

Creation and the Sovereignty of God. By Hugh J. McCann. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012. 280 pages. \$39.95.

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Rarely do we find a work in philosophical theology that is novel yet firmly entrenched within the theistic tradition. Hugh McCann's majestic treatment of God's absolute sovereignty as creator is such a work. God is a perfect, simple, timelessly eternal being who, by virtue of his creative activity, is solely responsible for the world and its entire history. McCann conceives of his project as "a study of God as creator and of problems that attend that concept" (1). And problems lurk around every corner, problems McCann adroitly solves as he defends his favored conception of God.

In chapter 1, McCann presents an inductive version of the cosmological argument to show that the existence of the everyday world is best explained by the activity of a creator. The most important property the creator must have, says McCann is aseity, "if the creator is to ground the existence of contingent beings, he himself must exist of his own nature; there can be no distinction in him between essence and existence" (12). But here, McCann moves too fast. All aseity asserts is that there is no external explanation for a thing's existence. It is a further *substantial* metaphysical claim to say that aseity entails that essence and existence are indistinguishable. Many will balk at such a claim for it seems obvious that the two concepts *are* distinguishable, even for a being that exists *a se*.

If the creative activity of God is alone responsible for the existence of the world and its entire history, then God is the ultimate micromanager. No detail is too small that it is left to chance or delegated to any subordinate agency or intervening mechanism. Questions quickly arise. What space is there for the operation of secondary causes? Is God blameworthy for sin and

suffering? Call the problem raised by these questions and more like it, the Problem of the Divine Micromanager.

In Chapter 2 McCann addresses the Problem of the Divine Micromanager with respect to the natural order. If the world and its entire history are the sole responsibility of God, we are forced into the following dilemma: either Occasionalism is true or secondary causation cannot be understood as an existence-conferring operation. Occasionalism is unattractive at best and at worst, as McCann argues, the physical world becomes a sham. The second horn of the dilemma appears no better, for as long as causation is understood as existence-conferral, there is no workable division of labor between God and nature such that God is still an active participant in all the world's operations (30-35). McCann's way out is to deny that causation in the natural order should be understood in terms of existence-conferral. Instead, causation is a *process* whereby conserved quantities of energy and momentum are transferred to produce new manifestations of what already exists. As the primary cause, God is responsible for the existence of all, even though the products of his creation genuinely interact and exert real influence upon each other. Thus McCann ably shows how God's absolute sovereignty as well as the real powers and natures of entities in the world can be upheld.

The dialectical pattern of the book is also revealed: (a) God's absolute sovereignty is asserted; (b) some well-motivated (even cherished) aspect of reality that appears incompatible with God's absolute sovereignty (natural powers, human freedom, objective morality, necessary truth, God's nature) is affirmed; and (c) it is argued that there is a plausible account of the latter which is fully compatible with the former. This result (c) is far from trivial—if successful, there is no need to sacrifice our commonly held convictions about God, man, or the world—a result many will find attractive.

In Chapters 4 to 7 McCann again addresses the Problem of the Divine Micromanager, this time with respect to sin and suffering. If God is responsible for the existence and history of the world, then it seems God is to blame for sin and suffering. But then, God is not perfectly good. McCann rejects the most common response to the problem of sin and suffering, the free-will defense, which places God at a distance from sin by making our (libertarian) will ontologically independent of his. Still, there is a version of libertarian freedom, one that rejects the idea of agent-causation, which is compatible with God's absolute sovereignty over our willings. God is creatively responsible for our willings, but not through some mechanistic relation where he issues a command and our wills are violently overridden. "He does not operate upon us, or from without; he operates in our very willing, so that his will is done through ours, but without any kind of forcing" (106). Perhaps we can think of it this way. On the standard free-will defense, God creates free creatures who will to sin, whereas on McCann's story, God will's the sin of free creatures. As long as God is justified in willing sin, then God cannot be found morally at fault for our wrongdoing—we are in need of a theodicy of sin. We are also in need of a theodicy of suffering, for God too wills the harm done as a result of sin and the evil that arises from the normal operations of the world.

Meaningful friendship with God requires that we be in a position to choose responsibly to accept or reject God's offer of love, and such a position can only be accomplished from a stance of sinfulness. Furthermore, the acceptance and overcoming of suffering contributes to our "soul making," thus securing the basis for true fellowship with God. The salvation and moral development of sinners, as well as the ultimate defeat of evil are great goods; hence God is justified in willing sin and suffering. But what about the unsaved? McCann rejects the idea that all sinners will eventually be saved, even as he admits God *could* bring all sinners to repentance

simply by operating in his role as creator. Once admitted, I wonder, why is *that* scenario not the best possible world instead of our actual situation, where God consigns some sinners to damnation? McCann has no answer. Instead, we are to hold that unrepentant sinners are effectively cut off from the sustaining power of his creative will upon death, and cease to exist. Still, McCann thinks *every* instance of suffering a rational agent faces is ultimately part of some good *to* that agent. I find this hard to reconcile with annihilationism, for the cessation of existence seems to be a great evil, and it is hard to square this reality with the “overwhelming love” (154) of God. McCann seems forced to this position given his particular understanding of sovereignty, and one begins to wonder if the costs of such an extreme conception begin to outweigh the benefits.

The costs continue to add up in the last part of the book. Contrary to appearance, this is the best possible world (Chapter 8). In fact, it is the only world God could create, for “prior to the creation of what is real there are no possibilities” (212)—God did not survey all possible worlds and choose, according to some principle of action or his nature, which world to bring into being. Rather, he acts with complete freedom and absolute spontaneity. Further, the moral and conceptual order, indeed God’s very nature, must not be ontologically prior to God’s creative will, otherwise, “he is reduced to a robotic existence” (199). Hence, God’s commands are the source of morality (Chapter 9), and the natures of things (indeed all abstracta) are created by God “in their exemplification” (201)—that is, in creating cats, God creates the property *being feline*, in creating a triangle, God creates the property *being triangular*, and so on (Chapter 10). Regarding God’s own nature, he is creatively responsible for it, without conferring existence on himself in that “that nature finds its first and only reality in the completely spontaneous act of God intending to have that nature—the act that is God himself” (232). As “pure act,” God is

timeless (Chapter 3) and simple; he is an “event-like” (228) concrete state of affairs (Chapter 11).

McCann’s position is brilliantly argued, clear, and properly motivated. One is tempted, given the theoretical elegance of his account of God’s sovereignty, to impute it with the stamp of truth. Still, I have my doubts. Chief among doubts is that it is not clear McCann’s position can be coherently maintained. In his unfettered freedom, God even chooses his own nature lest he be constrained by anything distinct from his will. But it is hard to see how God can freely choose his nature *unless* he already has a determinate nature—the very thing McCann is at great pains to rule out—minimally; prior to his choosing, God must be such that, essentially, he is *able* to freely choose a (complete) nature. But, then it seems God isn’t solely responsible for his nature after all and McCann’s God is neither sovereign nor free. Perhaps, as I have suggested, the problem lies in his extreme conception of sovereignty. Perfection doesn’t require it, and traditional theism can get by without it. All that is required for divine sovereignty is that no explanation trace *through* God to some more ultimate context. Why not understand God to be a substance, a fundamental unity that is the final explanation of all reality? If so, God is ultimate in terms of explanation and control, hence as sovereign as can be. Regarding divine freedom, it is not clear that the above limitations would be of any real consequence: being “constrained” by one’s nature doesn’t seem to be destructive of freedom. God is still the sole determiner of his action as creator, and his creative activity can still be understood as spontaneous and intentional, hence free, even if planned.

A final worry relates to McCann’s employment of perfect being theology. A notorious problem for the perfect being theologian is how to judge between competing modal and value intuitions when erecting a conception of a perfect God. McCann’s more fine-grained intuitions

can be challenged: *contra* McCann, some perfect being theologians think perfection entails necessary existence, and that God have the nature he has ontologically prior to his acting. Nor do all agree with McCann that perfection entails simplicity, that timeless existence is the most perfect mode of existence, or that God always acts for a sufficient reason (the Principle of Sufficient Reason is not obviously intuitively true and may be false), or with complete spontaneity in creating. McCann may be right, but he is not obviously so, limiting his project's overall appeal. My worries now stated, McCann's book is a must read for those interested in God's relationship to his creatures for the simple reason that he offers a solution that treats both seriously.