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**A Self-Effacing Gardener: Divine Causality in
the Theology of Austin Farrer**

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Introduction

At the end of *Faith and Speculation*, his most mature theological work, Austin Farrer writes the following: “Our thesis is no more than that the relation of created act to creative Act is inevitably indefinable, and that its being so is neither an obstacle to religion, nor a scandal to reason.”² A seemingly unilluminating statement, yet it sums up rather nicely Farrer’s ultimate position on divine causality, the topic I explore in this essay. Farrer’s statement contains two distinct claims: 1) The manner in which God acts, the “mysterious causal joint” by which divine and creaturely activity are related, is

¹ See www.HSC.edu and jvogel@hsc.edu.

² *Faith and Speculation: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1967), 170

inaccessible to knowledge, and 2) This is little concern to the believer, whose chief task is not to “manage a contact with supernatural force,” not to theorize about God’s will, but actually to relate to it, “to set himself in the line of the divine intention.”³ That the indefinability of this relation is also not a scandal to reason is only partially true, according to Farrer. God does constitute a limitation on reason because God is not a constituent part of the universe, God is undetermined by anything else, and, therefore, can be spoken of only by analogy with things that are a part of this world. Once this is accepted, however – and, for Farrer, God is inevitably an object of faith – the irreducibly mysterious nature of God’s relation to the world creates no further problem for reason.

Though all of this may be true, and though there may never have been a more philosophically astute advocate for the right of the faithful to get on with being faithful, it is also true that one must say what one can on behalf of one’s beliefs and illuminate for others, to the degree that it’s possible, what is meant by claims about God’s activity in the world and in one’s life. As Farrer puts it, “We live the belief, and in so doing, we cannot leave it utterly undefined. The idea of the relation of our activity to God’s causality cannot play its part in our imaginations while remaining to us just ‘some relatedness, we know not what.’”⁴ Farrer’s profound wrestling with how to conceive of this relation is perhaps his longest lasting contribution as a theologian. Indeed, though nearly a half-century has passed since his death, Farrer’s notion of “double agency,” the idea that there can be two agents – God and creature – for an identical action, continues to generate considerable interest. I will have much more to say about this idea below. More generally, one cannot help but be struck by the seemingly perpetual freshness of Farrer’s theology. Though he frequently wrote with the critiques of mid-twentieth-century British positivists in mind, he escaped being totally defined by them. Farrer’s thought anticipates and still has something to add to many contemporary theological conversations, in areas as diverse as atonement theory, onto-theology, and the dialogue with evolutionary biology. Even for a philosophical theologian – one less smitten with

³ Ibid., 142

⁴ Ibid., 143

Barth than was perhaps typical at the time – Farrer has interesting things to say about the primacy of story in the life of faith, noting in one place that “our thought of God is the summary of a tale which narrates the actions of God.”⁵ Most important of all for Farrer’s continuing relevance is his attention to the practical life of faith. Among his published works, spiritual reflections and collections of sermons greatly outnumber the more philosophical essays for which he is remembered. I will draw on some these throughout this essay.

In what follows, I will first discuss Farrer’s account of God’s activity in the natural world. Though this seems unadvised in one sense – for Farrer believed we have little access to God’s intention in nature – it establishes the pattern that will hold for his account of the divine-human relationship as well. As Farrer sees it, there is “one divine action through creation, nature and grace.”⁶ In the course of my discussion of Farrer’s account of physical providence, I will have occasion to talk about his understanding of evil and suffering, and note points of interest for those currently engaged in thinking about religion and science, particularly the theory of evolution. I will next look at Farrer’s account of God’s activity in the lives of human beings, highlighting his emphasis on Christ as the paradigm of the life of faith. In this section, I will briefly consider Farrer’s thinking on predestination and free will, perhaps the topic of greatest interest to readers of this journal. Finally, I will offer a brief assessment of Farrer’s thinking on these issues, noting critiques and potential resonances in the work of contemporary theologians.

I. Such a Tangle: Farrer’s Account of God’s Activity in the Physical World

According to Farrer, the Christian doctrine of creation straddles a kind of paradox. On the one hand, it asserts the universal causality of God or, what is the same thing, the utter dependence of all things on God for their existence. Though our lives are determined by many proximate causes, it is clear that there is no “sheer originativeness” in the world, no cause that does not depend on something else. To believe in God is to assert that, outside of this world of proximate

⁵ Ibid., 35. See also *Saving Belief: A Discussion of Essentials* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1964), where Farrer describes the believer as one who is first “captured by a story” (14).

⁶ *Faith and Speculation*, 80

causes, there is such an originating power from which all things derive their existence. As already noted, this belief does involve faith, does require a “jump” beyond what is scientifically demonstrable, but it is also the case that an unexplained world is “indigestible.”⁷ For Farrer, the God of creation must be personal to be anything at all. Belief in an impersonal God à la Einstein reduces, in the end, to a pious regard for nature itself. Such a regard is perhaps based on a noble sentiment, but the word “God” adds nothing to it. So Farrer insists that God is a personal being, one he defines most simply as “sovereign will” and “sheer act.” In his mind, the latter term suggests that God’s thought and action are identical, with no distinction, as in our own case, between an idea and its execution. This means that the world is quite literally, both in its origin and in its ongoing existence, the creative thought of God. God thinks what things are.

Given the creative immediacy of God’s thought to every existing thing, it is fair to wonder about the self-standing of creation – the other component of the paradox of the Christian doctrine of creation. Farrer states this concern well:

What happens, then, if we make a finite reality of this sort the direct object of a divine creative act? The comfortable cushion between creative action and creaturely action vanishes. If God creates energies he creates going activities. What he causes to be is their acting as they do. We cannot even say that he causes them to act, for it is by their action that they are they. The self-being of the creature seems to be annihilated. Its whole active existence is a simple *fiat* of the divine will.⁸

In this passage, Farrer both poses the problem and indicates the manner in which he will address it. First of all, Farrer insists that beings do not exist independently from their acting. In acting as they do, they are – a claim applying as much to God as to finite beings like ourselves. This particular way of understanding existence only

⁷ *God is Not Dead* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1966), 34. In his case against faith, the Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins has argued that, though an unexplained world may be unsatisfactory, so, too, is an unexplained God. Farrer disagrees. Whereas it is the nature of the world to be made up of component parts and, therefore, to beg for an explanation, God is by definition a “free, untrammelled Spirit.” To ask, as Dawkins loves to do, “Who designed the designer?,” is simply to misunderstand what theists mean by the word “God.” For Dawkins’ view, see *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), ch. 4.

⁸ *Faith and Speculation*, 82

heightens the problem of the God-world relationship, as the prior causality of God in calling creatures into being – and, therefore, into acting as they do – seems to swallow up any “self-being” we might want to say they have. “What he causes to be is their acting as they do.” If so, is there any independent status to the world at all?

According to Farrer, when we try to conceive of God’s causation we inevitably degrade it to the level of creaturely causation.⁹ Having borrowed the very idea of causation from our experience of it among finite things and applied it analogously to the divine will in creation, we cannot help but imagine it as a finite cause. More specifically, we wind up conceiving of it as a competitive power. What God does, I must not do – and vice versa. This, however, is to make God a component of this world, a “factor among factors,”¹⁰ vying with finite realities for the claim to have acted in any particular happening. In insisting that God is a “universal cause,” the springing-point of creaturely existence, Farrer wants to understand God’s causation on a completely different level from worldly causation. God causes causing things or, to use Farrer’s more elegant phrasing, God creates “going activities.” He writes, “The purpose of so fantastic a dialectic is to leave standing the inescapable paradox: to affirm Creative Will is to affirm a power which institutes an activity active of itself, and not a mere phase of creative activity.”¹¹ What God wills in creating, according to Farrer, is for creatures to make themselves, to go just as they go, to be, not for God’s sake, but for their own.¹² Thus, God gives to creatures a genuine self-standing. This is the generosity of the divine creative act – not to hoard the power of acting, but to share it on a dizzying multiplicity of levels. And it is only possible if God causes in a completely different way than finite beings, in such a way that, though God is the cause of the acting of created beings, their acts are truly their own.

This is the idea of double agency for which Farrer is perhaps most famous, namely, that there are two distinct causes – God and

⁹ Ibid., 62

¹⁰ On this, see Brian Hebblethwaite, “God and the World as Known to Science,” pp. 65-84 in *The Human Person in God’s World: Studies to Commemorate the Austin Farrer Centenary*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Douglas Hedley (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 67.

¹¹ *Faith and Speculation*, 83-84

¹² *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961), 91

creature – for an identical act. This double agency is not analogous to the common activity of two finite agents, say, in the combined effort of two people to transport a heavy load. In that case, one could theoretically – if not always practically – distinguish the work done by each person. In the case of God and creature, one has to say that both are simultaneously causing the whole action in question – merely on different levels. To ask what in a creature’s action is God’s activity and what its own is to view God’s causation in a competitive manner, to see the relationship between God and creature as a zero-sum game. “God’s agency,” Farrer writes, “must actually be such as to work omnipotently on, in, or through creaturely agencies without either forcing them or competing with them.”¹³ What Farrer’s idea of double agency leaves unexplained is exactly how God acts in and through creatures, how God creates “going activities,” without also determining them. It is this matter of how God acts that Farrer says is completely inaccessible to us. We simply do not know the modality of God’s activity. Just as an amateur artist is incapable of experiencing Rembrandt’s artistry – the manner in which he creates – while at the same time capable of appreciating the art that results from it, so, too, the believer in God is “inescapably amateur” with respect to the *how* of God’s activity in the world, though he reads the world as evidence of a divine art and wisdom. This activity does not strike us in the “springing-point of causes,” but “in the finished effect.”¹⁴

For Farrer, this ignorance of how God acts in nature is attributable to the utter hiddenness of that activity. He writes, “If it has a gardener, the natural world is a wild garden laid out with so skilful and so self-effacing an informality that the gardener’s hand can never be convincingly detected in any single feature.”¹⁵ Put positively, this hiddenness has to do with the generous gift of God to allow creatures to make themselves. What one sees when looking at the world is simply creatures acting as they do. As Farrer puts it,

To speak of God’s ‘manipulations’ is merely to force the parallel between the work of God and our experimental science. We manipulate the energies of nature, God does not. ‘Manipulation’ is a forcible re-direction through external

¹³ *Faith and Speculation*, 62

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74

interference. God simply wills the energies of nature to act in their own way; that is why his doing what he does is invisible. All we see is what he does; and what he does is what, as willed by him, his creatures do.¹⁶

No clearer – and yet no more paradoxical – statement of the idea of double agency can be found in Farrer’s work than in that final sentence: Everything we see in the natural world is God’s doing; what God does is will God’s creatures to go their own way. The “causal joint” – that meeting place of divine and creaturely action – is inaccessible to us. Particularly in the case of merely physical agencies, we do not have the knowledge to say that “they are capable of just so much, and the extra is divine.”¹⁷ All there is to see is the going of natural things. Every cause in the world is ultimately traceable to the action of created beings.

In willing creatures to make themselves, God creates a world that is “unbelievably multiple and multi-leveled,”¹⁸ made up of “different systems placed in mutual interrelation.”¹⁹ We call the world we inhabit a “universe,” suggesting that it is a single organism or totality – and it surely achieves a unity in the divine mind – but in reality, on the ground, it is a free-for-all of forces, energies and interests. Farrer is consistent on this across texts. From the highest elements to the lowest, from the energetic activity at the sub-atomic level to the constant struggle for survival that plays out in the animal kingdom, physical reality consists of myriad realities “busy being themselves at their own level.”²⁰ This accounts for the tremendous vitality of the physical world; it also accounts for why there is so much suffering. If it is God’s will for the various systems of the world to “run according to their kind,” it is inevitable that they will criss-cross and interfere with one another, that they will sometimes rebel. Indeed, as much as we detest the evils that result from the collision of forces in the world, the possibility of such happenings cannot be removed without at the

¹⁶ *God is Not Dead*, 97

¹⁷ *Faith and Speculation*, 79. See also *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, where Farrer says that we can never sufficiently plumb the depths of natural action to be able to identify the “overplus of providence” (87).

¹⁸ *God is Not Dead*, 80

¹⁹ *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, 48

²⁰ *Saving Belief*, 50

same time stripping the world of its vitality. Accidentality, Farrer says, is an inevitable accompaniment of physicality.²¹

This, then, is the heart of Farrer's theodicy. We make the mistake of imagining God's purposes in the physical world to be what our purposes would be, of supposing that God thinks humanly about physical realities. Instead, Farrer says, God thinks physically about physical realities and humanly about human ones. Farrer offers the example of an earthquake to make his point:

If an earthquake shakes down a city, an urgent practical problem arises – how to rescue, feed, house and console the survivors, rehabilitate the injured, and commend the dead to the mercy of God; less immediately, how to reconstruct in a way which will minimise the effects of another such disaster. But no theological problem arises. The will of God expressed in the event is his will for the physical elements in the earth's crust or under it: his will that they should go on being themselves and acting in accordance with their natures.²²

The destructiveness of the earthquake does not constitute a theological problem because the physical processes that lead to it are themselves good. God wills them always to go on being themselves. But it is a disaster, perhaps even an evil – a word Farrer says ought theologically to be defined as “what God himself detests.”²³ The evil is not in the things themselves, but in the occasional collision of interests and forces in the world. “The world is such a tangle,” Farrer writes, “God cannot do for each of his creatures here and now what (we feel) he would wish to do for it, if that creature stood alone.”²⁴ In our groping human language, we might call this a limitation on God's ability to intervene or talk about the “difficulties confronting God's providence.” Perhaps, too, we mistakenly suppose that God has made the world for human enjoyment alone, that God is not equally the God of particles, stars, rocks and beasts, willing each existing thing to go as it goes. In reality, God has called into being a world of

²¹ If we ask why then the world has to be physical, Farrer believes we are quickly getting out of our depth. God's choice to create this world rather than that is an abyss, he says. However, he notes that our complaint about physical suffering ultimately reveals just how much we love our physical being. We do not want to be angels. “Because we take the physical creation to be good, we are outraged by the presence of certain distressing features in it” (*Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, 57).

²² *God is Not Dead*, 87-88

²³ *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, 18

²⁴ *Saving Belief*, 46

bewildering complexity and multiplicity – and we are but one part of it.

A world in which things are called into being to run according to their kind is inevitably beset by conflict and wastefulness. But it is plain that the world also exhibits a high degree of organization. In Farrer's mind, the story of the world is one of increasing complexity over time. Though he felt the physical evidence for Darwin's theory evolution through natural selection was somewhat spotty, he did not see any reason to dispute it – particularly the idea of a gradually unfolding universe that it entails.²⁵ More than that, he believed that evolution was a boon to theology, bringing the idea of creation down from its perch at the beginning of time and into the middle of the ongoing processes of life. In other words, if creation is constantly making itself, constantly evolving into new forms, then the believer may have a better view of God's creative activity than if – as a simplistic reading of Genesis might suggest – creation was a one-off act of God once upon a time. But what can we say about this creative activity? Or again, if creatures have the impulse only to be themselves, how are new infusions of form ever fed in? How does a lower form of organization give rise to a higher? A simpler organism lead to a more complex? For one thing, Farrer is insistent that God does not use creatures forcibly, against the grain of their own being. "God uses creaturely powers straight," he says. "He does not make them only to twist them."²⁶ Unlike a poor author, who maps out the plot of his story in advance and then fashions his characters to behave in a way that leads inexorably to where he wants to go, God gives life to creatures, lets them be, and through their being themselves leads them into the story that we see. Farrer writes,

He [God] is like the good novelist who has the wit to get a satisfying story out of the natural behaviour of the characters he conceives. And how does he do it? By identifying himself with them and living them from within. There are no stage villains in a good novel, an no plaster saints either. The storyteller can make his people as good or as bad as he likes, but only if his heart can go with them in being as good or as bad as makes them.²⁷

²⁵ *God is Not Dead*, 42

²⁶ *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited*, 84

²⁷ *God is Not Dead*, 76-77

This is the wonder of omnipotence, according to Farrer. God wills the multiplicity of beings to be a universe, a harmonious whole, but achieves it, not by imposing a pattern from above, but through the creative employment of actual existences.²⁸ This bottom-up approach to universe-making is, from our perspective at least, unbelievably slow and wasteful. A “super-craftsman” God could achieve beautiful and harmonious patterns much more efficiently, without all of the conflict, evolutionary dead-ends and chance misfirings that lead to deformity and disease. But God has no interest in streamlining a plan, according to Farrer; rather, God wills to realize a world.²⁹ As a consequence, God submits to going with the creatures God has made and achieving any further purposes God has only in and through them.

Farrer’s preferred language for how God brings the creation into new patterns of being is that of the process theologians: leading, persuasion, creative pulling. At the same time that God maintains creatures at their current level of existence, God draws them into new patterns of interrelation, new structures of organization and, ultimately, new types of being. There is an openness to this worldview that certainly lines up with much current thinking about the God-world relationship done by theologians interested in the dialogue with science. Farrer would add that it accords well with the biblical emphasis on the patience of God’s creative wisdom. Unlike certain process theologians, however, Farrer was unwilling to give up the traditional divine attributes of omnipotence and omniscience, though he may have redefined them. As we saw with Farrer’s idea of double agency, one need not restrict God’s power of action to make room for creatures to have their own existence. Neither does God need to be temporal in order to identify with temporal beings. Farrer writes,

It is no doubt a foolish piece of theology which makes the time-transcendent mode of God’s being a bar against his entering into the temporality of his creatures’ existences by his knowledge of them and his action in them. The first capacity of the infinite is to fill every finitude. But it is a folly no less extreme

²⁸ *Faith and Speculation*, 150

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 110

to think that we bring God and his creatures together by attaching our temporal conditions to his existence.³⁰

What process theologians hope to gain by subjecting God to the same conditions as the developing world is, according to Farrer, already achieved by the idea of God's infinity. God can see from the perspective of every creature, can "know up every nerve," as he puts it, precisely because God is infinite and not bound by time or place. As the cause of every existing thing, God knows the world from within. How God does this is, again, inaccessible to us. We talk about God's action, God's causing things, God's knowledge of things, and so we must if we are to say anything at all about God. But Farrer insists that we must never forget the necessity of analogical predication when speaking of God. He writes, "God's way of acting is the infinitely higher analogue of our way, but we cannot *conceive* it otherwise than in terms of our own."³¹

The foregoing presents in broad outline Farrer's account of God's activity in the physical world. Though the God he depicts is self-effacing to the point of being utterly hidden beneath the natural activity of created beings, Farrer notes that the believer will see God in the effects of God's activity – that is, after the fact – and wait for God's providence in situations where he does not see.³² The effects of God's activity may be more apparent in the lives of human beings, the topic to which I now turn. Before leaving the subject of the physical world, however, it is important to note that, though Farrer insists on God's complete hiddenness in nature and says much on behalf of the integrity of natural process, it does not follow that speech about God in nature is superfluous. As Farrer puts it, "By dropping out the divine thought you do not halve complexity, you take away explanation."³³ Though God is inevitably an object faith, reason demands explanations for the world's achievement of pattern –

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 165

³¹ *Ibid.*, 62

³² On this, see *Lord I Believe: Suggestions for Turning the Creed into Prayer* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1989), where Farrer writes, "Where I cannot see providence, I do not see improvidence; I simply do not see" (27).

³³ *God is Not Dead*, 81

and, before that, its very existence – that the world itself cannot give.³⁴

II. Adoption into Sonship: Farrer’s Account of God’s Activity among Human Beings

It would seem less needs to be said about Farrer’s understanding of divine causality among human beings because, as already noted, he believed that God’s action in grace and nature is the same throughout. The same generous choice that causes God to give creative power to non-human creatures and lead them to higher forms of organization also underlies God’s activity in creating humanity – the latter case being but a special instance of the more general pattern of God’s providence. And certainly much of our existence – the cells and tissues and electrical currents that make up our bodily life – is of a piece with God’s activity in the physical world. But we are also creatures who can feel the pressure of the divine will, and in that, according to Farrer, we are unique. As he puts it, “We are physical, *plus ...*”³⁵ Human beings are created not only to go as they go, but to do so with the awareness of their creator. The fulfillment of their existence is to unite their wills to the will of God.

More than this can be said. While Farrer was eager to correct overly anthropocentric views of God’s will in creation, and did so by insisting that God thinks physically with respect to physical things and humanly with respect to human things, it is not the case that these two things are equally revealing of God. The physical world does not supply the essential clue of who God is, according to Farrer, namely, the notion of wisdom or mind itself.³⁶ We must look to human beings for that. He writes,

We have said that the God to whom nature points is a Creator who thinks physical things physically, and all other things similarly as they are and as they

³⁴ Farrer accepted the theory of evolution without hesitation and would certainly have been interested to see some of the additional evidence from the fossil record and from genetics that has emerged since his death in 1968. Still, he was unimpressed by vaunted claims about the theory’s ability to explain everything having to do with the organization and complexity of life on Earth. Too often, he felt, naturalistic proponents of the theory use it sloppily, taking for granted things they are not entitled to – the mechanism of heredity, for example – and speaking overly loosely, even mythologically, about “life” and the “process of evolutionary development.” See *God is Not Dead*, chs. 3-4.

³⁵ *God is Not Dead*, 102

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 93

act. But though such a power may think physical thoughts about the physical, it cannot itself be physical, for physical things as such do not think. The physical world reveals some part of what God thinks, it cannot reveal what he is. It is only when God makes a thinking creature that his work reveals part of what he is as well as part of what he thinks.³⁷

So it is the personal model, not the physical, that we must use when speaking about God. We speak analogically, of course, using our own minds as the source or clue, but given that, Farrer is content to call God a sovereign will, irreducibly personal, a creative, intentional mind. The believer in God may infer the artistry of such a mind from the evidence of the physical world, but such an inference depends on a prior belief in God as the “prime creative cause.”³⁸ Indeed, for as much thought as he devoted to the God of nature, Farrer felt we could know very little of God on the basis of natural agents. In order truly to know something about God, one must look to human lives.

Farrer famously adhered to what he calls the “empirical principle,” the idea that one can know something only if one is able to do something about it. This is true even of our physical knowledge, our conclusions about things far distant being based on manipulation of things closer to hand. In the realm of interpersonal relationships, Farrer noted, we can only claim knowledge of another person – a friend, for example – by means of a “perpetual try-on” of the friendship. There is in everything, then, an “inseparability of knowledge and activity.”³⁹ This holds true of the God-human relationship as well. One knows God only in the act of relating to God. Unlike worldly entities, however, which are subject to our experimentation, or our friends, whom we can act on as much as we can be acted upon by them, God is not a manipulable object. God is not available to us in the same way as created objects. So the obvious question arises: How can we know God if we cannot act on God? What can we do about God? For Farrer, the answer is simple: We can embrace the divine will. Whereas we cannot do anything about the causal joint between God and creaturely actors, and, therefore, can know nothing about it, we are able to sink our wills into the will of

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 123

³⁸ *Faith and Speculation*, 38

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22

God and, in so doing, experience God's activity within us. Edward Hugh Henderson states this well,

To know a person as a friend, we must be friends with the person. To know God, we must live faithfully with God. And if we do, we can reasonably believe that we encounter God acting within our own action. 'We cannot touch God except by willing the will of God. Then his will takes effect in ours and we know it; not that we manipulate him but that he possesses us.' The knowledge that results will be anything but groundless and irrational. The degree of its concreteness and accuracy, however, will depend on how authentically and fully one lives the life of faith.⁴⁰

Though it seems circular to argue from experience of God to knowledge of God, Farrer argues that no other way to knowledge is possible to us. One must will the will of God if one is to have any hope of encountering God. Thus, religion is a kind of experiment in the embracing of this will, the evidence of its veracity lying in the way that doing so blesses and changes us. Though Farrer did not discount the component of feeling in religion, he ultimately understood religion to be a practical doing, the submission to God's will leading to a moral outcome in the lives of believers. Indeed, he was adamant that, though the embrace of God's will takes place in one's heart, the effect ought not be confined there, but have "the whole of a man's conduct for its outward expression."⁴¹ To the degree that one succeeds in embracing God's will, one discloses God in one's actions. The one-sidedness of this relationship puts an obvious strain on the analogy with friendship, in which cause and effect, growth and change, take place in both directions. Our activity in this relationship is to be wholly conformed to the will of God, to "place ourselves in his action as we suppose it to be disclosed."⁴² At the same time – and perhaps similar to friendship in its ideal form – God's will in this relationship is entirely devoted to our self-realization.⁴³ As one comes to embrace the will of God more and more, one becomes more fully oneself.

⁴⁰ "The God Who Undertakes Us," pp. 66-99 in *Captured by the Crucified: The Practical Theology of Austin Farrer*, ed. David Hein and Edward Hugh Henderson (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 81. The quotation from Farrer in the middle of this passage is from *God is Not Dead*, 107.

⁴¹ *God is Not Dead*, 114

⁴² *Faith and Speculation*, 57

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 55

This claim bears greater attention, as it is central to Farrer's understanding of divine causality in human beings. A competitive model of the divine-human relationship would suggest that my freedom is diminished as God's will takes hold in my life. For the one to assume primacy, the other must be curtailed, suppressed, overthrown. Farrer sees it quite otherwise. Because God's will is for the self-realization of creatures – and, to introduce specifically religious language here, their justification and sanctification – the more one embraces God's will the more free one is, the more one enacts one's own true being. The more one is possessed by God, the more one's submission to God renders one a tool of God's will, the more self-determining one becomes. Farrer writes of the union of one's will with God in prayer,

What happens when we pray ourselves, on the day when prayer comes really alive? Does not a better wisdom and a less selfish concern than one's own take charge of the praying mind? And when it does so take charge, does it displace one's personal will? Of course not; what would be the use? God cannot inspire me, by removing me, by pushing me off the saddle and riding in my place. No, the more I am inspired, the more I am myself; the will God makes me make is my truest and freest creation.⁴⁴

This claim continues to puzzle commentators on Farrer. Just how is it that an action can be attributed wholly to God and, at the same time, be my own freest creation? How can there truly be two agents for an identical action? Admittedly, Farrer makes this claim more often than he gives practical examples.⁴⁵ His well-known example of the Assyrian army, borrowed from Isaiah, does not apply here. In that case, God demonstrates God's ingenuity by using wills quite out of alignment with God's own to accomplish the purposes of providence. It is an example of God's ability to incorporate all of the blunderings and errors of human beings into the divine plan. What Farrer is talking about here is a coming together of divine and human will in

⁴⁴ *Saving Belief*, 78

⁴⁵ For two thoughtful analogies, see Henderson's aforementioned "The God Who Undertakes Us" and Rodger Forsman, "'Double Agency' and Identifying Reference to God," pp. 123-142 in *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990). Henderson offers the example of a parent's role in forming the character of a child and Forsman that of one person changing another's mind. Though both acknowledge limits to their respective analogies, they use them to call attention to events in our mundane experience that seem to be the result of two agents acting simultaneously.

such a way that both freely intend the same act. As with Farrer's talk about double agency, this way of speaking depends on an understanding of divine causality that differs from that of created beings. God causes on a different level. The paradoxical ring of such talk is unavoidable given that we speak of God as "causing" and "willing" only by drawing an analogy with our own causing and willing. But Farrer does not think it is unintelligible. Ever giving heed to experiential evidence, Farrer notes that the faithful attest to this coming together of obedience and freedom, seeing their submission to God as leading to the enhancement of their being.⁴⁶

The freest being, then, is the one in whose life God's will has been embraced most fully, the one whose actions can be attributed wholly to God. For Farrer, Jesus Christ is the paradigm of this simultaneity of divine and human will, the one who has accomplished it in his own life. He is, at once, utterly possessed by the will of God and, for precisely that reason, more himself than any other person.⁴⁷ This is not, Farrer maintains, a mere parroting of the Chalcedonian dogma. It is rather that the Christ of the gospels gives just this impression. What struck Farrer most about Christ, what he highlights over and over again in his sermons, is the sheer transparency and lack of duplicity of Christ's character. To provide but one example, he writes, "Christ has no motive to distrust his heart; he speaks as he is minded, he is all one piece. So all the words of Jesus are windows to his mind, not only those which have the special form of self-disclosure."⁴⁸ According to Farrer, this directness of Christ's being, this alignment of intention and action, derives from his unflinching reliance on the will of God. Farrer writes,

He is the Son of God, and his Sonship is simple and unalloyed derivation. We wind up our buckets half empty and spilling as they come out of the well of life; in him the fountain rises to the surface and overflows. It is his glory to be derivative ... If the words we write are derived from a model, our work may be decried as derivative. But no one will complain of the derivativeness of the writing, if the source from which it derives is the author's mind, for that is the derivation which guarantees the life and spontaneity of the work. The Son of

⁴⁶ Henderson, "The God Who Undertakes Us," 87

⁴⁷ *Saving Belief*, 79

⁴⁸ *A Faith of Our Own* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1960), 178

God is the Word of the Father, and more alive than any utterance, because he comes new every moment out of the heart of God.⁴⁹

It is in his willingness to be derived, to rely completely on the will of God even in moments of temptation and suffering, that Christ is most fully himself. At the same time, it is through his complete openness to God that the divine will shines forth clearly through him. In Christ, then, the mutual inter-penetration of divine and human causality is fully accomplished. Neither one is overwhelmed or eclipsed by the other; rather, both show forth with a clarity that makes it necessary to speak of a personal identity.⁵⁰

Obviously, no such identity is possible in the case of beings of imperfect will. Some alloy of self-will remains even in the saints. Still, Christ's way of being, his learning by suffering, is the paradigm of the life of faith for the Christian.⁵¹ It is only in embracing the will of God as Christ did that one is freed from the stunted growth caused by sin and set back on the path of realizing one's true being, which, for Farrer, means coming into the eternal perfection resulting from unity with God. Thus, we come to God by being conformed to Christ, by adopting his attitude and disposition toward God. God takes this initiative in this. As Farrer puts it, "There is a divine sonship by nature, before there is or can be sonship by adoption. There is an equal friendship or association of the Father and the Son, into which the Son may bring us by living as man, and by making us the disciples and partners of his life."⁵² In his more openly Christian reflections, Farrer notes that we are adopted into sonship through the work of the Holy Spirit, who moves our will from underneath, uniting us about a center outside of ourselves, namely, the heart of God.⁵³ As is typical of all of God's activity in the world, the Spirit is not seen but in its effect, in the way that it opens people up to others and conforms them to the life of Christ.

⁴⁹ *Lord I Believe*, 39

⁵⁰ *Saving Belief*, 75. For a thorough exploration of Christ's identity with God in Farrer's thought, see Edward Henderson, "Double Agency and the Relation of Persons to God," pp. 38-64 in *The Human Person in God's World: Studies to Commemorate the Austin Farrer Centenary*.

⁵¹ *Faith and Speculation*, 57-58

⁵² *Saving Belief*, 101

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 122

God is patient with human beings, desiring to effect good in them in no other way than by appealing to their free decisions.⁵⁴ As with the rest of creation, people, in being made to make themselves, prove at times slow and intractable. Even more, we prove perverse, willing in opposition to the enhancement of our being that God intends. Still, God does not force us against the grain of our being. Farrer finds the same non-violent metaphors of persuasion, appeal and leading that he employs in discussing God's physical providence useful in describing how God acts in calling human beings into greater perfection. At the same time, because God is able to appeal to the minds of human beings, God acts in human history in such a way as to require a decision. God's grip on us, Farrer says, is somewhat firmer, God's appeal more urgent.⁵⁵ The activity of God in nature and grace is indeed one, but God acts appropriately in every field of activity.⁵⁶

If we insist on asking what role, if any, we play in accepting God's grace, Farrer proves elusive. On the one hand, he notes that, because we do not know the modality of God's action, the question of the relationship between free will and predestination simply does not arise.⁵⁷ Neither God's action nor our own is to be denied in accounting for the uniting of our wills to God's. More important, from Farrer's perspective, is the importance of insisting on God's initiative in this process. God precedes us in intention, lays down the path which we are called to walk and provides the grace actually to walk in it. It is true that the Spirit uses our free will as its instrument and, in a sense, waits for the action of sinful creatures, but no person who has experienced God's grace will ever be content to hear it said that he acquired it through his own work; instead, he will attribute it to God. Farrer writes,

But I can't accept that. My life hasn't been like that; the life of no Christian ever was like that. Divine goodness has persuaded me, hedged up my path, headed me off, driven me back into the road; that is why I am here. I suppose it is abstractly conceivable that I could have been a greater fool than I was, but that

⁵⁴ *Faith and Speculation*, 110

⁵⁵ *God is Not Dead*, 105

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 125

⁵⁷ *Faith and Speculation*, 66

is no reason for saying that I have been brought here by my own wisdom. ‘You, O Lord, have wrought all our works in us,’ the Christian says.⁵⁸

As with everything else, Farrer maintains that we err precisely when we resolve this tension in the divine-human relationship to one side or the other. God saves us, though we are not saved against our will; God takes the initiative, but we are at our most free when possessed by divine grace. Though it is always possible to distinguish two actors – divine and human – neither being reducible to other,⁵⁹ at a deeper level, Farrer says, the believer experiences an identity with Christ that defies easy demarcation. The skeptic looks at the life of a such a one and sees nothing but the latter’s own action, no evidence of anything coming in from outside. And so he would be right. But, Farrer says, we are “complex double beings.” He notes,

At a deeper level than that which any science studies, Christ feeds with himself the springs of our action. Nothing comes in from outside; when we act from the resources of divine grace, all the action and all the thought is in us; but it is Christ in us, feeding the deep root of the will; Christ, giving himself to be our self.⁶⁰

As Christ wills the will of God and so lives out a unity of being with God, the believer in Christ lives with the life of Christ. As with so much else, the believer cannot account for the how of this. But he can deny that this is his experience even less so. And thus we are returned to the quotation with which this paper began: “Our thesis is no more than that the relation of created act to creative Act is inevitably indefinable, and that its being so is neither an obstacle to religion, nor a scandal to reason.”⁶¹ Theology has an important task of clarification, but given Farrer’s insistence on the inseparability of action and knowledge in all things, there is a point at which it must yield to the practical experience of the faithful.

⁵⁸ *A Faith of Our Own*, 79-80

⁵⁹ On this, see Thomas F. Tracy, “Narrative Theology and the Acts of God,” pp. 173-196 in *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, especially pp. 187-196.

⁶⁰ *A Faith of Our Own*, 127-128

⁶¹ *Faith and Speculation*, 170

Conclusion

At the outset of this paper, I noted that Farrer is rightly recognized for having wrestled in a profound way with the question of how to relate God and world, specifically how to conceive of God's causality in a way that allows for the genuine self-standing of creation. Not everyone agrees that his solution, the idea of double agency, does much to mitigate the problem. Maurice Wiles, for example, argues that, by the time Farrer is done qualifying the way in which God can be said to cause things within the world – Farrer calls God's way of acting the “infinitely higher analogue of our way” – it is so remote from anything like what we understand by the word as to be completely uninformative.⁶² Wiles concludes that, precisely because a thinker like Farrer worked so hard on this matter and wound up only in mystery and paradox, we must give up any idea of speaking of God as causing things in the world. No fan of Wiles' seemingly deistic God, John Polkinghorne comes to much the same conclusion, noting that Farrer's idea of double agency proves, in the end, an “elusive” concept, doing very little to advance our understanding of God's interaction with the world.⁶³ He himself opts for a kenotic view, in which God, out of love, that is, out of the “interior constraints of divinity” and not from any metaphysical necessity, gives up omniscience and omnipotence in order to allow creation a genuine openness and role in bringing about the future.⁶⁴

With respect to Wiles, Farrer may have shrugged. In attempting to speak about an utterly transcendent being, such as Farrer conceived God to be, our language will inevitably disappoint. He was particularly keen on using parables in his writing precisely because they allow one to construct and deconstruct a theological vocabulary simultaneously. It is unlikely that he thought the language of “double agency” somehow escapes this necessary dialectic. What it succeeds in doing, in his view, is to articulate the *experience* of people who know themselves both to be creatures of God and self-directing

⁶² Maurice Wiles, “Farrer's Concept of Double Agency,” *Theology* 84 (1981), 243-249

⁶³ *Science and Providence: God's Interaction With the World* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2005), 15-16

⁶⁴ “Kenotic Creation and Divine Action,” pp. 90-106 in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001)

agents, “posited and positing.”⁶⁵ That awareness, which the faithful possess without any experience of contradiction, is the primary datum in speech about God. Theologians then do what they can.

It would be interesting to know how Farrer would respond to Polkinghorne. In many respects, their positions, even their language, are the same. Polkinghorne, too, uses the language of “persuasion” that Farrer found useful in describing God’s providence. Farrer, however, was unwilling to abandon the language of classic theism, preferring instead to try to put new wine into old wineskins. That is ultimately what the idea of double agency attempts to do, namely, to maintain the traditional emphasis on God’s initiative, God’s status as First Cause, while making room for a genuinely creative becoming in the world. These ideas, Farrer hoped, could be held simultaneously. Farrer was leery of theologies that rendered God overly human, worrying that the familiarity and relatability they sought was purchased at the price of God’s ability to do what we need God to do.⁶⁶ He was also unwilling to enshrine openness and possibility to such an extent that God becomes no more than the power that accompanies beings throughout their existence.⁶⁷ In Farrer’s view, such a position would be unable to account for the stupendous degree of order and complexity present in the cosmos. More than that, it would deny any overarching *telos* to God’s will for creation. Yes, God creates a free-for-all of self-moving forces, and, no, God will not fake the story, but God has a further will for created things beyond the mere fulfillment of their existence. The world is not left to “keep blinding away,” according to Farrer, but through an infinite patience God draws all created things into new and different harmonious patterns of relation.⁶⁸ God does this through a bottom-up approach,

⁶⁵ *Faith and Speculation*, 169

⁶⁶ Of the process theologian Charles Hartshorne, Farrer writes: “The God of Professor Hartshorne, for example, must be human enough to have a natural need of his creatures. It is apparently a matter of no concern that he should be divine enough to save their souls alive” (*Faith and Speculation*, 170).

⁶⁷ For an example of this way of imagining God’s relationship to the world, see Ruth Page, *God and the Web of Creation* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1996). Though Page quotes Farrer favorably, she ultimately denies any “directing hand” or “program” on the part of God in creation. See pp. 52-58, 91-105.

⁶⁸ *God is Not Dead*, 103. In fact, Farrer says, there are not two wills of God in creation – making things to make themselves and leading them to new ways of being – but only a single will. [*Footnote continued on next page ...*]

infusing elements of form without doing violence to creatures as they are. In this respect, Farrer would have approved of Polkinghorne's emphasis on God's input of information throughout the evolutionary history of the universe.⁶⁹

Ultimately, God's intention for the world is unknown to us. What is clear – and what is perhaps not often enough mentioned in discussions of Farrer – is that without some *telos*, some end that redeems the story, the Christian claim about God's providence becomes nonsense. We saw that Farrer's defense of God's goodness in creation depends heavily on God's making things to make themselves, the cost of which is the permitting of an endless parade of wastefulness and suffering.⁷⁰ And so it must be, Farrer says, in a world such as ours. But such a story is only tolerable if it is accompanied by a robust eschatology. As Farrer himself puts it,

The workings of supernatural providence are to be understood by reference to their goal. By looking at the universe I could never have divined that it was working towards a sparrow or a thrush, until such creatures actually appeared; and by looking at the whole confusion of the human scene I could not see the life of the World to Come prefigured in it ... But to us below, casting about for the path of our ascent on the flanks of the hill, there is no such simple clarity about the ways of God.⁷¹

An account of God's activity in and through the processes of creation is incomplete without a hope that transcends them. Though Farrer was adamant about this, his eschatological vision might have been more compelling if he had allowed a greater place in it for the non-human world. Indeed, for a thinker as convincing as he about the vibrancy of all created things, Farrer was surprisingly narrow on this matter, arguing that because only rational creatures are capable of having their wills united to God's, they alone are capable of eternal perfection. Such criticism aside, Farrer's understanding of heaven as the perfected community of relations that begins even in this life in grace is an important component of his account of the God-world

The will of God is perfectly one throughout creation. However, we inevitably distinguish two strands in thinking about it (105).

⁶⁹ "Kenotic Creation and Divine Action," pp. 97-102. For a similar view, see John F. Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), especially ch. 5.

⁷⁰ Brian Hebblethwaite, "God and the World as Known to Science," 79

⁷¹ *Lord I Believe*, 28-29

relationship. And, as with all of his theology, it has an eminently practical application: “Heaven alone gives final meaning to any earthly hopes; and to take it the other way round, we have no way to grasp at heavenly hope, than by pursuing hopeful tasks here below.”⁷²



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⁷² *A Celebration of Faith: Communications, Mostly to Students*, ed. Leslie Houlden (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), 118-119. This passage is quoted in Robert Boak Slocum, *Light in a Burning-Glass: A Systematic Presentation of Austin Farrer's Theology* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007), p. 37.
