divine impassibility ought also to be disowned, for even if any free will theodicy grants the classical theist claim that God's knowing is causal, he must also affirm that future contingents cannot, on pain of logical contradiction, actually be caused by God. This means then that God cannot know with certainty free choices until they are made by creatures. God, like the rest of us, must learn from within the matrix of the temporal world order, and so God is neither impassible nor eternally immutable. But to give up these basic doctrines is simply to abandon classical theology and metaphysics and to begin to theologize in the domain of open theism,<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, translation altered.

<sup>84</sup> "If God eternally foreknew that certain individuals would end up damning themselves, and if, as the Bible says, God takes no delight in the destruction of the wicked but wants everyone to be saved (Ezekiel 18:23; 1 Timothy 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9), why would he go ahead and create such individuals? Some might respond by arguing that it is just as difficult to explain why God would allow people to go to hell *after* he created them, as the open view [of the future] holds, as it is to explain why he would create people he foreknew would go to hell, as the classical view holds. However, there is a world of difference between creating a person with the *possibility* of going to hell and creating a person with the *certainty* of going to hell. If God creates people with the possibility of going to hell, he is not responsible if they choose to actualize this possibility. He allows them to go to hell because not allowing them to do so would render their freedom to reject God's gracious offer of eternal life disingenuous. This explanation is not open to someone who holds that the destiny of people is settled before they are ever created." Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 100.



of weak theology,<sup>85</sup> of process thought.<sup>86</sup> As noted above, to theologize outside of classical theology and metaphysics may bring its own affordances, especially in the task of offering theodicies. But since this is what the free will theodicy for hell commits its proponent to do, it should be done explicitly and with self-awareness.

If my analysis above is cogent, then we now have an answer to the question with which we began this essay: why did Augustine and Thomas Aquinas deny the free will theodicy of God's permission of eternal torments for recalcitrant sinners? They rejected this theodicy because it wreaks havoc on the doctrine of God's perfection, and especially the doctrine of divine omnipotence—a teaching enshrined in the very first line of the creed. By making the eschatological outcome ultimately explicable by the choices of sinners who reject God, and by putting those free choices outside the domain of God's causality, the free will theodicy subverts God's power as the providence of this world order, and it reduces God to a demiurge destined to be defeated by the pre-existent matter he tried so charitably and valiantly to mold. But it also turns upside down the doctrine of grace, by which God moves the will to move itself freely towards God in love. The free will theodicy transforms grace from God's healing and elevating salvation into nothing more than an external call, one whose efficacy depends not on the omnipotent God but on the sinners who may hold God's universal salvific will hostage. Predestination ceases to speak to God's priority but instead refers only to ours. It becomes apparent that we can take the free will theodicy as our ultimate explanation for the fact of any particular sinner ending up in hell; or we can claim Augustinian-Thomist philosophical and theological principles as our own and affirm the anti-Pelagian theological doctrines; but we cannot do both.

The fundamental issue at stake in this decision is the nature of divine transcendence. What I have argued is that the trade-off implicit in this free will theodicy—namely, human freedom purchased at the cost of divine omnipotence, providence, predestination, grace, divine impassibility, and *creatio ex nihilo* with it—is no bargain. It is, in fact, a betrayal of the conviction that God and creatures do not exist in the same way, are not two realities occupying the same ontological space.<sup>87</sup> For this reason, appeals to God's respect for human freedom as an explanatory account for why one sinner is damned

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<sup>85</sup> "Suppose that the event that is sheltered by the name of God is not identified with timeless infinite power invested in an *omnipotens deus*, but with the powerless who suffer the ravages of time? [...] Suppose that God's power over human beings is limited by love and that God takes up a place beside them in their powerlessness?" John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 34.

<sup>86</sup> "Our rejection of [the classical doctrine of] omnipotence will be attacked by the charge, 'So you dare to limit the power of God?' Not so, I impose no such limit if this means, as it seems to imply, that God's power fails to measure up to some genuine ideal. All I have said is that omnipotence as usually conceived is a false or indeed absurd ideal, which in truth limits God, denies to him any world worth talking about: a world of living, that is to say, significantly decision-making agents." Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1984), 17.

<sup>87</sup> "Any pitting of the divine liberty against human liberty, any competitive causality between God and man, is to miss the fact that what it means to be a human being is to be absolutely reliant and dependent on God for everything that one has. Far from God mitigating our being by giving it to us, he makes us to be." Taylor Patrick O'Neill, *Grace, Predestination, and the Permission of Sin* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 290. And Matava: "For the sort of cause that must be invoked to definitively account for the existence of any contingent reality [including free choices] [...] must, on the very grounds one has for positing that cause, be itself uncaused and so utterly different from any kind of cause or entity known in experience. One cannot therefore infer that it is impossible for a human act of free choice to be free simply because it is caused by God. Divine causation is not relevantly like creaturely causation and the limits of our knowledge of what divine causation is like block the judgment that it is incompatible with human freedom [...]" *Divine Causality and Human Free Choice*, 293.

while another is redeemed trade in a mythology concerning God and the nature of divine agency and grace.<sup>88</sup>

That God can cause free human choices remains a sign of contradiction for free will theodiscists. Precisely for this reason does Lonergan identify one's answer to the question of God's infallible providence as the telltale sign of whether one has truly grasped the divine difference. "The Thomist higher synthesis was to place God above and beyond the created orders of necessity and contingency: because God is universal cause, his providence must be certain; but because he is a transcendent cause, there can be no incompatibility between terrestrial contingency and the causal certitude of providence."<sup>89</sup> It is precisely this understanding of divine transcendence that the free will theodiscist must disavow.

It is worth repeating here at the close that nothing in this account denies the fact that freely chosen sin lands sinners in hell. Free rejection of God is certainly a necessary condition for damnation. What Augustine and Thomas do deny is that free will can function as the sufficient condition or ultimate explanation for why one sinner goes to hell and another does not. It is hoped that this investigation has made clear the deficiency of any argument to the effect that if God were infallibly to will the salvation of all, then human free will would be abolished or would prove simply inconsequential in the drama of salvation.

If the theologian finds the foregoing convincing, and now judges that the free will theodiscy is off the table, he will have to find another theodiscy for hell, one that does not drive a wedge between divine activity and human agency. A Pelagian could

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<sup>88</sup> Cf. the following comments of Thomas Joseph White: "The middle way [between a view that God does not offer universally sufficient grace and a Molinism that makes the soul its own savior] is to affirm that God offers grace truly sufficient for salvation to all such that all have the real possibility of attaining to salvation, and that simultaneously God mysteriously shows a just respect for some who refuse the gift of grace while showing a predilection of mercy for others who [*sic*] he converts to himself" ("Catholic Predestination," 111). Despite White's efforts to avoid the conclusion, this is essentially Pelagianism as Augustine and Thomas understood it, which violates White's own commitments to the scope of divine agency as articulated in the same chapter (101-03).

<sup>89</sup> Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom*, 81-82.

accept such a disjunction, but Augustine and Aquinas could not.<sup>90</sup> For—and this is the last and greatest of the troubling conclusions to follow from the view—if the free will theodicy for hell is correct, we must conclude that human will, meaning human persons themselves, are the ultimate explanation not only for damnation but for *salvation* as well. Then it would only be with great difficulty that we could praise God by confessing, in the words of St. Paul: what do you have that you have not received? (1 Corinthians 4:7).<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> In the light of this argument it appears that contemporary Catholic magisterial teaching on hell finds itself in an odd position. We can see this from a brief survey of the relevant texts in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It affirms the traditional understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* (CCC §296). It follows Augustine in understanding grace as converting (CCC §1432; Cf. also CCC §1989; §2001. St. Augustine's writings on grace are the main inspiration for this section on grace, as is apparent from the footnotes). God's omnipotence is proclaimed as fundamental to the creed, showing forth his governance of the order of the world as he pleases (CCC §268-269), and it is God's activity of converting us that most manifests the divine omnipotence (CCC §277). Yet contemporary Catholic magisterial teaching also reads straightforwardly 1 Timothy 2:4, claiming that God definitively wills all people to be saved (CCC §851)—*pace* Augustine's and Thomas' exegetical obfuscations the matter. Finally, it makes the possibility of everlasting damnation for sinners contingent on their free decision to reject God decisively (CCC §1033; §1037)—introducing the free will theodicy. The doctrine of predestination in its traditional Augustinian-Thomist context appears in the *Catechism* mostly to clarify that God predestines no one to hell (CCC §1037; although cf. CCC §600, where it is stated that God includes the free choices of persons in the plan of his predestination. Whether this should be read in a Molinist or Augustinian-Thomist fashion is unclear). In fact, the word "reprobation" only appears in relation to Christ's suffering, by clarifying what Christ did *not* undergo when he "became sin" for us (CCC §603).

It should now be apparent why this attempt to keep the traditional anti-Pelagian thrust of the teaching on grace while also making room for the free will theodicy is unstable. Its instability is implicitly acknowledged in the loss of the traditional language of predestination, for that language cannot be made sense of when the free will theodicy is operative. If the Catholic magisterial tradition has decisively moved away from the restricted reading of God's salvific will, then the constellation of its metaphysical and theological doctrines detailed above, especially in their anti-Pelagian orientation, should push it in the direction of universalism (which in fact has occurred in the Catholic Church's development on the question of *nulla salus extra ecclesiam* [CCC §846-848]), or towards a theodicy more in line with Augustine and Aquinas' own: the *chiaroscuro* theodicy. For most theologians today it is not a surprising fact that at any moment in the historical development of a religious community its doctrines should sit in some tension with one another. Nonetheless, it is desirous that such tensions be resolved. To achieve coherence among all these doctrines surveyed, either the free will theodicy, or the traditional doctrines of grace and divine omnipotence, or the unrestricted reading of God's universal salvific will, must go.

<sup>91</sup> Augustine, *de dono*, 43.

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