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## Divine Sovereignty and Creation

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Title

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### Introduction

Please join me in imagining a large chest of drawers, each of which contains some variant on a question engendered by the topic of this article: “divine sovereignty” and “creation.” Then go on to picture a large number of similar chests. Each of the drawers in these other chests contains a possible answer to one of the questions out of the original chest.

If the question chest were to have a thousand drawers, there would have to be another thousand chests with potential answers to those questions.

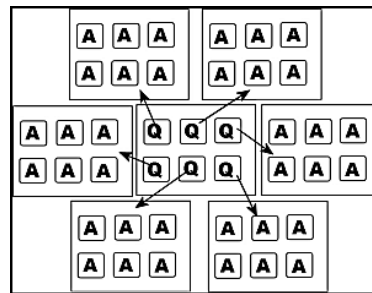


Fig1 Question and Answer Drawers

Examples of questions in the first set of drawers might be: What actually is divine sovereignty? Does divine sovereignty mean that

<sup>1</sup> His books

<sup>2</sup> School

God alone is a causal agent in the world? Or is it true, as many people say, that God is so sovereign that he can give other beings power and authority alongside of him? For that matter, does God's sovereignty entail that he act in the world at all, or are his acts in the world independent of his sovereignty? Is God sovereign over the world because he created it, or did he create the world as an expression of his sovereignty? We are just scratching the surface. I must add immediately that this essay will not so much attempt to answer these questions as to address one matter that is involved in finding answers. So, one might go to the question chest, open a drawer, read the question, proceed to the chest with potential answers to the question, open all of the drawers. and contemplate the plenitude of alleged answers. Which is the correct one? Is there only one correct one? Could several answers be correct by themselves or only in conjunction with each other? Could they all be false or be only partially true, at best?

Sadly, there are far too many people in the world, including philosophers and theologians, who—confronted with such a situation—immediately toss in the towel. As soon as they see that a question has been given more than one answer, they resort to skepticism or, what is worse, claim that somehow all of them are true. Such a reaction is both childish and silly: childish because it expects that one should get answers without having to work for them, silly because it ignores that there are criteria by which one can assess the correctness of answers, so that not all answers are equally plausible. Just as a meal, which may be a pleasure to eat, may have required a lot of effort to prepare, so a cogent and satisfying answer may have demanded a lot of effort by a scholar to discover it. Furthermore, that kind of effort requires taking into account all necessary scholarly tools and all relevant aspects of the question.

Let me become a little more specific now. Over the last ten years or so, there has been a lot of debate concerning theology proper, that is to say, the nature and work of God himself. Undoubtedly, the catalyst was the so-called “openness” theism, the notion that God has intentionally closed off his knowledge of all future events so that free creatures can truly exercise their freedom. However, “openness” theology would not have received the welcome that it did in many quarters if there had not been a concern with theology proper to begin

with. Furthermore, many theologians who opposed “openness” theology, nevertheless, declared that, even apart from the extremes of “openness,” it was necessary for theology to take another fresh look at how we understand God. Thus, for example, Stanley Grenz proposed that we can retain a doctrine of divine providence, but that we must reexamine and restate it in the light of contemporary events.

The events of the twentieth century and the theological rearrangement the doctrine of providence that these events have produced call into question the viability of the Christian confession of God as the providential governor of the world. How can we as theologians chastened by the realities of the twentieth century make sense of this classic Christian faith stance? As significant as they may be, the events of the last hundred years do not call into question the providence of God. Rather, they demand that we think through clearly what this Christian confession actually means.<sup>3</sup>

My question, then, is why are some contemporary theologians so unclear about a concept that is most fundamental to their discipline?

There are always many reasons why theologians disagree with each other, possibly including: different cultural backgrounds, differences in training, insufficient training, deliberate refusal to accept what is true, inadequate knowledge of the bible, and so forth. It would take up far too much time and space to list all of them because there really are many such explanations. However, I would like to zero in on one of them and then, demonstrate how this particular explanation can become helpful in understanding the topic of God's sovereignty and creation.

In my estimation, a major problem in contemporary theology is that too many theologians are working on a topic that necessarily requires them to engage in metaphysics without wishing to do metaphysics. If that is the case, and I believe that it is, then it is no wonder that so many people are confused on some basic doctrines.

And let me hasten to add that I do not believe that divine revelation (i.e. the Bible) is intrinsically metaphysical writing. The nature of biblical writing styles can be narrative, doxological, apocalyptic, and of many other genres, while metaphysical writings surely occupy only a very little amount of space in the canon as a whole. However, when the theologian creates a systematic theology

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 58.

out of the conclusions of Biblical theology, it becomes inevitable for him to use metaphysics in erecting a plausible scheme. Either that, or—as I have intimated above—wind up unable to build a coherent system with confidence.

"Metaphysics" is a term describing an area of thought whose reputation is far more feared than it should be. Unfortunately when one says "metaphysics," too many people immediately think that they have to deal with something that is "deep" or unfathomably abstract or, to be blunt about it, essentially useless. Now, since there are many different ways of doing metaphysics, and because this diversity is to a large extent based on the lack of a common definition for the discipline, this aversion is to somewhat understandable. But it doesn't have to be that way. We can follow Aristotle and define "metaphysics" simply as the study of what is real. More precisely, his book that came to bear the title *Metaphysics* is about "being *qua* being," but that is really just another way of saying the same thing. What does it mean for something to "be"? Well, if you looked at Aristotle's treatment of the subject you would see that it is synonymous with the analysis of what is real.<sup>4</sup> Such a study would combine two aspects: 1. an overall exploration of what it means for anything in general to be real, and 2. an analysis of how different real entities interact with each other.

Speaking of Aristotle, his metaphysics culminated in the notion that, in order for anything to be real, there had to be an Unmoved Mover that has god-like qualities. We shall look at some of the aspects of this idea presently. For now, I am simply making the point that from the beginnings of metaphysics, God was included in the subject.<sup>5</sup> When we speak of God's existence, his attributes, or his actions in the world, it is inevitable that we speak metaphysically. I may have made it look above as though one can either choose to engage in metaphysical thought or decide to avoid metaphysical thinking. In fact, the choice is between doing metaphysics consciously, and thereby creating a coherent system, and refusing to utilize metaphysics consciously, and consequently doing so badly and

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<sup>4</sup> Hippocrates G. Apostle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics: Translated with Commentaries* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press).

<sup>5</sup> See Werner Jaeger, *The Theology of Early Greek Philosophy: The Gifford Lectures of 1936* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

creating for yourself difficulties in building a viable theological system.

Let me attempt to clarify my point by displaying an example of what happens when one attempts to extract metaphysics from theology. Humanly speaking, it is doubtful that the Protestant Reformation could have happened much earlier than it did, for example in the thirteenth century. It is not that there was no corruption in the church or that biblical doctrines were not being suffocated under an ecclesiastical and ecclesiological mountain. There was plenty in the church that needed to be reformed, but I am saying so in hindsight from a post-Reformation vantage point. The people at the time (with a few exceptions, such as Wycliffe) for the most part would not have said so. Whether the doctrines prescribed by the church were false or not, the faithful were content to abide by them and, with help from the grace of God, earn their salvation and hope for a short time in purgatory. After all, God was known to be just and loving and, though it might take some time and effort, one could trust God to keep his word.

One major item that brought about the difference is that by the time of Luther the philosophy of nominalism had created an environment in which the assurance that God was known to be just and loving had been taken away from the people. They were now at a point where they could no longer trust God to keep his word. Nominalism, also known as “terminism,” is the philosophical position that certain forms of language, such as the names of qualities (e.g., “redness”), universal terms (e.g., “humankind”), or abstract concepts (e.g., “reconciliation”) do not refer to anything real. “Redness,” “humankind,” or “reconciliation” are just words, which do not represent anything that actually has any reality. They are nothing but breaths of air, “mouth noises,” if you will, and it would be wrong to assume that there really *are* such things as redness or humankind or reconciliation. You can see a red thing; you can meet a human being; you can reconcile your differences. However, you cannot see redness; you cannot meet humanity; you cannot reconcile yourself with reconciliation. These are just “names” (hence “nominalism”) or “terms” (hence “terminism”). Another way of looking at this school of thought is that it attempted to eliminate traditional metaphysics.

Nominalism became an important influence on the church under the heading of the *via moderna*, but what an empty theology this “modern way” turned out to be! The *via moderna*, given its nominalistic roots, eschewed any statements about intangible things as arbitrary or unreal—and one could not check which of the two it was, not that it mattered much. If universal terms are just words that do not refer to a reality, then what do you make of expressions such as “love,” “goodness,” “sinfulness,” “redemption,” “grace,” and so forth? The nominalism of the “new way” made a systematic theology impossible. There was a positive side to this movement insofar as it promoted more directly the study of the Bible, but it undercut the concepts by which we can consider the Bible to be a coherent book and that hold a systematic theology together. Very specifically, how can you say that God is just if “justice” is merely an empty sound? Whatever we may call God’s justice then can be no more than what he decides to be just, and there is no way for us to know what exactly that might be. How can one understand that God is love, if there is no reality behind the term? How can one have any assurance of God’s trustworthiness or our salvation when the terminology we use to understand our beliefs is arbitrary?

<b>Prior to <i>Via Moderna</i></b>	<b>During <i>Via Moderna</i></b>
Platonic, Aristotelian Metaphysics	Nominalism
Theological terms refer to reality	Theological terms are just words
Confidence in theological assertions	Theological assertions are arbitrary
Assurance of salvation, even though	Assurance of salvation impossible
Attempts at Reformation local	Receptivity toward a major

Thus, in contrast to earlier times when, rightly or wrongly, one could have faith in what one thought to be true, by the late fifteenth century for anyone caught up in the theological fashion of his day, faith in truth was no longer an option. If the words you use to express your faith cannot correspond to a reality, you cannot even test their truth, and if you cannot be certain of truth, you cannot have faith in any truth. Thus, the church of Luther’s day was characterized by an all-pervasive uncertainty concerning salvation, and Luther himself

was an example of the excesses to which people went in order somehow to come to some sense of the reliability of God.<sup>6</sup>

So, here is my point: when people attempt to draw conclusions concerning the nature of God, unless one is willing to acknowledge the reality of metaphysical expressions concerning God, skepticism must be the result. Even the expression, “the nature of God,” is already metaphysical. To disregard this requirement is to consign oneself to a weak, anthropomorphic theology in which God can, indeed, be no more than a projection of one’s own experience. Herewith, then, I shall make some self-consciously metaphysical statements concerning God’s sovereignty and his creation.

#### **A. The Priority of God over His Creation**

God has priority over his creatures both logically and temporally. Of course, the temporal relationship between God and the world is not as straightforward as one of God being there first, followed at some time by the appearance of the universe. Since God is atemporal we cannot say from his standpoint that he existed first, but he certainly did so from the world's standpoint. So, from the perspective of creation, first there was only God, and then there was a world. Let us think some more about the initial state of God when he alone existed.

What does it mean for something to exist? Well, one could say that something is just there, and it is hard to figure out where one could possibly go from there. So, let us just analyze the nomenclature and unpack the terms in order to learn from them. As we saw earlier, for something to exist means that it is real. For something to be real it is actual. Thus, if we say that God exists (has being), we are saying that he is actual.

Now, if God is actual, and if his existence precedes that of anything else, he must always have been actual, again both logically and temporally, and we can think of him as pure actuality. This means that God is actual simply because that's what he is, not a very satisfying statement perhaps, but the only one (or its synonyms) with any possibility of expressing what needs to be said about him and his existence. Traditional theology has called this idea his "aseity." The literal translation of this word is the somewhat awkward “by-himself-

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<sup>6</sup> As described vividly by Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor Books, 1963).

ness." In other words, God existed apart from any other being. Consequently, he must be uncaused since there could not have been any other entity that could have caused him to exist. We need to make sure that we do not confuse this idea with the contradictory notion of his being "self-caused" because that expression is a logical absurdity. Nothing can be self-caused because in order to be self-caused, it would have to exist (again, logically, if not also temporally) before it existed. Thus, we can say the following things about God's existence:

1. He has not come into existence;
2. He was not caused to come into existence by anything, not even himself.
3. Consequently, since he is pure actuality, there cannot ever have been a potential in God that was actualized by something outside of him.

### **B. The Paradoxical Existence of Creation**

The medieval scholar and preacher Meister Eckhart was condemned by the papal inquisition for a number of statements extracted from his writings. Among these prohibited propositions was his assertion that "all creatures are nothing in themselves."<sup>7</sup> Eckhart's accusers were attempting to derive from it the conclusion that Eckhart was a pantheist, a misunderstanding that has followed him all of these centuries. But Eckhart himself defended this proposition and said,

To deny this is to be ignorant and blaspheme God, as if God were not the creator and the creature was not created, 'For creation is from nothing: not so making. John 1:3 says: *All things were made by him and without him was not anything made.*<sup>8</sup>

In fact, at the end of his written defense, Eckhart summed up all the ways in which he thought his persecutors were ignorant, and he repeated the above and added the absurd conclusion that would follow if creatures had their being intrinsically: "For if it were so, God would

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Blakney, *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), p. 286.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.



not be the first cause of all things, and creatures could not have been created by him—not having being from him.”<sup>9</sup>

That last little phrase, “not having being from him,” is both the key to understanding the relationship between God and his creation and an enigma for anyone who wishes to do more than just to repeat the accepted orthodox phrases.

Let's go back to the for us unimaginable singularity, the time (measured by the universe, not God), when only God existed. God alone was actual; only he had being. He was not dependent on anything else because, for one thing, there was nothing else he could depend on. Everything that is true of his nature was already actual, and there was nothing else that was actual. This was, indeed, a singularity in every sense of the term.

Then we come to the second condition, the creation of the universe. Now there are many beings beside God. Where did they come from? Our theological jargon can be true, but misleading at this point. The standard phrase, of course, is *creatio ex nihilo*, usually translated as “creation out of nothing,” which is risky enough, though the Latin would even allow “creation by nothing.” But even in the former, more correct, and milder translation we need to watch our step very closely. Nothing could not have created something, and neither could God have literally created something by using “nothing” as his building material.

If we agree that the universe need not have existed, but does so now, thanks to God's creative power (and I trust that we do), then metaphysically speaking we are describing the world's existence as “contingent.” To be contingent can be defined simply as falling short of the same property that we described as “aseity” for God in one area, no matter how small. Any entity that is in any way dependent for whether it exists or how it exists on anything else is contingent. Let us take this analysis just one short step further and say that a contingent entity is one that has actuality only insofar as its potential for actuality was actualized by something else that was already actual. The broadest application of this terminology is to recognize that creation is actual only insofar as its potential for being has been actualized by God.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

### **C. Two Views**

Now, I realize that any number of Christians would be greatly bothered by what I can't deny to be Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics. But here's my contention. Either you are going to say the same thing, perhaps with different words but with the same underlying concepts, or you are not only going to have the difficulties to which we pointed at the outset of this paper, but chances are that you are going to hold to heretical view—and may not even recognize it. Here are some of the options with regard to God and the world:

#### **1. Dualism**

The most common meaning for the term "dualism" is, of course. The idea that there are two eternally existing different entities, equal in power and forever contending against each other for supremacy, either as actual powers in the universe or simply as the dominant metaphysical reality. In other words, this would be dualism without origin. However, you can also have a dualism in which one of the entities preceded the other. This idea is illustrated in Hinduism in the school of Dvaita Vedanta, ascribed to the sage Madva, who held to a strict separation between God (*Brahman*) and the physical world (*Maya-prakriti*), but who held that the physical world was originally at one time derived from God, though, once created, now existed utterly independently of its maker. Now, I'm afraid that this kind of dualism can be an easy trap for someone to fall into, namely, to hold that once God had created the world, the world's existence has continued without any dependence on him and could continue to do so without God. Therefore, the existence of creation would be virtually on the same level as the existence of God. But this kind of dualism is not acceptable, because the Bible teaches clearly that creation is continually being upheld by the word of God, and so, if God were ever to withdraw his support, creation would immediately return to its initial state as nothing (Hebrews 1:3).

#### **2. Pantheism**

The opposite extreme has a lot of metaphysical sense going for it insofar as it recognizes that the being of the world can never be its own being, but must always depend on the being of God. If at first there was only the being of God, and then later there was also the being of the world, since being cannot come from non-being, the

being of the world must ultimately be the being of God. We are not looking at creation so much, then, as emanation. We see this view illustrated in the Hebrew Kabbalah tradition, where the only true being is God's alone with the sefirot, his emanations, constituting the universe. The problem with this view is obvious: it abolishes the vital distinction between God and his creation. However, it also recognizes the need to avoid the metaphysical problem of dualism. If God alone is being, then he can be the only source of being, and thus, anything that has being must, therefore, have the being of God. Now, we do not want to accept this kind of pantheism, and neither do we need to, but I am trying to show that there is a need for subtlety and refinement in analyzing the relationship between God and the world, and we cannot attain this level of understanding simply by repeating the phrase *creatio ex nihilo* over and over again as though it solved all problems.

This is why I am insisting that we need to make use of intelligible metaphysical categories in which the two notions of uncaused being and contingent being must figure prominently. Even though it is the case that creation must have received its being from God, it is also unavoidable that there is a qualitative difference in the being of creation, contrasted with the being of God.

#### **D. The Analogical Relationship between God and Creation**

Thus, here is our assignment: we must find a way of understanding the relationship between God and the world that steers clear of either dualism or pantheism and that preserves the priority of God over his creation. Our two most fundamental pieces of data are that

1. The being of the world can only be derived from the being of God; and
2. The being of the world is clearly inferior to that of God, by which I mean that it is contingent, dependent, finite, limited in space and time, and subject to change.

And that is not even taking into account the fact that the world is liable to succumb to evil, something that is certainly not true of God.

Once again, this discussion starts with nomenclature, but really intends to clarify concepts. One does not have to use the terminology associated with the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, but in order to resolve the problem, one has to say something that pretty much means the same thing. Allow me to use St. Thomas Aquinas, not to provide a

mandatory expression, but to stand as a model for pulling together the realities that have to be a part of our total picture.

For Aquinas, God's being and our being are analogous and not identical, but there could be no analogy of being if God were not being (*esse*) preeminently, and creatures did not derive their being from his creative act. Clearly, St. Thomas Aquinas taught creation *ex nihilo*, but he also maintained that creatures exist and are good insofar as they participate in God's being (which is convertible with his goodness). To quote,

Hence from the first being, essentially such, and good, everything can be called good and a being, inasmuch as it participates in it by way of a certain assimilation which is far removed and defective (ST. 1, 6, 4).

and

All beings other than God are not their own being, but are beings by participation. (ST 1, 44, 1).

Consequently, even though we can maintain the necessary distance between God and his creation, we are also able to maintain the connection between the two. And here is the crucial bottom line to all of this: unless we maintain a connection, there is no sovereignty. You cannot be sovereign over something with which you have no contact.

Where does God's sovereignty touch his creatures the most palpably? Two things come to mind: his plan of salvation, and his providence. And it is particularly in his providence that we realize that his sovereignty would be meaningless unless he maintained a direct ontological relationship to his creatures. Let us remind ourselves of the words of the Heidelberg catechism:

Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty— all things, in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand. (Q. 27)

### **Conclusion: Dispelling the Confusion**

We have now drawn up a picture in which God is pure actuality, and he created the universe, which consists of actualized potential, and, therefore, continues to depend on him. In other words, God is at all times sovereign over his universe. However, a lot of people object to this depiction of God because they do not understand the meaning

of these metaphysical categories. They are concerned that a God who has no potential but is pure actuality can be nothing more than a static immovable being, not one that creates, let alone engages in actions in a dynamic relationship to the world. However, even without the least bit of philosophical analysis, the question comes up why a being that is pure actuality, should be unable to act. As a matter of fact, the matter goes the other way around. Consider for a second, a being that is purely contingent or, to be more technical, that would be pure potential (which, of course, cannot actually exist). This would be a being that could not act at all, because it would have no reality, but that could only be acted upon by other beings that have actuality. Now, there is no such thing as a purely potential being; all beings must have some actuality, even if it is only as much actuality, as is possible for, say, a thought to have. So, to whatever extent it has actuality --- that is to say, to whatever extent it can exist --- it can also act causally on other contingent beings. Now, to stick with the example of a second ago, a thought, which may not have much actuality, will also not be able to be a very powerful causal agent. However, the more actuality this thing has, the more it will be able to act, cause, and influence other things. So, there is a positive correlation between the amount of actuality and the ability to act. It follows then, that God, who is pure actuality, is also capable of infinite actions.

<b>Composition</b>	<b>Pure potentiality</b>	<b>Some actuality; some</b>	<b>Less potentiality; more</b>	<b>Pure Actuality</b>
<b>Classical Terminology</b>	“most moved”	“moved”	“moved”	“unmoved”
<b>Relationship to other entities</b>	Totally dependent on other entities	Dependent on other entities	Dependent on other entities	Totally independent of other entities
<b>Degree of Passivity</b>	Can only be acted upon	Can be acted upon	Can be acted upon less	Cannot be acted upon
<b>Ability to act</b>	Cannot act	Can act some	Can act more	Can act without limits

In his zeal to present to the theological world a picture of God, who is acting and responding to us, Clark H. Pinnock has referred to God as "the most moved mover."<sup>10</sup> But, as I just attempted to explain, the "most moved mover" would be the entity we just described that consists of potentiality only, and is, therefore, an entirely impotent dependent being with less reality than any other entity in the universe. It could not be the creator; it could only be the lowliest item in creation. It could not interact with the universe, but the universe could only act upon it. It could not be an infinite God, who has intentionally closed off his knowledge of the future, but it would be a finite thing, not even capable of any knowledge. Here we have an example, then, of how erroneous theology and uninstructed metaphysics go hand in hand.

And with that last comment, we come back to where we started the paper. I bemoaned the fact that contemporary theologians find themselves adrift on a sea of uncertainty, where too many questions seem to have too many answers. I have tried to make the point that part of this uncertainty is due to the fact that people who address the crucial questions are unwilling to work through the metaphysics that is required to answer the questions. Then I have tried to introduce some relatively simple metaphysical categories that give us a hand up so as to arrive at some meaningful answers. Is there then, for example, a need to rethink theology proper and to come up with new models of understanding God's relationship to the world? Not in the least. The need is for theologians to reacquaint themselves with the work of those who went many centuries before them and to understand the categories that they used, which already supply all that is needed to understand God as sovereign and active in the world that he has created. To put less effort into the labor that our forebears put into their work of theology proper, particularly to jettison metaphysical categories, will deprive us of the assurance that came with their work. An "easy" theology will lead to "uneasy" conclusions.

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<sup>10</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

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