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**The Nature of God & Predestination in John Davenant's *Dissertatio De  
Praedestinatione et Reprobatione***

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*B. A. Politics, Philosophy, & Economics, The King's College, 2013*

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**Abstract:** This paper is an exposition and defense of John Davenant's critique of the lapsarian understanding of the ordering of God's decrees. I evaluate Davenant's use of theology proper in his critique of said debate and contend that if Davenant is correct about divine simplicity and divine immutability, his critique of lapsarianism is successful.

**Keywords:** predestination, reprobation, infralapsarianism, supralapsarianism, divine simplicity, divine immutability, John Davenant, Reformation, classical theism.

## **i. Introduction**

John Davenant (1572-1641), an English Reformed theologian and delegate to the Synod of Dort,<sup>1</sup> was known and respected for his works on predestination and the atonement. A recurring theme in Davenant's work is a critique of an intra-Reformed debate about the ordering of the divine decrees. Whereas the supralapsarians believed that God's decree to save some held a priority over his decree to allow the fall, the infralapsarians believed that the decree to allow the fall held a priority to the decree of election. Davenant in his *De Praedestinatione et Reprobatione* contends that if God acts in a way ordered by metaphysical priority and posteriority, God cannot be simple or immutable—a conclusion both supralapsarian and infralapsarian theologians would want

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<sup>1</sup> The Synod of Dort was an international council of Reformed theologians and churchmen especially convened to deal with a number of controversial theological issues such as predestination, the extent of the atonement, and especially with the issues brought about by the theology of Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), a Dutch theologian who believed that predestination was based on foreseen faith in Christ. Controversy developed for a few reasons: 1) according to classical theology, there is no cause for God's actions other than God, and the theology of Arminius seems to indicate otherwise. 2) A key tenet of Reformed Protestantism is that there is nothing in man that causes his salvation, and the Reformed believed that Arminius made foreseen faith a cause of salvation. 3) The Reformed believed that Arminius seriously tweaked with the traditional understanding of predestination. According to this understanding, faith is a gift prepared by God's decree of predestination. Thus, unless God grants the gift of faith, there is faith for him to foresee. For a history of the Synod of Dort: Geeraert Brandt, *The History of the Reformation and other Ecclesiastical Transactions: Volume IV* (London: No Publisher, 1723), 1-4.

to avoid. Here I provide an exposition and defense of Davenant's critique of the lapsarian debate. My contention is that if Davenant's understanding of divine simplicity and immutability is correct, his critique of lapsarianism succeeds.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to furthering the scholarship about John Davenant, of which there is precious little, my hope is that this brief study will aid our understanding of the relationship between ancient and medieval theology and that of the early modern Protestants.<sup>3</sup> My observations here will push back against a stream of scholarship which contends that Protestants departed from the classical understanding of God.<sup>4</sup> Older works that argue as much include Louis Bouyer's *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*,<sup>5</sup> and Hillaire Belloc's *The Great Heresies*,<sup>6</sup> and of course of G. K. Chesterton famously had many things to say about the Calvinist God. Perhaps the best known comes from *Milton: Man and Poet* where he states, "The first conception of Calvinism is a fierce insistence on the utterly arbitrary nature of power. The King of the Cavaliers was certainly not so purely willful, so sublimely capricious a sultan, as the God of the Puritans."<sup>7</sup> There are also recent works

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<sup>2</sup> Here I use the term *lapsarian* to refer to either the supralapsarians or the infralapsarians. What both parties hold in common is that they both believe that some divine decree is prior to some other divine decree. As we shall see, this schema can be understood in at least two different ways.

<sup>3</sup> There is not a single book on Davenant and there are no essays on him in the contemporary literature. Michael Lynch, a Ph.D. candidate at *Calvin Theological Seminary*, is writing his dissertation on John Davenant, and I have received invaluable help from him.

<sup>4</sup> Here I will use the terms *Protestant* and *Reformed* interchangeably. I am convinced that the same argument can be made from a Lutheran vantage point, but, I will limit myself to Reformed Protestantism.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (Princeton: Scepter Publishers, 2001). Originally published by Newman press in 1965.

<sup>6</sup> Hillaire Belloc, *The Great Heresies* (London: The Catholic Book Club, 1940).

<sup>7</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *Milton: Man and Poet* (New York: *The Catholic World*, 1917), 467.

that further this thesis such as Brad S. Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*<sup>8</sup> and Michael Allen Gillespie's *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. In this work, Gillespie makes the following astonishing claim:

With this emphasis on divine determinism, nominalism was able to avoid Pelagianism, but the price was high, for the notion of predestination not only relieved humans of all moral responsibility, it also made God responsible for all evil. John of Mirecourt saw this conclusion as the unavoidable consequence of his own nominalism, admitting that God determined what would count as sin and who would act sinfully. Nicholas d'Autrecourt went even further, declaring that God himself was the cause of sin. While this conclusion for good reason was not emphasized by most nominalists, it was too important to remain submerged for long, and it emerged in all of its distinctive power in the period of the Reformation.<sup>9</sup>

Both Gillespie and Chesterton portray Reformed protestants as believing that God's power is such that he can both cause and be responsible for evil. The root of this radically new understanding of God was, supposedly, the protestant rejection of the classical understanding of God. A rejection that comes with multiple unintended consequences.<sup>10</sup>

All of these works have one thing in common: they stress that Protestants departed from the traditional doctrine of God, of which Aquinas is taken to be its greatest expositor. While it is undeniable that Protestants rejected a number of the theological commitments of medieval Catholicism, claims that Protestants departed from the traditional doctrine of God are rather misleading. Indeed, such studies have not sufficiently noted, or noticed, the continuities between the Protestant and the medieval understanding of God. What is clear, despite the claims made by the proponents of this

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<sup>8</sup> Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 29.

<sup>10</sup> For a survey of this literature see the massive footnotes 5-7 in: Richard Muller, "Not Scotist: understandings of being, univocity, and analogy in early-modern Reformed thought," *Reformation & Renaissance Review*, Vol. 14. No. 2 (2012): 128-129.

discontinuity thesis, is that when it comes to divine simplicity and immutability, there is a clear continuity. Indeed, these two categories are crucial to Davenant's critique of the lapsarians.

What follows, in outline, is this: (1) First, I provide a brief biographical sketch of John Davenant and highlight his importance as a representative figure of the Reformed tradition. (2) Second, I outline Davenant's commitments to classical theism; more specifically, his commitments to divine simplicity, and divine immutability. With this outline we will then be able to (3) provide a fuller sketch of the lapsarian debate and (4) Davenant's critique of it. Once Davenant's critique is on the table, I will then contend that if Davenant's commitment to classical theism is correct, his critique of lapsarianism is successful. (5) In order to give a fuller exposition of Davenant's thought, I will then examine the kind of lapsarianism or ordering of the decrees that Davenant deems appropriate.

## **ii. Biography**

John Davenant was educated at Cambridge University and was later appointed president of Queen's College Cambridge, a post he held from 1614 to 1621. Near the end of his post at Cambridge, he was summoned as a delegate to the Synod of Dort, and, at the end of his post, he became the Bishop of Salisbury from 1621 to the end of his life in 1641. In addition to holding important positions of ecclesial authority, Davenant was also known for his theological works.<sup>11</sup> The English theologian John Arrowsmith (1602-

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<sup>11</sup> For a full biography of John Davenant see: Morris Fuller, *The Life, Letters & Writings of John Davenant* (London: Methuen 1897).

1659)<sup>12</sup> went so far as to call Davenant the "Augustine of his time."<sup>13</sup> Even two centuries after his death, the historian William Cunningham wrote the following about Davenant's predestination treatise:

...a most thorough and masterly exposition and defence of the views *ordinarily* held by Calvinists in regard to election and reprobation. Indeed, we do not believe that there exists a better or more satisfactory vindication of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, in both its branches of election and reprobation.<sup>14</sup>

Cunningham not only notes the excellence of Davenant's treatise, but also indicates its representative nature. It didn't take two-hundred years for the excellence of Davenant's work to be acknowledged. In his own day, Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656),<sup>15</sup> while discussing the Arminian controversy, wrote, "I desire never to read more than my Lord of Salisbury's [i.e. Davenant's] Lectures touching Predestination and Christ's death.' 'They are excellent, learnedly, soundly, and perspicuously performed.'"<sup>16</sup> And herein lies the importance of John Davenant: he was a respected theologian within the Reformed tradition who held posts of significant authority, and was also an influential delegate at the international Synod of Dort—which was one of the most important Protestant

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<sup>12</sup> John Arrowsmith, other than being a Reformed churchman and Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University, was also a member of the Westminster Assembly—perhaps the single most important council in the Reformed tradition. See: Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly* (New Jersey, P & R Publishing, 2009), 33.

<sup>13</sup> John Arrowsmith, *Tacita Sacra Sive De milite Spirituali Pugnante, Vincente, et Triumphante Dissertatio, Tribus Libris comprehensa* (Cambridge: John Field, 1657), 47: "Quibus paria sunt quae sui temporis Augustinus, nostrae Angliae et imprimis Academiae Contabrigiensis decus singulare D. Davenantius Sarisburiensis...."

<sup>14</sup> William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1862), 205. Italics mine.

<sup>15</sup> James Ussher was a famed Reformed scholar and the Archbishop of Ireland who had a strong influence upon the Westminster Assembly. See: Letham, *Westminster Assembly*, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan D. Moore, "James Ussher's Influence Upon the Synod of Dort," in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*, ed by Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 176.

councils. Furthermore, as we have seen, Davenant had the ear and the respect of other important Reformed theologians. What all of this means is that understanding Davenant will help us better understand early modern Protestantism.

## **ii. John Davenant's Classical Theism**

### ***Simplicity***

As stated earlier, there are a number of scholars who claim that the Reformation represents a break with the ancient and medieval way Christians have thought about the nature of God. In this section, we will simply take it that Aquinas is a good representative of classical theism.<sup>17</sup> Contrary to the claims made by the proponents of the discontinuity thesis, John Davenant and Thomas Aquinas are in substantial agreement in their understanding of God's nature. Davenant, for instance, appeals to divine simplicity and immutability to critique the lapsarians. In order to understand his critique, we will see how Davenant defines these terms and demonstrate that Davenant's use of these categories is in harmony with Aquinas.

While Davenant does not define simplicity in his *De Praedestinatione*, he discusses simplicity in his *Determinationes*. First, Davenant defines simplicity saying that, "...no diversity of parts, either *essential* or *accidental*, is to be found in the Divine nature." To this, Davenant adds: "...the Divine essence is in every respect uncompounded; so that it is impossible that anything which is distinct from the Godhead itself, whether of the nature

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<sup>17</sup> For the sake of variety, I will use the terms *classical theism*, *the traditional understanding of God*, and so forth, interchangeably.



of *substance*, or of *accident*, can be either combined with it, or superadded to it."<sup>18</sup>

Elaborating further, Davenant writes:

The eternity of God renders it impossible that the divine nature can be compounded of distinct parts. For that declaration of God concerning himself is true: *Before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me* (Isaiah XLIII. 10). But every compound is necessarily posterior to those things of which it is compounded, and also to the author of the composition; for things which are distinct from each other, do not coalesce into one substance, unless they are combined by means of some agent. Whoever, therefore, represents God as a compounded being, must necessarily acknowledge some cause of the combination more ancient than God himself. For it is impossible that any compounded thing can be the first thing in nature.<sup>19</sup>

According to this argument, parts, and whatever brings parts together, exist prior to the composite being. An eternal being cannot be composite, because nothing exists prior to an eternal being. Thus, if we take God to be eternal, as Davenant and everyone involved in the lapsarian debate did, we must conclude that God is without parts, that is to say, that God is simple. This very argument was made by Aquinas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*:

Every composition, likewise, needs some composer. For, if there is composition, it is made up of a plurality, and a plurality cannot be fitted into a unity except by some composer. If, then, God were composite, He would have a composer. He could not compose Himself, since nothing is its own cause, because it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now, the composer is the efficient cause of the composite. Thus, God would have an efficient cause. Thus, too, He would not be the first cause—which was proved above.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> John Davenant, *A Treatise on Justification together with translation of the Determinationes*, trans. Rev. Josiah Allport (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1846), 344.

<sup>19</sup> Davenant, *A Treatise on Justification*, 345.

<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.18.5, trans. Anton Pegis (New York: Hanover House), 1955. Accessed June 28, 2017.

<http://dhspriority.org/thomas/english/ContraGentiles1.htm>.

The resemblance in this argument is unmistakable. No composed being can be prior to all created things, for every composite being must be brought together by a composer or some agent. In other words, every composite being is created and cannot be the creator of all things, for it is impossible for such a being to create its "composer"—a composer which must necessarily be prior since nothing can be its own efficient cause. Nevertheless, since God is prior to all things, there can be no composer prior to him that causes his existence. The conclusion of this line of argument is that there is no composition in God, he is absolutely simple, and without parts. Here we see not only that Davenant defines simplicity as Aquinas does, but we also note that his arguments for simplicity are strikingly similar.

### ***Immutability***

Divine immutability, according to classical theists, is conceptually related to divine simplicity. For, if God is simple and pure act, God must also be immutable. When Davenant invokes this concept he points his readers to the classic Scriptural text: "in God there is no alteration or shadow due to change."<sup>21</sup> Davenant explains this passage in the following way: "These words exclude all change in either the essence or in the working of the Divine nature."<sup>22</sup> Divine immutability, then, means not only that God *does not* change, but that he *cannot* change.

In order to understand the conceptual relationship between simplicity and immutability, a brief sketch of the distinction between act and potency is in order. M. De

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<sup>21</sup> James 1:17.

<sup>22</sup> John Davenant, *Dissertationes Duae: Prima de Morte Christi... altera De Praedestinatione et Reprobatione*. Quibus subnectitur ejusdem sententia de Gallicana controversia. (Cambridge: Roger Daniels, 1650), 108. The translations from Davenant's treatise on predestination are my own.

Wulf, in his *An Introduction to Scholastic Philosophy*, outlines the distinction between act and potency in the following way:

Actuality (actus) is therefore the degree of being... of actual or positive perfection in a thing... potentiality (potentia), the mere capacity of receiving some such complement of being or perfection— it is non-being, therefore, if you will, yet not mere nothingness, but such non-being as implies within itself the real principle of a future actualization. This actualization, this passage from the potential to the actual state, bears the technical name of movement...<sup>23</sup>

Thus, something is in act insofar as it exists in concrete reality and something is in potency insofar as it lacking in concrete existence but could be moved to act under the right causal circumstances. For example, a wooden table is in act with respect to extension—it really occupies space. This same table is in potency with respect to its being on fire. With the right amount of heat, this table could be in flames. With the categories of act and potency so defined, we can see the relationship between simplicity and immutability in Aquinas's classic argument for divine immutability:

First, because it was shown above that there is some first being, whom we call God; and that this first being must be pure act, without the admixture of any potentiality, for the reason that, absolutely, potentiality is posterior to act. Now everything which is in any way changed, is in some way in potentiality. Hence it is evident that it is impossible for God to be in any way changeable.<sup>24</sup>

Here Aquinas is appealing to the conclusion of an argument he articulated for the existence of God. One of the conclusions of this argument is that there must be a being who is absolutely prior to all. Now, act is prior to and determines potency. A wooden table has the potency for being on fire because of the kind of thing that the wooden table

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<sup>23</sup> M. De Wulf, *An Introduction to Scholastic Philosophy*, trans. P. Coffey (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1907), 99-100.

<sup>24</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I.9. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benzinger Bros, 1947. Accessed June 28, 2017. <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/FP.html>.

is (prior to its combustion). Thus, in order for the table to be flammable (potency), the table must already concretely exist in a certain way (act). Thus if God is simple and in potency, he would be purely and entirely in a state of potency, and this would mean that even God's being would be in potency—and if God exists, that state of potency must be made actual by a being other than and in act prior to God. But, since there must be a first being prior to all things, and that being is simple, that being must be pure act (seeing that such a being indeed exists) and therefore cannot be a composite between act and potency. Therefore, if one embraces the categories of divine simplicity and God as *actus purus*, as both Davenant and Aquinas do, one must embrace divine immutability.

Aquinas's second argument for divine immutability is also derived from God's simplicity:

Secondly, because everything which is moved, remains as it was in part, and passes away in part; as what is moved from whiteness to blackness, remains the same as to substance; thus in everything which is moved, there is some kind of composition to be found. But it has been shown above (I:3:7) that in God there is no composition, for He is altogether simple. Hence it is manifest that God cannot be moved.<sup>25</sup>

The argument here is relatively straightforward. If something changes in any way, and that something is not destroyed, then some part of that something changes and another part remains the same. Therefore, in order for something to change, that something must be composite. God, however, if God is simple he cannot have a part that remains unchanged and a part that changes, for God would be without parts. Therefore, if God is simple, he is also immutable.

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<sup>25</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I. 9. Art. 1.

What these arguments from Aquinas's *Summa* show is that the principles Davenant has embraced, namely divine simplicity and therefore God as pure act, necessitate that God be immutable. Davenant (or Aquinas) cannot embrace divine simplicity and God as pure act and reject divine immutability without also embracing a metaphysical contradiction.

Here we have not sketched out a full argument for either immutability or simplicity. Instead, we have simply defined these terms and examined their relationship. For the purposes of our study here, what is important is the function that divine simplicity and immutability play in Davenant's argument. As will become clear, explicitly rejecting simplicity or immutability is out of the question for Davenant's target audience, and demonstrating that the lapsarians implicitly reject these categories would be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum*.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Davenant sees no need to argue *for* simplicity or immutability, instead he argues *from* them that to posit priority or posteriority in God is erroneous.<sup>27</sup>

### **iii. Lapsarianisms**

While the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) is primarily known for its attempt to resolve the Arminian controversy, it was also the scene of heated intra-confessional conflicts. When the members of the Synod were discussing the issue of lapsarianism, the theologian

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<sup>26</sup> The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, for instance, approved by both supra and infralapsarians states that: "There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable..." Westminster Assembly, *Westminster Confession of Faith*, II.I.

<sup>27</sup> Whereas here we are primarily interested in outlining the continuity between Aquinas and Davenant, those interested in pursuing the case for immutability further would do well to consult: Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), and: Michael Dodds, *The Unchanging Love of God* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641)<sup>28</sup> became so agitated that he challenged Matthias Martinius (1572-1630)<sup>29</sup> to a duel. Fortunately for Martinius, the president of the Synod managed to cool down the affair. After doing so, the president decided that such a moment of peace was a fitting occasion to conclude the meeting in prayer. Anyone thinking that peace had been reached would have been mistaken. Immediately after prayer, Gomarus renewed his challenge.<sup>30</sup> It was the lapsarian debate that so motivated Gomarus, that he was willing to kill his fellow Reformed theologian.

### ***Lapsarianism Critiqued***

There are two ways of understanding lapsarianism: the first posits a real priority and posteriority as ordering God's acts of willing. The second way holds that ordering the decrees is an act of creatures attempting to understand the one act of a simple God. Davenant is concerned with critiquing this first kind of lapsarianism. Before turning to Davenant's critique, a brief sketch of the lapsarian positions will be of use.

The very heart of the lapsarian debate is about how we should order the divine decrees. Whereas the supralapsarians believed that the decree of predestination and reprobation was prior to the decree to allow the fall, the infralapsarians believed that the decree of predestination and reprobation was posterior to the fall. J. V. Fesko summarizes the debate as follows:

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<sup>28</sup> Franciscus Gomarus was the chair of theology at the Academy of Saumur and a famed supralapsarian at the Synod of Dort. See: Kestutis Daugirdas, "The Biblical Hermeneutics of Socinians and the Remonstrants in the Seventeenth Century," in *Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe*, ed. Keith Stanglin et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 97.

<sup>29</sup> Matthias Martinius was a German theologian who was influential in the development of certain themes in Reformed theology: W. J. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669)* (2001), 25.

<sup>30</sup> An account of this episode can be found in: W. Robert Godfrey, "Popular and Catholic: The Modus Docendi of the Synod of Dort," in *Revisiting the Synod of Dort*, ed by Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 243.

According to a basic supralapsarian position man is predestined *creabilis et labilis* (creatable and fallible). In other words, man is a creatable possibility and is capable of falling into sin. According to a basic infralapsarian position man is predestined *creatus et lapsus* (created and fallen). In the former, God does not take into account man's fall into sin in the decree of election; in the latter, the fall is factored into the eternal decree of election.<sup>31</sup>

The question, then, is whether God performed the predestining decree with the understanding of man as creatable and able to fall, or as created and fallen. According to the supralapsarians, God decreed who would be saved, then to create, and then ordained the fall. The infralapsarians, on the other hand, believe that God first decreed to allow the fall, and then performed the predestining decree. Thus, both the infralapsarians and the supralapsarians are trying to answer the following question: what is the proper ordering of God's decrees?

Davenant, however, contends that the assumptions of the lapsarian debate, if understood as positing a certain kind of priority and posteriority in God's act of willing, are incompatible with the traditional doctrine of God. For lapsarianism assumes that in God's decree of all things there is an order of priority and posteriority and that this relation of priority actually exists within the Godhead. And this relation of priority, Davenant argues, is contrary to God's simplicity and his immutability, and this, of course, compromises the traditional doctrine of God. On this point, Davenant is worth quoting at length:

First, it should be understood and maintained that, if we consider the nature and perfection of God in himself, we learn that God does not see one thing first and then another, nor does he decree or will something first and afterwards something else. On the contrary, in a sole and most-simple

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<sup>31</sup> J. V. Fesko, "Lapsarian Diversity at the Synod of Dort," in *Drawn into Controversie*, ed. Michael Haykin and Mark Jones, (Göttingen, KG: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 99-123.

act, God has seen all things at once, and has at the same time decreed all things through himself. A most firm argument for this may be found in God's immutability, "in God there is no alteration or shadow due to change" (James 1:17).<sup>32</sup> These words exclude all change in either the essence or in the working of the Divine nature. For if we imagine that God, in operations understood as immanent in him, works as if in succession, that God understands this first and that next, wills this first and then that, we thus set up in God a change from potency to act—and this is contrary to his most absolute simplicity. Therefore, Ambrose,<sup>33</sup> or whoever the author was, rightly said, "In God there is no accident, no motion, and there is neither a new will nor a temporal plan. No, his thought is not altered by the irregularity of changeable things, but he comprehends all times and temporary things by a firm and eternal glance." Hilary<sup>34</sup> also supports this by denying that in God exist "individual thoughts of things" and asserting that "all things pertaining to God depend upon an equal infinity of eternity." All the Scholastics and theologians, which I have seen, agree, except one Vorstius<sup>35</sup>, whose shameful hallucinations are actually refuted in school theology.<sup>36</sup>

Before proceeding to examining Davenant's critique, we will first need to understand what exactly is being critiqued. While we have discussed the rudimentary features of the lapsarian debate, what we must do now is understand the ontological status of the priority and posteriority relation Davenant deems incompatible with an

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<sup>32</sup> James 1:17. The translation is my own. It is unclear which text Davenant is relying on.

<sup>33</sup> Prosper of Aquitaine, *De Vocatione Gentium*, in vol. 2 of *Opera*, 5 vols., ed. Desiderius Erasmus (Basel, 1538), II.10 [p. 46]. In translation: Prosper of Aquitaine, *The Call of All Nations*, trans. P. De Letter, S.J., *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation* 14 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1952), 2.33 [p. 147]. In the early modern period, the authorship of *De Vocatione Gentium* was disputed. Some thought that Ambrose (340-397) was its author, while others considered Prosper [390-455] its author. Prosper, a Roman layman, was perhaps the most well-known of Augustine's disciples.

<sup>34</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* in *D. Hilarii Pictavorum Episcopi Lucubrationes Quotquot Extant*, ed. Desiderius Erasmus (Eusebius Episcopus and Nicolaus Episcopus: Basil, 1570), XII [p. 192]. In translation: *Ibid.*, *On the Trinity* in *NPNF2* 9, XII.40 [p. 228]. Hilary of Poitiers (310-367) was a Latin Bishop in what is now France.

<sup>35</sup> Conrad Vorstius (1569-1622) was a Remonstrant (Arminian) theologian. He succeeded Jacob Arminius in the chair of theology at Leiden. For more on Vorstius see: Kestutis Daugirdas, "The Biblical Hermeneutics of Socinians and the Remonstrants in the Seventeenth Century," in *Arminius, Arminianism, and Europe*, ed. Keith Stanglin et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 93-95.

<sup>36</sup> Davenant, *De Praedestinatione et Reprobatione*, 107-108.



orthodox theology proper. Seeing that Davenant himself does not define the kind of priority and posteriority he deems problematic, we will have to discern it from a careful and charitable reading of the text.

A first reading might lead some to believe that Davenant is critiquing a temporal ordering, for instance, Davenant states that, "God does not see one thing first and then another."<sup>37</sup> While one cannot deny that terms such as "first" and "then" lends themselves to such an interpretation, a charitable reading of Davenant suggests a different interpretation. Seeing that the lapsarians were committed to divine immutability, it is exceedingly unlikely that they would also conceive of God as performing discrete acts at distinct temporal moments, for this would require God to do something he had not previously done, which would very obviously violate divine immutability. Additionally, if Davenant wanted to critique a temporal ordering of God's acts, it would have been sufficient for him to argue from divine immutability, but, we see that the ordering which Davenant has in mind is contrary to divine simplicity as well. All of this suggests that Davenant has something other than a temporal ordering in mind.

One might also take Davenant to be critiquing a logical ordering of the divine decrees. After all, much of the secondary literature talks about the lapsarian debate as being about the logical ordering of the divine decrees. Fesko, for example, while summarizing the supralapsarian position, states that it does not order the decrees chronologically, but logically.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps such a way of thinking about the lapsarian

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<sup>37</sup> Davenant, *De Praedestinatione et Reprobatione*, 107.

<sup>38</sup> J. V. Fesko, "Lapsarian Diversity at the Synod of Dort," in *Drawn into Controversie*, ed. Michael Haykin and Mark Jones, (Göttingen, KG: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 108. And: Nicolas Fornerod, "A Reappraisal of the Genevan Delegation," in *Revisiting the Synod of Dordt*, ed by Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 209.

debate is helpful, but one would be hard pressed to find a discussion on the ontology of logical priority in such secondary literature. Logical priority, then, as I will discuss here, poses no problem to divine simplicity or immutability. For instance, according to Aristotelian categories, genus is logically prior to species, but in the order of being, a creature does not belong to a species before it belongs to a genus—it belongs to both simultaneously. Additionally, a creature is not in itself divided between genus and species—a creature is not part of whatever genus it belongs to and part to whatever species it belongs to, all of its parts belong to both. Seeing that a logical ordering requires no distinction in parts or any kind of movement from potency to act, it seems unlikely, then, that such an ordering would be Davenant's target. We can also say the following about the relationship between logical priority and the divine decrees: it is logically necessary that creation and the fall occur prior to the incarnation. God, clearly, decreed that things happen in a certain order, and this is not at all incompatible with Davenant's claim that God decreed all things in a single and simple moment.

Thus, we need an ordering that is neither temporal nor logical. It seems, then, that what Davenant has in mind is a non-temporal metaphysical ordering. For the ordering that Davenant has in mind requires multiple and discrete acts of God's will. An example of such an ordering is the manner in which the earth is illuminated by the rays of the sun. In this case, the rays of the sun illuminating the earth is metaphysically prior to the earth being illuminated by the rays. In this case both events happen simultaneously and the distinction between the two is not merely logical: without the active illumination by the rays of the sun, the passive reception of that same light by the earth would not occur. In the context of the divine decrees, this would mean that while God's decrees occur at the same temporal moment, that moment in which they occur is not simple but

contains or is constituted of multiple acts of God's will. These acts of God's will, or decrees, then, (1) have distinct effects which are manifested at different points in history, (2) are metaphysically or really distinct, yet (3) occur at the same time.

This form of metaphysical priority allows us to understand the lapsarian schema in the following way: God decrees multiple things discretely, that is to say, there are two or more acts of willing performed by God. Additionally, there is an ordering between these decrees as if God could not decree Y without decreeing X. Davenant's contention, then, is that *what* God decrees can, and indeed is, logically, temporally, and otherwise metaphysically ordered, but, God's act of decreeing is certainly without any kind of metaphysical ordering or division.

### ***Simplicity***

Davenant's critique of lapsarianism from simplicity goes like this:

For if we imagine that God, in operations understood as immanent in him, works as if in succession, that God understands this first and that next, wills this first and then that, we thus set up in God a change from potency to act—and this is contrary to his most absolute simplicity.<sup>39</sup>

Davenant contends that if the lapsarian position is understood as requiring two or more acts of willing in God, it violates divine simplicity. If simplicity is true, however, there can be no distinction of acts within the Godhead. Aquinas makes a brief and compelling argument for why this must be the case: "God's willing is His being, as has been proved. But in God there is only one being. Therefore, there is in Him only one willing."<sup>40</sup> We can outline Aquinas's argument in the following way:

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<sup>39</sup> Davenant, *De Praedestinatione et Reprobatione*, 107-108.

<sup>40</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.76. 7. Aquinas argues for the identity between God's willing and being in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I. 74.

(1) If God is simple, then, within God, there is no distinction whatsoever.

In God there are no parts and, in himself, no distinction between his attributes, acts, aspects, and so forth (Definition of simplicity).

(2) God is simple (this premise is accepted by all of the parties involved in the debate).

*Therefore:*

(3): God's act of willing and being are identical, and since God is one in being, God's act of willing is one.

Davenant's argument is completed by bringing the lapsarian commitment into the equation:

(4) If X is prior to Y within God's act of willing, then there is a distinction between X and Y.

(5) Both supralapsarians and infralapsarians are committed to one decreeing act of God, be it X or Y, being prior to another within God.

*Therefore:*

(6) Supralapsarians and infralapsarians are committed to there being a distinction within God between God's act of decreeing X and his act of decreeing Y.

*And*

(7): God is not simple (1, 6, modus tollens).

At this point we see a contradiction between (2), divine simplicity, and what logically follows from the lapsarian schema (7). Since (2) is held by everyone, and (1) and (4) are true by definition, and (3), (6), and (7) are logical consequences, then only (5) can be

responsible for the contradiction. If divine simplicity is to be maintained, (5) the lapsarian schema must be rejected.

### ***Divine Immutability***

As we have seen, a consequence of God's simplicity and of his pure act is that he cannot change. Davenant employs this doctrine in the following way:

First, it should be understood and maintained that, if we consider the nature and perfection of God in himself, we learn that God does not see one thing first and then another, nor does he decree or will something first and afterwards something else. On the contrary, in a sole and most-simple act, God has seen all things at once, and has at the same time decreed all things through himself. A most firm argument for this may be found in God's immutability.<sup>41</sup>

Assuming that our discussion about Davenant's understanding of the lapsarian debate is correct, we can now see why he would think that lapsarianism is incompatible with divine immutability. If God's acts of decreeing are ordered as one being prior to another in the sense discussed above, then the lapsarians are committed to one decree being prior to another. We can think of this ordering in terms of dependence. If the decree to allow the fall depends on the decree of creating creatures that would fall, then God's act of decreeing to create fallible creatures moves from potency to act.<sup>42</sup> This must be the case if God performs multiple and discrete acts of decreeing. For if God does not decree to create fallible creatures, he cannot discretely decree that those creatures indeed fall. This leads to an unhappy conclusion for the lapsarian project: one discrete act of willing makes another possible. And if such is the case, then potency exists in God's acts of willing, and if potency exists in God's act of willing, God cannot be immutable. The problem here is

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<sup>41</sup> Davenant, *De Praedestinatione et Reprobatione*, 107-108.

<sup>42</sup> Different examples could be used here, but, this one sufficiently helps to illustrate the point.

made especially clear if we recall the previous discussion on divine simplicity. For, seeing that God simple, he is identical to his act of willing, and for there to be potency in his act of willing is for there to be potency in God himself. Therefore, the lapsarian schema, so conceived, is incompatible with divine immutability. Such a conclusion, however, could not be accepted by either lapsarian party and Davenant's argument would be identified as a *reductio ad absurdum*. For instance, Theodore Beza (1519-1605)<sup>43</sup>, who is often considered to be the father of supralapsarianism, wrote: "How absurd it is to think that there is mutability in God himself...What sort of God is it whose decree and judgement is uncertain in itself and dependent on the will of man?"<sup>44</sup> And, of course, no one wants to hold absurd beliefs about God. Therefore, if immutability is to be maintained the lapsarian schema must be rejected.

### ***Good Lapsarianism***

At this point we should note that Davenant is not against all discourse that orders God's decrees. As we have seen, Davenant's critique applies to anyone who would contend that within God, there is an actual division between priority and posteriority. Davenant, however, is not critical of those who believe that the ordering of the decrees is a description of how finite creatures perceive the effects of God's single act of willing:

Nevertheless, according to the things themselves, which God understands and decrees, certain signs of priority and posteriority can be distinguished according to our mode of understanding. It is in this sense that theologians ask whether God first decreed to give eternal life to the elect, or to first give them the faith and obedience which lead to eternal life. In the same way it is asked whether God first reprobated and rejected some from

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<sup>43</sup> Theodore Beza was the famed successor of John Calvin in Geneva. See: Shawn D. Wright, *Theodore Beza: The Man and the Myth* (Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in G. M. Thomas's, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2007), 52.

eternal life, and in what way did he foresee the pollution of sin and the fall.<sup>45</sup>

Priority, as understood by Davenant, is a reality in "our mode of understanding" but not in God himself. The error Davenant detects, then, occurs in the following way: "...due to the feebleness of our intellects, whenever we explain the matter of predestination, we are repeatedly compelled to understand one act as prior and the other as posterior."<sup>46</sup> And, therefore: "... according to our way of understanding, one thing is understood as prior in the Divine mind and will, if another depends on it according to the order of causality."<sup>47</sup> Thus, the error is not that we recognize, according to the nature of causes, an order between the effects of God's act of decreeing, the error is that we try to impose this same order upon God's act of decreeing itself.

Davenant, in critiquing lapsarianism, hopes to cool down the heat generated by the debate about the proper ordering of the divine decrees. Davenant, having experienced the incident between Gomarus and Martinius at the Synod of Dort, was well acquainted with how heated the debate could get. Therefore, he writes, "That accomplished it does not much matter what order of priority or posteriority one assigns to the decrees— which in reality, in God, are entirely the same—according to our way of understanding."<sup>48</sup> The debate, then, is not about the nature of God, but about the nature of our understanding. And if there is agreement about the nature of God amongst the parties, an irenic spirit can be had when discussing matters of lesser importance.

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<sup>45</sup> Davenant, *De Praedestinatione*, 108.

<sup>46</sup> Davenant, *De Praedestinatione*, 108.

<sup>47</sup> Davenant, *De Praedestinatione*, 109.

<sup>48</sup> Davenant *De Praedestinatione*, 108.

#### ***iv. Conclusion***

We have thus far seen that in order to critique the lapsarians, Davenant appeals to divine simplicity and immutability. Insofar as these two attributes are concerned, we see a continuity between the thought of Thomas Aquinas and that of John Davenant. Thus, scholars who have attempted to portray the Reformation as begetting a different theology proper would do well to note the continuities found in the thought of Davenant and in the Reformed Confessions—which affirm simplicity and immutability. That being said, the charge that these scholars tend to make is not that Protestants abandoned simplicity or immutability—though they do fail to note that there is a continuity. Instead, they contend that Protestants embraced notions such as the "univocity of being" or "divine voluntarism." Therefore, I conclude with an observation about the relationship between the thought of John Davenant and divine voluntarism. My observation is this: the principles that Davenant is committed to are inconsistent with divine voluntarism, and, additionally, Davenant explicitly repudiates voluntarism.

What is voluntarism? The first thing to note is that while the voluntarism discussed here exists in the secondary literature, it does not necessarily exist in the actual history of philosophy and theology. That being said, the presentation of voluntarism here is a reconstruction of the voluntarism described in the literature of the proponents of the discontinuity thesis discussed above, and not a reconstruction of the thoughts of actual voluntarists.

With that in mind, what, then, are the features of voluntarism as presented by the proponents of the discontinuity thesis? Here we must recall the comments of Chesterton and Gillespie. According to them, and others, voluntarists believe that: (a) actions are good or sinful because God wills them to be. (b) God is arbitrary in what he wills to do,



and in what he wills to be good or evil. (c) The divine will holds a priority over the divine intellect.<sup>49</sup> The contention, then, is that because the will holds a priority over the intellect, God can will whatever he pleases without any restrictions other than logical ones. In other words, if it is not a logical contradiction, God can will it.

Immediately we can see a conflict between the thought of John Davenant and divine voluntarism so conceived. For Davenant, as we have seen, is committed to the doctrine of divine simplicity. And, according to this doctrine, God in himself does not have will and intellect as distinct parts and therefore one cannot hold a real priority over the other. For to say that one of God's parts governs the other is clearly incompatible with divine simplicity. One might object to this line of argument by stating that people are inconsistent and sometimes hold to logically or metaphysically inconsistent beliefs. So, the objection would go, it is entirely possible that Davenant could have held to an inconsistent combination of beliefs, in this case, divine simplicity and divine voluntarism. This objection is, in principle, correct. While it is true that consistency with simplicity would rule out voluntarism, Davenant very well could have been inconsistent and embraced voluntarism. Thus, more needs to be said.

Fortunately for us, Davenant addresses voluntarism directly. In his *De Praedestinatione*, he writes:

Nevertheless, it does not shed a bright light upon the glory of God, if, with our minds we conceive that God destines his own creatures, who are not yet worthy of punishment, to eternal punishment. For God, no matter that on account of his own freedom is able to decree not to communicate to a creature, however innocent, that good which he communicates to others, nevertheless, he cannot decree to inflict punishment upon an innocent creature and remain standing upon his own justice.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Margaret Osler, *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>50</sup> Davenant, *De Praedestinatione*, 118.

Here we see that Davenant explicitly states that there are certain things that God cannot do and remain just. For instance, God cannot condemn the sinless to eternal punishment and remain just. This conclusion goes against precisely what divine voluntarism affirms: that things are good in virtue of God willing them, and that God could truly will anything insofar as it does not violate the laws of logic. Indeed, there are certain things that if God committed, he could no longer be just (of course, Davenant would resist the idea that such is indeed possible, for he takes God to be just and immutable. This should be taken as a *per impossibile* discussion). Additionally, the restrictions Davenant discusses, about what God can do and remain just, are not merely logical. For these restrictions involve the nature of justice. Therefore, in Davenant's thought, God cannot be arbitrary in the way this iteration of voluntarism requires. Davenant, then, is not also amongst the voluntarists.

Far from seeing a rejection of the classical doctrine of God, in the work of John Davenant we see some of its key commitments, such as divine simplicity, God as pure act, and divine immutability, assumed. This indicates that more careful attention should be given to the theology proper of the early modern Protestants. For this purpose, Davenant, given his position of authority and the respect he commanded as a theologian, proves to be an important case study. Indeed, reading Davenant indicates that the relationship between early modern Protestantism and ancient and medieval theology proper is far less strained than what all too many would have us believe.

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