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Hugh McCann on the Implications of Divine Sovereignty

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Abstract. This review article summarizes and in part criticizes Hugh J. McCann's detailed elaboration of the consequences of the idea that God is absolutely sovereign and thus unlimited in knowledge and power in his 2012 *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*. While there is much to agree with in McCann's treatment, it is argued that divine sovereignty cannot extend as far as he would like to extend it. The absolute lord of the natural and moral orders cannot be absolutely sovereign over the conceptual and modal orders.

Hugh McCann is an old pro in action theory and the philosophy of religion whose expertise is well-displayed in the eleven chapters of his magisterial *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*.[1] This is a book whose technical detail will give professionals quite a bit to chew on but whose clarity and coverage of a wide range of topics also make it suitable as an introduction to analytic philosophy of religion for advanced students. McCann's central conviction is that God is absolutely sovereign, so much so that God is not only sovereign over the natural order, but also over the moral order, the conceptual order, and the divine nature itself. The book can be summed up by saying that it is a detailed elaboration in all major areas of the consequences of the idea that God is absolutely sovereign and thus unlimited in knowledge and power.

Chapter 1 presents an inductive cosmological argument for the existence of a creator. The argument takes the form of an inference to the best explanation: given that the world exists and exists contingently, the best explanation of its existence is dependence on a self-existent creator. The best explanation, however, is not the only possible one. So McCann does not affirm the necessary truth of 'If the world exists, then God exists.' Nor, somewhat surprisingly, does he affirm the necessity of the consequent of this conditional. One might think that a being

[1]Hugh J. McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012). Pp. x + 281. ISBN 978-0-253-35714-4.

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that is self-existent or *a se* must be a necessary being. McCann, however, denies the entailment from aseity to necessity (20). And yet McCann sees his book as an exercise in perfect being theology (1). I wonder: would not an absolutely or maximally perfect being, one than which no greater can be conceived (Anselm), have to be necessary, existent in all metaphysically possible worlds, and not contingent, existent merely in some? Many would hold that absolute perfection is inconsistent with contingent modal status. And if God were contingent, how could his existence explain why there are contingent beings? Near the end of the book, however, it emerges that an absolutely sovereign God cannot be subject to a pre-existent modal framework. The Lord of all must be the lord of modality as well. So, if I understand him, McCann would meet my objection by saying that God is *a se* but neither necessary nor contingent. He is beyond both. Later we shall see that this involves difficulties of its own.

If God is the best explanation, then a naturalistic explanation of the world's existence must be excluded. McCann does an admirably lucid and convincing job of excluding it by showing that secondary or natural causation cannot be existence-conferring. If it were existence-conferring, then a naturalist could argue that the existence of the present state of the universe depends for its existence on earlier states. A universe with an infinite past would then have the resources to explain itself: the universe is just the sum total of its states and each state has an explanation of its existence in terms of earlier states. But this fails for three reasons. First, secondary causation is not existence-conferring for reasons that space constraints prevent me from detailing.[2] One of them, though, hinges on the Humean point that the causal nexus is not observable (18). Second, the entire infinite series of states might not have existed at all which implies that, even if each state derives its existence from an earlier one, we are left with no explanation of why there is this infinite series of existence-conferring states in the first place. Third, our universe, according to current cosmology, has a finite past. There is, however, a nuance that McCann seems to miss. Even if our universe is *metrically* finite, being some 12–13 billion years old, there could still be continuum-many earlier states prior to any given state. If causation is a continuous process, then one might argue that even a metrically finite universe could cause itself to exist in that every state has an earlier state.[3] But this suggestion too fails due to the first and second points.

One thing troubles me, however. Why couldn't the universe just exist as a matter of brute fact? Even if the theistic explanation is the best explanation,

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[2]One could devote an entire book to this fascinating topic. I hurry over it because I agree with McCann. See my "The Hume-Edwards Objection to the Cosmological Argument," *Journal of Philosophical Research* vol. 22 (1997): 425–43.

[3]I discuss and reject this argument in "Could the Universe Cause Itself to Exist?" *Philosophy* 75 (2000): 604–12.

why does the universe need *any* explanation? This is the problem of the seeming gratuitousness of the question, Why something rather than nothing? The question invites the response, Why not? Barry Miller thought it very important to deal with this problem.[4] It is not clear to me why McCann does nothing to block the brute fact objection or mention Miller's discussion of it.

Chapter 2 tackles the problem of the relation of primary and secondary causation. Since natural causation is not existence-conferring, God must be involved as a sustaining cause at each instant in the universe's career. Now if the universe cannot persist on its own, but requires divine sustenance at each instant, how is this compatible with the full reality of the universe, a reality that requires the exercise of genuine causal powers in created substances? How does one avoid occasionalism, the doctrine that God alone is a genuine cause and that natural "causes" are but occasions on which God exercises his power? McCann adopts a transfer theory of causation, according to which causation is a continuous process whereby such conserved quantities as energy and momentum are transferred from cause to effect. The upshot is a division of causal labor according to which God confers existence upon natural substances which then interact in natural ways. It may be, however, that McCann goes too far in his zeal to uphold the reality of the universe. He tells us that "A world sustained by God is . . . as real as it could [would] be if it sustained itself" (27). That makes no sense to this reviewer. God and the universe cannot exist in the same way given that God is self-existent while the universe is dependent in its existence on God.[5]

Chapter 3 defends the conception of God as eternal and argues that divine eternality is consistent both with God's creating the world and his omniscience. For if God is absolutely sovereign, and subject to nothing, then he cannot be subject to time: he cannot be a being in time who exists at every time. He cannot be sempiternal or everlasting; he must be timelessly eternal.

Starting with chapter 4 the book takes a turn toward the more "human" topics: evil, sin, suffering and the problems they pose for a theism of McCann's austere sort. Chapter 4 addresses the ancient problem of reconciling the existence of natural and moral evil with the existence of an omniqualified deity. The standard free will defense is presented and two vexing questions are raised with respect to it. One of them is how an absolutely sovereign God could have his power limited by the libertarian free will of some of his creatures. The other is how divine foreknowledge is consistent with human freedom. McCann rejects the Molinist *scientia media* solution to the second problem. One of his reasons

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[4]Cf. Barry Miller, *From Existence to God: A Contemporary Philosophical Argument* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 5–8. Cf. my review in this journal, 67 (1993): 390–4.

[5]I argue this out, with explicit reference to McCann, on my weblog in "Could God and the Universe be Equally Real?" http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2013/06/could-god-and-the-universe-be-equally-real.html.

is that the solution requires counterfactuals of freedom which in turn require haecceities. But there are no haecceities. Another reason for the rejection of middle knowledge is that many subjunctives of freedom lack a truth value. If there is no middle knowledge, however, then the standard free will defense is a failure. The free will defense maintains that moral evil comes into the world due to the exercise of libertarian freedom on our part. But then God's absolute sovereignty is compromised both in respect of knowledge and power.

Chapter 5 addresses the problem of the reconciliation of divine sovereignty and human freedom. If God is absolutely sovereign, then he is responsible for the existence of everything, including our exercises of will. But then how can our wills be free? There is no problem if free will is understood along compatibilist lines, but McCann wisely rejects compatibilism in favor of a form of libertarianism without agent causation. Having already persuasively argued that there is no existence conferral in event causation, McCann plausibly shows that the same is true for agent causation: creaturely agents lack the power to confer existence on their own actions. But a key tenet of libertarianism is preserved on McCann's account: the operations of free will do not have event-causes as on determinism and compatibilism. The autonomous agent is thus a "center of novelty" (101). Two positive features of free agency are then specified: the "actish phenomenal quality" (Carl Ginet) of free acts and the fact that a free decision is intrinsically an intention to decide.

The problem, however seems to remain: if our exercises of will are brought into being and maintained in being by divine omnipotence, then how on earth (or in heaven) could such exercises count as libertarianly free? If God creates my decision to review McCann's book, then it would seem that God is the free source of this decision and I am not. McCann's solution is to maintain that, just as my free decisions have no temporally antecedent event-causes in the natural order, they also have no logically antecedent divine event-causes. My decisions are free because they are neither naturally nor theologically determined. God does not operate upon us, making us do this or that, "he operates in our very willing, so that his will is done through ours, but without any kind of forcing" (106). The relation of divine to human willing is like that of a novelist to his characters, not like that of a puppeteer to his puppets. The novelist cannot make a character do something; he can only make him doing it. The will of the novelist and the will of the character do not conflict but coincide. I will try to explain McCann's meaning using the example of J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. The main character in this novel is Holden Caulfield. Salinger created Caulfield as doing and saying various things. But the novel having been written, Salinger could not intervene in its action, inserting himself into it, perhaps stopping Caulfield from using the word "crumby" or altering his view that the adult world is phony. In this sense, a novelist cannot make a character do something; he can only make

him doing it. Unlike the puppeteer who intervenes moment-by-moment as the action unfolds on the stage, the novelist creates the novel but cannot intervene in the action as it unfolds on the page.

Similarly, God cannot make me review McCann's book, but he can and does make me reviewing it. Thus there is no ontological or causal distance between the divine and human will. God does not make us act, he makes us acting (108). We are in no way self-creating. We do not create our free actions via agent causation *ex nihilo* like little gods; we are created freely acting.

Are we then but characters in a divine novel enjoying a merely mental or fictive existence? McCann answers in the negative, but not very convincingly. "We, of course, have more than a mental existence; we are real" (107). But how? We are not independently real; we are not real in the way that God is real. God, as self-existent, does not depend in any way on us for his existence. We are real, but wholly dependent on God for our entire being at every instant. But then, it seems to me, we do have a mental existence after all: we exist as merely intentional objects "in" or rather before the mind of God who is, of course, a pure spirit or mind. The upshot is that on McCann's scheme we cannot be subjects capable of an I-Thou relation with God any more than characters in a novel are subjects capable of an I-Thou relation with the novel's author. We are as it were sucked into the divine mind and reduced to the status of merely intentional objects whose entire being is our being for God. McCann's scheme threatens to destroy the transcendence of the human person. Robust free will may perhaps survive the excision of agent causation, but not the elimination of the spontaneity and interiority that come with genuine subjectivity. The divine plan is for some of us to enjoy for all eternity fellowship with God in the Beatific Vision. But this is as impossible on McCann's scheme as a novelist's enjoying fellowship with his characters. McCann is aware that the novelist-character analogy fails at this point (123), but conceding this doesn't help him since it is his operative model of creation.

Even if chapter 5 is successful in reconciling divine sovereignty with human freedom, there remains the problem of God's apparent involvement in our wrongdoing. If our every exercise of will is created by God, does that not make him the author and approver of sin? Chapter 6, "Sin," explains why not. The sinfulness of sin consists in moral rebellion; no one, including God, can be in moral rebellion against himself; so sin is impossible for God (120). McCann again reaches for the novelist-character analogy. If a mystery writer has one character murder another, the writer incurs no guilt. Similarly with God and O. J. Simpson (my example). God can't make O. J. murder, but does make O. J. murdering. The sin, however, rests entirely with O. J.

The difficulty here is that, while McCann gets God off the hook, he does so by denying to human creatures genuine agent status. A character in a novel

is not a genuine agent. While the novelist incurs no guilt, the character doesn't either. But a murderer in real life is guilty, and so a God who creates a world in which someone murders arguably must share in the guilt in the absence of agent-causation and could-have-done-otherwise free will. The rest of chapter 6 and the whole of chapter 7 contain a wealth of fascinating material impossible to summarize in the space allotted. Topics include salvation, reprobation, hell, suffering, and soul-making.

In chapter 8 McCann attempts to provide an account of God's freedom of will that renders it consistent with God's absolute sovereignty. There are two challenges to God's freedom: the hard problem and the easier problem. The hard problem arises from God's not having accidental properties. Such properties either would have no explanation, in violation of sufficient reason; or else their explanation would involve entities external to God, which would make God dependent on something outside of himself for part of what he is. All of God's properties must therefore be essential. But then God has essentially the property of willing me to review McCann's book. If so, God could not have willed differently, in this matter or in any other, in which case he is not libertarianly free. McCann postpones his solution to the hard problem until the final chapter.

The easier problem arises from the divine omnibenevolence. If God is essentially perfectly good, then he cannot but do the best. If it is better that he create than not create, then he creates. And assuming that he has alternatives, he creates the best of all possible worlds. But then it seems that God has no choice but to create, and to create the best of all possible worlds. The divine nature thus forecloses on all creative possibilities but one, which implies that God cannot be free in the libertarian "could have done otherwise" sense. The easier problem rests on two presuppositions. It presupposes a deliberative model of creation, and it presupposes that among the available options, there is only one that is best.

Accordingly, there are two ways of solving the easier problem. One way is by rejecting the second presupposition: either by maintaining that there is no maximally best world, that there is instead an upward progression of worlds to infinity in respect of goodness, or by granting that there is a maximally best level, but that it is occupied by more than one possible world. The other way is the way of McCann: that of rejecting the deliberative model of creation. Real creation does not follow a plan. Only an inferior God would need one. God creates the world and the world's plan in one blow. Since God does not create from a plan, his freedom is not restricted by any plan. A consequence of McCann's rejection of the deliberative model is that no sense can be attached to the question whether it is better that God create some world rather than no world, or this world rather than that world. God creates what he creates.

If God is absolutely sovereign, then he is lord of all orders including the moral order. This requires that the rightness of what is right and the wrongness of what is wrong cannot have independent standing, but must have their source in God. And if sin is rebellion against God, and thus a personal affront to God, then God cannot be a mere transmitter of moral injunctions, but their source. So chapter 9 finds McCann embracing a divine command theory of morality.

Simple divine command theories, however, come in for a drubbing. One problem is arbitrariness. If the wrongness of killing the innocent derives from God's forbidding it, then, had he not forbidden it, it would have been permissible, and if he had commanded it, it would have been obligatory—which is absurd. A second problem concerns reliable moral knowledge. If the created world supplies no insight into right and wrong, and rightness and wrongness derive from divine dictates, then a form of elitism results: only those few who are *en rapport* with the divine will can claim to have moral knowledge. This is counterintuitive to say the least. Most of us poor schleps enjoy a modicum of moral knowledge without benefit of a hot line to the divine. (My way of putting it.) A third problem is one of securing divine authority. Divine commands are no doubt authoritative, but whence divine authority? We would be in for a vicious infinite regress were we to say that God commands that we obey his commandments. But then there is one obligation for which the simple divine command theory cannot account, namely, the obligation to obey divine commands.

To circumvent these difficulties, McCann supplements the simple command theory with a form of moral intuitionism according to which our awareness of right and wrong arises from the experience of felt obligation. Divine edicts are not superimposed on the world but embedded in it. Deontic properties supervene on the descriptive natures of actions. This eliminates the problem of arbitrariness. It also explains how ordinary people can have epistemic access to divine commands. But if moral imperatives are embedded in the world, how is it that they come from God? They come from God in that the world comes from God.

Chapter 10 argues the absolute sovereignty of God over what McCann calls, perhaps misleadingly, the conceptual order: the entire Platonic menagerie of propositions, possible worlds (when construed along abstractist as opposed to Lewisian lines as maximal sets of propositions or maximal Fregean propositions or maximal abstract states of affairs), numbers, universals, and the like. All such items depend on God not only for their existence, which is not particularly controversial, *but for their nature as well.* Accordingly, God creates all abstracta and all associated conceptual truths, including all logical and mathematical truths. But it is not as if he first creates the abstracta and then the contingent beings according to the constraints and opportunities the abstracta provide. Creation is not a "two-stage process" (201). God does not plan, then produce. Creation

is a single timeless act in which natures are "created in their exemplifications" (201) and associated necessary truths along with them. Creating cats, God creates felinity by the same stroke. The creation of cats is not the causing of a previously existing unexemplified nature, felinity, to become exemplified. It is the creation in one and the same act of both the abstractum and the concreta that exemplify it. Another way God can create felinity and triangularity is by creating cat-thoughts and triangle-thoughts. Although my thinking about a triangle is not triangular, my thinking and its object share a common nature, triangularity. This common nature exists in my thinking in a different way than it does in the triangle. The main point is that God does not create according to specifications pre-inscribed in Plato's heaven, specifications that God must take heed of: there are no pre-existing unexemplified essences or unactualized possibilities upon which God operates when he creates. God does not create out of pre-existing possibilities, nor is his creation an actualization of anything pre-existent. Creation is actualization as little as it is deliberation. The essences themselves are created either by being made to exist in nature or in minds.[6]

This is problematic, however. Felinity is necessarily felinity and logically could not be, say, caninity. So it seems God is constrained after all: he is constrained by *the nature of these natures.* He has no control over felinity's being what it is. It is, in itself, necessarily what it is, and not some other nature, and God is "stuck" with the fact.

So a further step must be taken to uphold divine sovereignty in its absoluteness. It must be maintained that there are no broadly logical possibilities, impossibilities and necessities that are ontologically prior to divine creation. Prior to God's creation of triangles, there is no triangularity as an unexemplified essence, and no possibilities regarding it such as the possibility that it have a different nature than it has, or the necessity that it have the nature it has, or the possibility that it be exemplified or the possibility that it not be exemplified (211). The idea is that triangularity and the like are beyond modality: it is neither the case that triangularity is necessarily what it is nor that it is not necessarily what it is. There are no common natures and modal truths pertaining to them logically prior to God's will. Natures and the truths associated with them are created when things having those natures are created. As McCann puts it, "It is only in what God does as creator that the very possibilities themselves find their reality" (212). What this means is that possibilities are real only when actual: there are no real mere possibilia.

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[6]See also my weblog entry, "McCann, God, and the Platonic Menagerie," http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2013/02/mccann-god-and-the-platonic-menagerie.html.

In this way, God is made out to be absolutely sovereign: there is nothing at all that is not freely created and thus not subject to the divine will. My worry is that this scheme entails the collapse of modal distinctions. Notionally, of course, there remain distinctions among the senses of "possible," "actual," "necessary," and other modal terms. But if in reality nothing is possible except what is actual, i.e., what God creates, then the three terms mentioned have the same extension: the possible = the actual = the necessary. This violates our normal understanding of modality according to which the possible "outruns" the actual, and the actual "outruns" the necessary. We normally think that there are in reality, and not just epistemically, possibilities that are not actual, and actualities that are not necessary. We suppose, for example, that there are merely-possible states of affairs (including those maximal states of affairs called "worlds") that God could have actualized, and actual states of affairs that he might have refrained from actualizing. On this sort of scheme, creation is actualization. But on McCann's it is clearly not. So I am wondering whether McCann's absolute sovereignty scheme entails the collapse of modal distinctions. In actuality, there are cats. But might God not have created cats (or a world in which cats evolve)? No. He created what he created and that is all we can say. We can of course conceive of a world other than the world God created, but on McCann's scheme it is not really possible. It is not really possible because there are no unexemplified essences and modal framework that predelineate what God can and cannot do. Such a framework is inconsistent with absolute sovereignty. God does what he does and that is all we can say. Real modal distinctions collapse. God's creation of the world is neither necessary nor contingent. It just is. And the same goes for God. He just is. This is why in chapter 1 (20) McCann balked at the seemingly obvious inference from aseity to metaphysical necessity (existence in all broadly-logically possible worlds). God is *a se* but not necessary because on McCann's scheme modal distinctions collapse, both for God and for the created world.

I think this collapse of modal distinctions causes major trouble for McCann's project. For the project begins in his first chapter with a cosmological argument for a self-existent creator. Such an argument, however, requires as one of its premises the proposition that the world of our experience be contingent in reality; it must be really such that it might not have existed. (If it is not really contingent, then its existence does not require explanation.) I don't see how this proposition is logically consistent with the last sentence of chapter 10: "'Could have' has nothing to do with what goes on in creation" (212). The problem in a nutshell is this: McCann argues *a contingentia mundi* to a creator whose absolutely sovereign nature is such as to rule out the reality of the very modal framework needed to get the argument to this creator off the ground in the first place. To put

it another way, if McCann's God exists, then the world of our experience is not really contingent, and his cosmological argument proceeds from a false premise.

Here is another serious problem. On McCann's view, there are no modal truths to which God is subject, no modal truths over which he has no control. If there were even one such truth, God would not be absolutely sovereign. But surely there is at least one such truth, the truth that it is broadly-logically impossible that God create himself, which is an instance of the truth that nothing can cause its own existence. McCann himself insists on both of these truths (212, 215). Therefore, God cannot be absolutely sovereign. He is subject to the necessity that nothing cause its own existence. But if there is even one modal truth to which God is subject, then there is an infinity of them. ("Necessarily, nothing can cause its own existence" has an infinity of entailments.)

In his final chapter, McCann defends the divine simplicity. This is necessary for his project since an absolutely sovereign God cannot be dependent upon universals that exist independently of his will. He cannot *have* the universals that comprise his nature; he must in some sense *be* them. On the other hand, God cannot be a set of universals, or a big conjunctive universal, or each of the universals is an ingredient in his nature. For then God would be a causally inefficacious abstractum. No such object could create a world or be a knowing, loving, free person. A viable simplicity doctrine cannot maintain that God is identical to his attributes if these are *abstracta*. The simple God must be concrete.

One way to rescue concretion is to construe God as a property-instance or trope. Rejecting this suggestion of William Mann, McCann proposes that we think of God as a concrete state of affairs. Such states of affairs are to be distinguished from abstract states of affairs. Contrast *Booth's assassinating Lincoln* with *Booth assassinating Lincoln*. Both are states of affairs, but only the former is concrete. Whereas the former is an act (act-token), the latter is an act-type. The former was causally efficacious; the latter is disbarred from causal efficacy by its ontological category. McCann's proposal, then, is that God be thought of as a concrete state of affairs along the lines of *Michaelangelo's creating of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling*.

Thus is concretion secured, but whither simplicity? A concrete state of affairs such as *Socrates' being pale* is a complex both the subject and the property constituent of which are necessary for its identity. Tropes, by contrast, are simples: the paleness trope in Socrates, though it cannot "migrate" to Plato, does not have Socrates as a constituent and so is not tied to the philosopher for its identity. Now McCann is well aware that the ontological complexity of concrete states of affairs does not comport well with divine simplicity. But he thinks it is the best we can do.

Although McCann doesn't say it, it seems to follow from his whole approach that God cannot be a member of any extant ontological category: he

cannot be a universal or a set or a trope . . . or a concrete state of affairs. Indeed, if he is absolutely sovereign, then God must somehow be the creative source of the ontological categories themselves, how many there are and what they are, and not merely of the natures (essences) of members of categories. God must transcend all categories. Taken to the limit, absolute sovereignty would seem to imply absolute transcendence—and absolute ineffability. Clearly, this is what the simplicity doctrine culminates in and is meant to preserve. So there is a tension here if not a contradiction: it cannot be true both that God is beyond all ontological categories and is a member of the category of concrete state of affairs. But if we are to have any conception of God at all, we must force him into some extant category or other, and for McCann the category of concrete states of affairs is the best we can do. One walks a tightrope when one attempts to avoid reducing God to a being among beings and also attempts avoid negative theology with its "nothing can be said positively about God."

Beyond the characterization of God as a concrete state of affairs, we can say that God is more like an event than a state. God is a "primordial event," one that is "timeless" (228). Somehow God is dynamic but unchanging. But God is also a person, a being that knows and wills. McCann rightly points out that categorizing God as a concrete state of affairs is more in keeping with his personal status than categorizing him as a universal or as a trope. The "inexpungibility of the subject" (229) in a concrete state of affairs comports well with the irreducible personality of God. With universals and tropes there is no such inexpungibility. No universal or trope is tied necessarily to any *particular* particular.

What does the personal God will? He wills himself as Aquinas said. And in willing himself, he wills other things as Aquinas also said (*Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 75). McCann concludes from this that God is "identical with his creating the world" (229). But this is deeply problematic because it seems to entail that this particular world of ours with McCann, me, and his book could not have failed to exist. It is also not what Aquinas maintains. McCann invokes *SCG* I, 75, but ignores *SCG* I, 81 wherein Aquinas maintains that, while God in willing himself wills other things, he does not will other things *of necessity*. If "God just *is* his creating the universe" (230), then the universe cannot be contingent. But if so, the argument for God in chapter 1 cannot be mounted.

McCann's theological speculation reaches its apex with the thought that "God is, essentially, an act of free will, and that "God's having the nature he does turns out to be *in itself* an act of his sovereignty" (231). Thus, God freely undertakes to have the nature he has such that the divine nature falls under the divine sovereignty and is subject to divine control. God does not *happen* to have the nature he has. He makes himself have that nature, but without making himself exist. McCann's God is like Sartre's Man: his existence precedes his essence. (My comparison, not McCann's.) There is no divine essence that God

exemplifies any more than, for Sartre, there is a human essence or nature that Sartre and McCann exemplify. And like Sartre's Man, God has control over what he is but not that he is.

It is the facticity (to use a Sartrean word) of the divine existence over which God has no control. Here, then, absolute sovereignty reaches its limit. Is this a problem for McCann's view? If God is not sovereign over his very existence (facticity), then his sovereignty is not absolute; it is, instead, relative to, and dependent upon, the fact of his existence, a fact he is not master of. An absolutely sovereign God would have to be the creative source not only of every nature including his own but also of every existence including his own. As it is, McCann's God appears a bit like Sartre's Man writ large. His existence is a brute fact without cause or explanation, hence absurd, especially in light of his not being a necessary being. He can make his own essence and make the essence of everything else; but he cannot make himself exist. At this point his sovereignty collapses.

Finally, we come back to the vexing problem of modality and the putative collapse of modal distinctions. On McCann's scheme, it appears that there is only one possible world: the actual one in which he writes his book and I review it. But then our world is necessary, not contingent. If so, the divine aseity and self-sufficiency are severely compromised. For these attributes imply that God has no need of a created realm at all to be fully what he eternally is. The divine reality is plenary: creation cannot add to it or subtract from it. McCann attempts to evade the difficulty by maintaining that

God's "freedom as creator is such as to transcend all modality" (234). Prior to creation there is no system of broadly logical possibilities and necessities that God entertains or consults or deliberates over. And it is not as if God "first" creates the modal framework and "then" actualizes one of the possible worlds.

McCann's conclusion seems to be that neither God nor the created world exist either necessarily or contingently. They just exist, "amodally." But if we cannot say that God exists necessarily while the world exists contingently, then we cannot express the aseity and sovereignty of God. We have to be able to say this: God can exist without the world, but the world cannot exist without God. Not only must we be able to say it, we must be able to say it with truth, which implies that God must be *de re* necessary and the world *de re* contingent. Furthermore, we have to be able to say that the world depends for its existence on God, but that God does not depend for his existence on the world. But existential dependence is a modal notion: "*y* is existentially dependent on *x*" entails "it is not possible that *y* exist and *x* not exist."

The last two paragraphs of the book struggle with this problem, but unsuccessfully in this reviewer's judgment. The discussion is so murky that I cannot be sure I have understood it. But here goes. McCann rightly holds that possible worlds are abstracta, maximal sets of propositions or maximal abstract states

of affairs. Even better for his purposes would be to think of possible worlds as maximal Fregean (as opposed to Russellian) propositions. For God to exist in every world would then be for God to exist *according to* every world-proposition. Now in a sense this is a *de dicto* matter: if every maximal proposition or dictum conveys the information that God exists, then God exists in all (i.e., according to all) possible worlds, and conversely.

But what McCann seems to miss is that if God exists according to every world proposition with *de dicto* necessity, then God exists in reality with *de re* necessity. *Pace* McCann, it is incoherent to maintain that "even if the proposition *There is a God* does turn out to be necessarily true, the *de re* claim that God himself exists necessarily would be false" (235). Note first that all of the world-propositions are merely possibly true except one which is actually true. The actual world—which is not to be confused with the concrete universe or the concrete universe plus the concrete God—is the one true maximal proposition. Now if God exists according to every maximal proposition, and one of those propositions is the true maximal proposition, then the truthmaker of this true proposition must be God himself who exists with *de re* metaphysical necessity. God exists according to all world propositions because God necessarily exists in reality. So it cannot be the case that God is neither *de re* necessary nor *de re* contingent—which is what McCann maintains. The book ends on this note: "The foundational reality is simply this: God is" (235). Thus there is no *de re* necessity that God exist, nor any *de re* possibility that he not exist.

In closing, I suggest that divine sovereignty cannot extend as far as McCann would like to extend it. God cannot be absolutely sovereign because he himself is subject to modal constraints. First, God cannot create himself. Second, the divine aseity, *pace* McCann, entails both the divine *de re* metaphysical necessity and the *de re* metaphysical contingency of the created realm. Aseity is a modal notion: it implies the possibility that God exist without the world, and the impossibility that the world exist without God. Third, God's being the best explanation of the world's existence entails that the world needs an explanation, which is true only if the world is contingent—which it cannot be if McCann's scheme is correct.

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