Preface

This book addresses five big questions.

- Is the existence of God a matter of faith or knowledge?
- Does God sometimes act miraculously or are there physical causes for everything?
- Is morality absolute or relative?
- Are humans truly free or does God's sovereignty determine everything?
- When bad things happen, is God the cause or are they the fault of humans?

Too frequently Christians answer these questions with a Yes to one side and a No to the other side. Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth answer Yes to both, in all cases. Following their model, I will defend a "third way" which transcends the dichotomies of fideism versus rationalism, supernaturalism versus naturalism, relativism versus absolutism, free will versus predestination, and God's justice versus his mercy.

Our difficulties came to a head in the seventeenth century. Though the Enlightenment was responsible for much that is fine, just, and good, it also promoted three bad ideas: mechanism, universal quantification, and mono-causation. Mechanism is the claim that physical causes always have predictable effects fully determined by the laws of nature. This led to the assumption that the laws of cause and effect are logically clear and mathematically precise. So we must, as Galileo advised, "Measure everything, and that which you cannot, measure it anyway." Finally, since causal relations are always clear and precise they must be exclusive—if something is physically caused, then it was not caused by God, and conversely, if something is caused by God, then it cannot be physically caused. This sort of mono-causation produced a rigid natural/supernatural divide and the search for an "empirically detectable" God.

These three assumptions are demonstrably false, both philosophically and scientifically. In their place I articulate and defend three good ideas:

- Not all causes are mechanistic.
- All quantities are ultimately qualities.
- Full understanding requires dual-causation.

First, while every effect has a cause, many effects are not, and never will be, humanly predictable. Causation, predictability, and determinism are distinct ideas that must never be conflated. Second, while many things can be quantitatively measured, such measurements are ultimately based on qualitative human judgments about *what* something is. Every number is an iteration of the number one. But there is nothing "measurable" that one baseball game, one table, one person, one corporation, one nation-state, one essay, and one poem have in common except a *qualitative* integrity and unity. Third, when God employs humans to achieve his intended goal, the question "Who did that?" cannot be answered on the assumption of mono-causation. Instead, the answer requires dual-causation, or what Thomas Aquinas referred to as primary and secondary causes and Karl Barth the divine accompanying.

Thus, my central theme is that these three "good ideas" answer questions about God, miracles, and evil in a way which is scientifically, philosophically, and theologically satisfying, without resorting to false dichotomies.

Chapter 1 considers the assumption that physical causation and predictability are one and the same. No one cognizant of twentieth-century science believes that this is true. All physical actions have physical causes, but most of these are not even in principle predictable. Chapters 2 and 3 complete the philosophical case for this third category of the "physically caused but not predictable." These chapters do little to build an affirmative case for the alternative position. But until we throw away our old glasses and get a new prescription, we will never realize how much mechanistic philosophy masquerading as science has distorted our vision.

Chapters 4 and 5 will begin to flesh out the alternative to an Enlightenment conception of God. Isaac Newton's theory of universal gravity was the foundation of the mechanistic philosophy that virtually defined the Enlightenment, roughly the period beginning with the publication of his *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687) to the publication of Immanuel Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793). Newton was neither a materialist nor an atheist. But his conception of God was quite different from the pre-Enlightenment conception of God as the Author of creation. Newton pictured God as one who was "very well skilled

in mechanics and geometry." A century later, William Paley famously compared God to a skilled watchmaker. And today many Christians think in terms of an Intelligent Designer who acts in a scientifically detectable fashion. Instead of a divine Author who *speaks* the universe into existence, creates all things through his *Word* and is the "*author* and finisher of our faith," we now have a supernatural Craftsman who has fashioned an incredibly complex machine, capable of pretty much running on its own, except when God miraculously intervenes to suspend the "laws of nature" or when humans, with their God-given free will, make autonomous choices, independent of all antecedent physical causes.

These two competing conceptions of God assume different ideas about how God acts vis-à-vis his creation. The Craftsman model assumes a theory of mono-causation, while the Authorship model assumes a theory of dual-causation. Mono-causation assumes that everything has *either* a natural cause *or* a supernatural cause. Thus, when we come across things which are either too complex and/or improbable for science to explain in terms of natural causes, the justifiable inference is that they must have a supernatural cause. Dual-causation, on the other hand, assumes that God is the primary cause of *everything's* existence. Nonetheless the created order is informed so that the agency of real secondary causes is also responsible for what happens. Thus, nothing happens without a physical cause. However, as we will explore later, this does *not* justify the inference that God is absent, irrelevant, or uncaring. As the cause of our very being, God is closer, more involved, and more solicitous of our good than anyone else, including ourselves.[1]

The simplest way to understand the difference between mono-causation and dual-causation is to consider two distinct ways people can cooperate to achieve a goal. If a rock is too heavy for any single person to move, then two people might tie a rope to it so that they can both pull on the rope to exert a sufficient force to move the rock. In such a case, each person might contribute 50 percent of the force necessary to move the rock.

But there is a quite different way two people can work together to achieve a goal. Many years ago a friend and colleague said he was going to make an exquisite pasta dish for dinner and asked if I would like to join him. I immediately accepted the offer, though I was very puzzled. You see, my friend is a quadriplegic—how, I wondered, was *he* going to cook for me? When I arrived at his house, it soon became clear how he would do this. After the standard chit-chat, my friend politely began giving me instructions—"get two cloves of garlic from the pantry, three tablespoons of

1. "Because in all things God himself is properly the cause of universal being which is innermost in all things, it follows that in all things God works intimately." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica,* I 105.5; see also *Summa Theologica,* I 8.1.

olive oil, finely chop three leaves of basil . . . ." It continued like this for about thirty minutes, in part, because many of the ingredients and techniques he employed I had never heard of before, and hence, my friend was forced to give extremely detailed (and to his mind, elementary!) instructions. Yet when we finished, the pasta was truly exquisite.

So here's the question: who made the pasta—me or my friend? While in one sense we "cooperated," it would be wrong to describe this as a case where he and I each did 50 percent of the work. No, in the most important sense, my friend did *everything* because I was only the set of hands he used to prepare the pasta. While my hands did the physical work, they would have been utterly useless without his detailed instructions. Nonetheless, there was a real dignity in what I did and the words "well done, good and faithful servant" would have made perfect sense.

Besides thinking in terms of mono-causation, Enlightenment thinkers had a penchant for *universal* laws. Newton's "laws of nature," after all, were applicable to *everything*. So too, when Kant described a religion that functioned "within the limits of reason alone" this meant forming a conception of God under which everyone would be treated equally and fairly. Like the "laws of nature," the "laws of morality" must be universal. A God who failed to meet these criteria, Kant thought, would ipso facto be immoral, and hence, unworthy of our worship.

This made it extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, for Kant to reconcile himself to the irreducibly *particular* claims of Christianity. It was the Jews, not the Egyptians, Assyrians, or Babylonians, to whom God said: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gen 12:2); and it was Jesus, not Confucius, Lao-tzu, or Buddha, who died on the cross to reconcile the world unto himself. Such particularity is scandalous if one begins with Enlightenment assumptions. Chapter 6 examines these assumptions and finds them wanting.

Chapter 7 considers a third issue that arises from the Enlightenment penchant for the universal. What makes a house good in Alaska and what makes a house good in Hawaii are quite different. So it would be silly to search for the *universal* laws of constructing good houses. But the Enlightenment credo that *everyone* has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness remains at the center of our moral and political philosophies. And this means that much contemporary ethical philosophy is focused on resolving ethical dilemmas, i.e., what should we do when different people's rights conflict? Lying is wrong because everyone has a right to have their questions answered truthfully. But when the Gestapo asks, "Have you seen any Jews?", should we still answer truthfully, even when it means almost

certain death for someone else? Solving puzzles like this has become a central issue for those who begin by assuming that ethics is all about discovering, protecting, and promoting universal rights.

The ethics of Aquinas and Barth take a very different approach. For them the crucial moral question is not *knowing* what to do in difficult cases, but *doing* what one already knows should be done in the most ordinary cases. When St. Paul wrote "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do," he had no difficulty knowing what was good; his only problem was finding the power to "just do it."

Aristotle had much to say about the virtues and habits that are developed through good instruction and lots of practice. These provide one source of "power" for doing good. And we will not belittle these. But St. Paul, Aquinas, and Barth all argued that though virtues and habits are real secondary sources of power for doing good, the primary power is the work of the Holy Spirit that proceeds from the Father and the Son. In the end, Christian ethics *is* Christian theology and Christian theology *is* the theology of grace.[2]

In chapter 8 we move from the ethics of grace to the politics of stewardship. We do this to highlight the radical difference between an ethic focused on universal *rights* versus one focused on what we have been *given.* It is John Locke, perhaps the most important Enlightenment political philosopher, who is primarily responsible for this misstep. His influence is clearly visible in our Declaration of Independence and his central argument still convinces many Christians and non-Christians alike.

Locke argued that prior to a social contract that brought governments into existence, the whole of creation was God's and God's alone. In this primitive state, God's bountiful creation supplied more than enough to meet everyone's needs, so the lack of government was not a significant problem. Nonetheless, Locke thought that for people to gather more food than they could use before it rotted and went to waste would be morally wrong and insulting to the Creator. But with the invention of money all this changed. Humans had now invented a way to turn the fruits of their labors into something that would never rot, and hence, would never go to waste. So from here on, when humans freely "mixed" their labor with the land, they acquired an individual *right* to the fruits of their labor which had no limits. No longer were individuals limited in how much they could accumulate and call their own. A couple of generations later, David Hume argued

2. "It is the Christian doctrine of God, or more exactly, the knowledge of the electing grace of God in Jesus Christ, which decides the nature of theological ethics." Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* II.2, 543.

that this right to property was not only unlimited, but that the protection of private property was *the* central purpose of government.[3]

Enlightenment political theory had moved a great distance from the political thought which preceded it. Though a theory of "natural law" had already been formulated and defended by Aquinas, there is only a superficial connection between it and the Enlightenment theory of "natural rights." One indication of the breadth of the divide is Aquinas's clear and adamant insistence that property law is *not* part of the law of nature, but instead, a part of positive law (i.e., man-made law) which is neither universal nor absolute. Thus, he would argue that, "It is not theft, properly speaking, to take secretly and use another's property in a case of extreme need: because that which he takes for the support of his life becomes his own property by reason of that need."[4] We agree with Aquinas. Since God is the primary cause of all we are or have, being good stewards (cooperating, secondary causes) of what we are given precludes any absolute and unlimited *right* to property.

Chapters 4 through 8 all, in one way or the other, invoke the idea of dual-causation. But how can humans truly be free and responsible agents if God is the primary cause of everything? Doesn't free will require that our actions are wholly our own? On the other hand, if God is the Author of *all* of creation, then how can we be anything more than mere characters in a play or drama who do exactly what the script says we will do? In short, how can free will and predestination possibility be reconciled? And isn't this the ultimate either/or choice? Isn't it logically impossible to say Yes to both?

Chapter 9 will address these questions head on. In it I argue that there are two distinct conceptions of freedom. The first, which we will call autonomous freedom, cannot logically be reconciled with a robust understanding of predestination. The second can. When Jesus said to his disciples, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free," he had in mind a very different conception of freedom. Moreover, not only is the sort of freedom that Jesus promised logically compatible with predestination; it *requires* predestination.

A still greater problem remains—the problem of evil. One consequence of the Enlightenment's emphasis on human autonomy that many Christians still find very attractive is that it seems to provide an explanation for pain and suffering. If we, and not God, are ultimately responsible for our free choices, then the pain and suffering caused by humans is *our* fault, not God's. And conversely, if on the assumption of dual-causation we are *only* secondary causes, then doesn't God bear the ultimate responsibility for all

3. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice*, chapter 15.
4. *Summa Theologica,* II-II 66.7.

the pain and suffering caused by humans? So without a robust doctrine of free will understood in terms of human autonomy, it seems that the problem of evil is philosophically insoluble.

While there is no denying the appeal of the "free will defense" to the problem of evil, chapter 10 articulates and defends an alternative approach. In this pre-Enlightenment approach, God's transcendent existence is the ultimate good and evil is the ultimate privation. Evil is the "impossible possibility" that God permits, but does not cause. This is not a philosophical *explanation* of evil. Aquinas and Barth have no philosophical solution to the problem of evil. Instead, they remain content to *describe* evil's effects on God's good creation. Our utterly inexplicable turning away from all that brings joy and happiness toward that which brings only sorrow and destruction cannot be explained. Yet our fallen foolishness also makes fitting the incarnation with the great and glorious salvation found in Christ's death and resurrection.

Nevertheless, no theologically adequate description of demonic evil can ignore the fact that it *deserves* the wrath of God. In the final two chapters, we will explore three distinct ways of understanding God's wrath. Since the time of Augustine, many Christians have thought of it in wholly punitive terms. In this view, God's wrath is the everlasting punishment experienced by those in hell. However, there has always been a second understanding of hell. Though it has clearly been a minority position in the history of the Church, a few Christians have argued that the wrath of God is always restorative and ultimately redemptive. While some people will have to go *through* hell, in this second view, God's wrath ultimately succeeds in bringing *all* humans first to repentance and then to redemption.

The final chapter outlines yet a third view of hell. It follows Barth and says Yes to *both* the punitive and the redemptive aspects of God's wrath. On the cross Jesus suffered the wholly *punitive* wrath of God; for everyone else, God's wrath is ultimately *redemptive*, though it does include a punitive aspect. Yet Barth insists that he is not a universalist. Is he being subtle or simply slippery?

If we assume an Enlightenment conception of freedom in terms of autonomy, then Barth is clearly being slippery. Given this assumption our eternal destiny is wholly in our own hands and the choice for or against God is ultimately our own. No matter how much God *desires* that all will be saved, there is no way that he can *assure* that this will be the case. But if by "freedom" we mean the freedom Jesus promised to his disciples, then Barth's position is subtly defensible. The bottom line is that we must neither affirm nor deny that all will be saved, but we must also unceasingly hope and pray that hell will be emptied. As Edith Stein once said, "Human freedom can be

neither broken nor neutralized by divine freedom, but it may well be, so to speak, outwitted."[5]

Now, a note on heroes and villains. Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth are clearly the heroes of this book. So who are the villains? That's not nearly as obvious. Rene Descartes, Isaac Newton, David Hume, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant are all frequently mentioned, and rarely in a positive light. But I wouldn't consider them villains. And I would certainly never suggest that there isn't much to be learned by reading them. Nor would I suggest that there isn't much to learn from the Enlightenment to which they all contributed. Of course, given the subtitle of the book, the reader can rightfully expect that the Enlightenment will receive some serious criticism. But my goal is not to find and punish villains.

A Thomist of the previous generation, Etienne Gilson, frequently compared the history of philosophy to the scientist's laboratory. When science is working as it should, no one criticizes individual scientists just because their theory is proven false in the laboratory. Coming up with good scientific ideas and theories is hard work that only great minds can do well. And the fact that a scientist's idea or theory doesn't work in the laboratory does not belittle the scientist. The only scientists who deserve criticism are those whose ideas are too vague or inchoate to permit rigorous testing. So too, Gilson argued, coming up with good ideas and theories in philosophy is hard work which only great minds can do well. And while scientific ideas are frequently tested by expensive tools, philosophical ideas can only be tested by history. Given the interconnection and resonances of philosophical ideas, it takes centuries for all the implications of a great philosopher's ideas to become clear. Descartes, Newton, Hume, Locke, and Kant were all great philosophers. But now, two-and-a-half centuries after they died, even mediocre philosophers are able to put their fingers on mistakes and implications that were invisible at the time they were first proposed.

What's more, the great philosophers we discuss sometimes had vague intuitions of future difficulties that would arise when their ideas were simplistically and perfunctorily applied to ethical, political, or theological problems. A great tool only produces great results in the hands of a skilled craftsman. So great philosophers frequently qualify and nuance their big ideas with numerous fine distinctions.

And while fine distinctions have their place, this book is not one of them. My goal is not a careful exegesis of past philosophers. Instead, I assume with Thomas Aquinas that "the study of philosophy has as its purpose to know not what people have thought, but rather the truth about the way

5. Quoted in Balthasar, *Dare We Hope,* 221.

things are."[6] If historical scholars can point to more nuanced and qualified statements which demonstrate that these great philosophers did not really endorse mechanism, universal quantification, and mono-causation, then so much the better!

Finally, a note on reading this book. The book focuses on big ideas about God, miracles, and free will. But the conclusions I reach are not deductions from alternative "presuppositions." Instead, I try to build a case based on a wide range of issues and specific examples for a decidedly "unmodern" approach to these questions. While my goal is to study the forest, doing this requires much time looking at individual trees. So to make sure the "big picture" is not lost, each chapter begins with a short abstract. These should keep the forest more clearly in focus.

I have also included fairly extensive footnotes, many of which include quotes (some fairly long) from both primary and secondary sources. These can easily be ignored without substantial loss. The primary purpose of the footnotes are twofold. First, to make clear the utter unoriginality of my arguments. Second, to provide interested readers with references to my decidedly unmodern way of thinking.

Of course, I am speaking loosely when I refer to *my* thinking. "Thoughts" are not *owned* like cars or pieces of property. A book like this is the product of countless hours of discussion with friends and colleagues. Here are a few that immediately come to mind and deserve my heartfelt thanks: Dan Barnett, Greg Cootsona, John Wilson, Dave Montoya, Bill Martin, Scot Hoiland, Michael Machuga, Matt Caldwell, Michael Fitzpatrick, Andrew Lavin, Justin Gilley, Jay Gallangher, Robin Parry, David Yeago, James Madden, Gary Deddo, and David Opderbeck. And finally I must acknowledge the computer skills of my wife, Kathy—without her my frustration level with all things technological could have easily prolonged this project beyond the useful life of my neurons.

6. Aquinas, *Commentary on De Caelo [On the Heavens]*, I.22, quoted in Stump, *Aquinas,* 9.