

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Goodness, gratitude and divine freedom

Steven J. Duby*

Phoenix Seminary, Scottsdale, AZ, USA

*Corresponding author. Email: sduby@ps.edu

Abstract

This essay considers the goodness of God and the psalmists' gratitude toward God in connection with divine aseity and divine freedom. The plenitude of God's goodness entails that he is fully sufficient and actualised in himself. The psalmists' gratitude toward God implies that he acts in freedom when he communicates his goodness to creatures. The essay then explores how contemplating this teaching in the Psalter can help us to articulate in a broader dogmatic scope the coherence of God's pure actuality, freedom and constancy.

Keywords: divine freedom; divine goodness; Psalms; pure act

The Psalms of Israel repeatedly direct our attention to the goodness of God, celebrating the grace and mercy displayed in God's works. His abundant goodness is regarded as a rationale for gratitude among the saints: 'Enter his gates with thanksgiving. ... For YHWH is good, his love endures forever and his faithfulness from generation to generation' (Ps 100:4–5).¹ This essay will consider the goodness of God in the Psalter and the psalmists' gratitude toward God in connection with God's aseity and freedom. I will maintain that the plenitude of God's goodness entails that God is fully sufficient and actualised in himself. And the psalmists' acts of thanksgiving imply that God acts in freedom when he communicates his goodness to creatures. More specifically, such acts of thanksgiving imply not only that God was not compelled from without in assuming a relation to created being or to his covenant people, but also that God was fulfilled in himself and by nature could have chosen not to assume a relation to creatures.

After describing these implications of the Psalms' teaching on God's goodness, I will attempt to show how they can help us to articulate in a broader dogmatic scope the coherence of God's pure actuality, freedom and constancy. One benefit of shedding light on the coherence of these things will be to alleviate a concern in recent theological discussion about the notion of God's pure actuality conflicting with Christian teaching on God's freedom and the contingency of the economy. This concern often appears in debates about whether the absence of inactive potential in God would render everything God does (including the act of creation) absolutely necessary. For, some authors have argued, it seems there would have to be an inactive potential in God in order for God to be able to decide to create the world or to decide not to create the world.²

¹Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are given in the author's own translation.

²For relevant discussion, see e.g. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann, 'Absolute Simplicity', *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985), pp. 362–9; James Ross, 'Comments on Absolute Simplicity', *Faith and Philosophy*

Another benefit will be to underscore that one need not choose between affirming divine freedom to create or not to create the world and affirming divine constancy and trustworthiness. Though Karl Barth ultimately maintained that God could have chosen to be God without us, his pointed reflections on the doctrine of election bring this second concern into focus. For Barth, it is problematic to speak of a God ‘above and beyond Jesus Christ’ or a ‘will of God apart from the will of Jesus Christ’. In Barth’s view, such a ‘hidden will of God’ that was not originally determined toward the economy of salvation undermines the primacy and trustworthiness of the grace of God given in Christ.³ The argument of this essay will suggest that when the perfect goodness of God shapes our understanding of God’s aseity and freedom, we are in a position to confirm that God’s free acts are not those of a tyrant but those of a benevolent and trustworthy Creator. The first section of the essay will consider the psalmists’ teaching on God’s goodness and the saints’ gratitude. The second section will speak more broadly about the coherence of God’s pure actuality, freedom and constancy.

God’s goodness and the saints’ gratitude

The psalmists speak of what is good in several different senses, three of which appear close together in Psalm 119:65–72 with the use of the Hebrew טוב and cognate forms. In each case, what is good is what is desirable or agreeable, but there are different senses in which something can be considered desirable or agreeable. First, something or someone can be good in the sense that it is complete or is what it is supposed to be and has what befits its purpose. In verse 66, the psalmist asks God to teach him ‘good discernment’. Discernment would be *good* discernment when it includes what discernment is supposed to include and will help the psalmist make right judgements rather than misdirected judgements. Similarly, according to verse 71, it was ‘good’ that the psalmist was afflicted, in the sense that the affliction provided an opportunity for the psalmist to become what he is supposed to be as one who knows God’s statutes. Second, someone can be good in the sense of being benevolent, beneficent or kind. In this respect, according to verse 65, God ‘did well (טוב) with his servant’. Indeed, the psalmist prays, ‘You are good and do good’ (v. 68). In other words, God is inclined to give to another what he or she needs to be sound or fulfilled. Third, something or someone can be good in the sense of bringing delight or satisfaction. In this respect, according to verse 72, the law of God’s mouth is better (טוב) than earthly riches (cf. v. 70).

Throughout the Psalms those second and third senses of goodness (benevolence and that which brings delight and satisfaction) are applied to God.⁴ In addition to Psalm 119:68 (‘You are good and do good’), Psalm 145:7–9 attests God’s benevolence or kindness. Generation after generation pours forth the recollection of the God’s ‘great goodness’ (v. 7a). That goodness is linked with God’s ‘righteousness’ (v. 7b), the former term

2 (1985), pp. 383, 387–8; Katherin Rogers, ‘The Traditional Doctrine of Divine Simplicity’, *Religious Studies* 32 (1996), pp. 165–86; Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity, and Immutability* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 234–5; Christopher Tomaszewski, ‘Collapsing the Modal Collapse Argument: On an Invalid Argument Against Divine Simplicity’, *Analysis* 79 (2019), pp. 275–84; Joseph E. Lenow, ‘Shoring up Divine Simplicity Against Modal Collapse: A Powers Account’, *Religious Studies* (2021), pp. 10–29.

³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, ed. Geoffrey T. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 63–7, 115.

⁴For an excellent treatment of God’s goodness in the Psalms, see Christopher R. J. Holmes, *The Lord is Good: Seeking the God of the Psalter* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

highlighting God's generosity here and the latter God's alignment with a standard of conduct (which is ultimately nothing other than God himself and God's own promises). In this same passage, the content of God's goodness is shown to include grace, mercy, patience and love (vv. 8–9), all of which are simply God's singular goodness 'variously modified' in the circumstances of creatures.⁵

There are certain passages in the Psalms where the goodness of God could signal either that he is benevolent or that he is the one who is pre-eminently delightful or satisfying (e.g. Ps 31:19–21; 52:9). There are some passages, though, where goodness in the sense of that which brings delight and satisfaction is evidently applied to God. Indeed, throughout the Psalms God is presented as the principal object of human desire and the principal source of joy (e.g. Ps 4:6–7; 17:14–15; 21:1–3, 6; 27:4, 13; 37:4, 11; 42:1–2, 43:4; 45:7; 89:15–18; 90:14; 92:1–4; 103:5; 107:8–9; 135:3; 147:1). Only a few relevant texts can be commented on here.

In Psalm 16 David declares that he takes refuge in God and has no good apart from God (v. 2).⁶ To be sure, David also says that all his delight is in the holy ones in the land (v. 3), but he does not portray the saints as though they were, in and of themselves, the source of his joy. For David adds that it is YHWH who is his portion and his cup (v. 5). Since his lot is in YHWH's hands, he has a pleasing inheritance (v. 6). Because YHWH is at David's right hand David is secure and his heart rejoices (vv. 8–9). There is fullness of joy before YHWH's face; there are pleasures forever at YHWH's right hand (v. 11).

In Psalm 34 David exhorts us to taste and see that YHWH is good. The one who takes refuge in him is blessed or 'happy' (v. 8). Those who seek him lack no good thing (v. 10). In Psalm 63 David's soul thirsts after God (v. 1). God's love is better (טוֹב) than life itself (v. 3 (v. 4 MT)). When David contemplates YHWH in the watches of the night, his soul is satisfied like one's body may be satisfied with abundant food (vv. 5–6). In Psalm 65 the fact that God hears prayer and atones for transgression leads David to call blessed or 'happy' the one whom God brings near to dwell in his courts. The people will be satisfied with the goodness of God's house and his holy temple (vv. 2–4). Even in the midst of the non-human created order YHWH's goodness and bounty cause joy: 'You crown the year with your goodness [or 'bounty', טוֹבָתְךָ] and your paths flow with abundance' (v. 11 (v. 12 MT)). 'The valleys cover themselves with grain, they shout for joy and they sing (v. 13). Similarly, in Psalm 145 David observes that YHWH opens his hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing (v. 16). Turning back to rational creatures, David adds that YHWH fulfils the desire of those who fear him (vv. 18–19).

Psalms attributed to other writers echo such themes. In Psalm 73 Asaph acknowledges that he envied the wicked in their prosperity (vv. 1–3). But entering the holy place of God changes his mind (vv. 16–17). Asaph recognises that there is none desirable in heaven or on earth except God himself (v. 25). His portion is God forever (v. 26). Being near to God is good. Asaph will take refuge in God and recount all of God's works (v. 28). Like Asaph when he appreciates the goodness of God in God's sanctuary, the sons of Korah call God's dwelling place 'lovely' (Ps 84:1). 'My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God' (Ps 84:2 NRSV). Blessed or 'happy' are the ones who dwell in God's house (Ps 84:4). Indeed, a day in God's courts is better (טוֹב) than a thousand elsewhere (Ps 84:10a).

⁵Peter van Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia*, 2nd edn (Utrecht, 1724), 2.17.5.

⁶The meaning of this verse is disputed, but both of the predominant interpretive options indicate that God himself is the supreme good (see below).

The psalmist would choose to stand at the threshold of God's house rather than dwell in the tents of the wicked (Ps 84:10b). From those who walk in integrity God withholds no good thing. Happy is the one who trusts in him (Ps 84:11–12).

Two features of God's satisfying goodness are worth highlighting here. First, it is the only ultimate source of delight and rest. A connection with created goodness brings a measure of joy, but only in fellowship with God is there *fullness* of joy (Ps 16:11, 21:6). Of all things in heaven and on earth, it is finally God himself who produces joy and satisfaction in the human heart (Ps 73:25–8). After all, any good other than God comes from God in the first place. The fullness of the earth belongs to YHWH because he founded it (Ps 24:1–2). He created all things in heaven and on earth by his powerful word (Ps 33:6–9, 148:1–5). As works of God, these things receive their glory from God and reflect the glory of God (Ps 8:1, 8:5, 19:1, 21:5, 97:6, cf. 94:9). Any created good is a faint reflection of the goodness that is found in God, the sum and archetype of all goodness. Thus, the satisfying goodness that is found in God himself is underived, not acquired by God from somewhere else or in relation to something else.

That God does not acquire goodness from elsewhere is overtly attested in one possible interpretation of Psalm 16:2. The MT reading of the pertinent clause is תּוֹבָתִי בְּלִי עֲלֵיךָ ('my goodness is not upon you'). The LXX reading (15:2) is τῶν ἀγαθῶν μου οὐ χρείαν ἔχεις ('of my good things you have no need').⁷ Regarding this text John Calvin remarks that 'however much men earnestly try to expend themselves toward God, nevertheless they are able to furnish nothing', for 'he lacks nothing' and is 'content in himself alone'.⁸ Recent interpreters, however, often take the meaning to be something like 'my well-being is entirely dependent upon God'⁹ or, as in the NRSV and ESV, 'I have no good apart from you'. If some version of the second approach is correct, the text still bears witness to God being the fount of all goodness, which entails that God would not acquire goodness from others.

At any rate, God himself clearly makes the point in Psalm 50 that he does not acquire goodness from anyone. There God rebukes the people of Israel because of their mistaken approach to sacrifice, in which the people acted as though God might need their sacrifices and as though they might 'make an impression on him'.¹⁰ God declares, 'If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?' (vv. 12–13 NRSV). In verse 12 God momentarily condescends to speak to his people as though he might be hungry. If he were, he would not have to satisfy himself by the gifts of others. God already has everything, so no one can give to God something that did not already belong to him and come from his own gracious hand in the first place (cf. v. 10; Rom 11:35). 'Why would I ask from you what I have made? Is it more yours to whom I have given to possess than mine, the one who has made it?'¹¹ Yet God still clarifies in verse 13 that in fact he does not undergo hunger or thirst at all. 'He has not said he needs

⁷ Compare the KJV's 'my goodness extendeth not to thee'.

⁸ John Calvin, *Commentarii in librum Psalmorum pars prior*, in *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum et al. (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1887), p. 150.

⁹ So A. A. Anderson, *Psalms 1–72*, vol. 1 of *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), p. 142, taking the particle בְּלִי to be affirmative. Cf. e.g. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), pp. 154–5.

¹⁰ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 493.

¹¹ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos I–L*, ed. E. Dekkers and J. Fraipont, CCSL 38 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956), 49.17.

from us any necessary thing. ... He who keeps Israel will not hunger nor thirst nor become weary nor sleep' (cf. Ps 121:4).¹² Thus, according to verses 14–15, the point of religious observance is not to provide something for God but rather simply to thank him and to call upon him for deliverance. 'Other lords, although they may be powerful, nevertheless cannot say to their servants, "We do not need your works," since they abuse their service. God alone is truly Lord, who would require the duty of his servants only for this, that he would have an occasion of giving more.'¹³

A second feature of God's goodness to highlight here is that God himself delights in it. God rejoices in his works (Ps 35:27, 104:31, cf. 149:4). If those works are good only insofar as they reflect the abundant goodness, wisdom, power, and glory of God the Creator (e.g. Ps 8:1, 19:1, 104:24), then it follows that God rejoices pre-eminently and originally in himself. Though further exploration of the matter would require us to go beyond the book of Psalms, God's enjoyment of himself is unveiled elsewhere in scripture where God the Father announces his delight in the Son who is his perfect image (Matt 3:17, 17:5; cf. John 17:24; Heb 1:3). Ultimately, if human beings who have God lack no good thing and are satisfied in God, then God, in perfect possession of his own goodness, lacks no good thing and is satisfied in himself.

God's delight in his own goodness seems to be presupposed and displayed in places where God does things for the sake of his own name. In Psalm 23:3 God leads David in paths of righteousness 'for the sake of his name'. In Psalm 79:9 Asaph asks God to help Israel 'on account of ... the glory of your name' and 'for the sake of your name'. After all, why should other nations ask where Israel's God is or why he does not act and bring retribution for the blood of his servants (Ps 79:10)? Similarly, according to Psalm 106:8, God saved Israel from Egypt 'for the sake of his name' and in order to make known his power. The meaning of God's name here includes both his own identity or perfection and his outward reputation. That God acts for the vindication of his name – for the manifestation and reiteration of his wisdom, faithfulness and justice even when it is not evoked by any merit found in creatures – indicates that God knows, values and delights in his own perfect goodness and glory. 'God is not able not to obligate man to the love and the worship and the pursuit of himself as the highest good.' Thus, in his covenant relationship to human beings, God 'becomes to covenanted man what he is to himself, the font of consummate beatitude'.¹⁴

Turning more briefly to the saints' thanksgiving in the Psalms, it is fitting to observe that God's people give thanks to him in various settings and for various reasons. There are times when the psalmists thank God for doing what is right or for remembering his covenant. 'I will give to the LORD the thanks due to his righteousness' (Ps 7:17, NRSV). 'I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. ... When my enemies turned back, they stumbled and perished before you. For you have maintained my just cause' (Ps 9:1, 9:3–4, NRSV, cf. 35:17–28, 105:7–11, 111:1, 111:4–9). There are many times when the psalmists give thanks to God for his gracious deliverance from enemies or other evils (e.g. Ps 28:6–9, 30:4–5, 30:12, 54:6–7, 56:12–13, 86:12–13, 109:30–1). Often such acts of thanksgiving pertain to God's beneficence toward the whole of Israel or, indeed, toward the whole world (e.g. Ps 100, 105:1–6, 106:1–5, 107:1–3, 107:8–9, 107: 15, 107:21–2, 107: 31, 108:3–4).

¹²Augustine, *In Ps.* 49.19.

¹³Jerome, *Tractatum in psalmos series altera*, in *Tractatus sive homiliae in psalmos*, ed. G. Morin et al., CCSL 78 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1958), 15.2.

¹⁴Herman Witsius, *De oeconomia foederum Dei cum hominibus*, 2nd edn (Leeuwarden, 1685), 1.1.11, 14.

‘The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever’ (Ps 118:27–9, NRSV). In certain places, the saints’ gratitude is rooted in the works of God in nature as well as the works of God in (supernatural) grace. ‘Give thanks to the Lord of lords ... to the one who alone does great wonders ... to the one who made the heavens by understanding ... to the one who spread out the earth upon the waters ... to the one who made the great lights ... the sun for dominion over the day ... and the moon and stars for dominion over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever’ (Ps 136:3–9). ‘YHWH is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. All your works, YHWH, shall give thanks to you, and your faithful ones shall bless you’ (Ps 145:9–10).

Taking note of these various scenarios or bases of thanksgiving in the Psalter may help us to grasp some of the theological implications of the saints’ gratitude, particularly the way in which gratitude implies the presence of some freedom in the will and action of the one being thanked. An expression of gratitude toward God assumes that God has *chosen* to act as he does. It is suitable to give thanks to God for his benefits only if he is a ‘voluntary and most free agent’, not driven by a ‘necessity of nature’ (a connate, inevitable propensity to do something without consideration of options).¹⁵

In the case of those passages where the psalmist gives thanks to God for acting according to his covenant, there is a certain sense in which God’s action is necessary. While God’s people have nothing in and of themselves from which God might gain or become indebted, God in his faithfulness and justice necessarily fulfils his promises. That thanksgiving still takes place presumably indicates that God did not have to enter the covenant relationship in the first place. Beyond such passages, there are those where the psalmist gives thanks without respect to any prior covenantal obligations that God has assumed. Most significant for the present essay are places where the psalmist thanks God for the work of creation itself (e.g. Ps 136:1–9, 145:1–10). At this point the psalmists’ comments on God’s goodness and on the saints’ gratitude converge: just as God himself is perfectly good and satisfied by his own goodness, so he does not naturally have to act to produce his outward works but rather freely chooses to bring them into being. How all of this might be corroborated and illumined by pondering the coherence of God’s pure actuality, freedom and constancy will be taken up in the next section by way of the following points.

The coherence of God’s pure actuality, freedom and constancy

1. It may sound strange to expound the Psalms’ teaching on God’s goodness by invoking an apparently clunky ‘metaphysical’ phrase like ‘pure actuality’, so it will be important to clarify the motivation behind the use of such a phrase. The aim is not to take the results of scriptural exegesis and place them under the domain of an abstract philosophical concept. Rather, the aim is to set out the meaning and implications of the Bible’s teaching by making reference to a feature of reality that is in fact commonly known by human beings. For we know that rational agents or persons strive toward something good for which they are suited, something that will bring them fulfilment and delight and will evoke and terminate the operation of their capacity to know and to will or

¹⁵Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia*, 2.15.33. Here Mastricht contrasts God with the sun, which, of course, cannot choose not to emit its light and heat.

love.¹⁶ In other words, we seek union with what brings satisfaction. When rational agents possess the good for which they are suited, they have reached their end; their knowledge and love, as far as possible, are occupied with that good. They are neither striving for something else nor idle. In this twofold way (attainment and active occupation), their potential is actualised. Accordingly, to say that God is 'pure act' is simply to set forth one aspect or implication of God being in perfect possession of his own undervived, satisfying goodness that is the fount of all goodness. Since God is in perfect possession of such goodness and since his knowledge and delight are occupied with such goodness, he does not have to strive for something else and he is not idle. Indeed, unlike creatures who must take breaks, the God of Israel does not grow weary or slumber (Ps 121:3–4; cf. Isa 40:28), so he is never idle at all and is *pure act*, or ceaselessly active.

This sort of exposition is not tangential to the Psalter's teaching. It facilitates a stronger understanding of why the God of the Psalter would tell us that he does not need our sacrifices (see again Ps 50:12–13). It facilitates a stronger understanding of why our worship is not a matter of putting God in our debt or giving him something to do but an opportunity to receive more of God's good gifts in fellowship with him (cf. Ps 50:14). It also illumines the freedom and liberality of God that impels our acts of thanksgiving. God was always enough for himself and always actively enjoyed the riches of his own goodness, so he does not have to gain something from us. It is from a free choice that he gives life and that he saves, which underscores the wonder of his love and incites gratitude on our part.

2. Bringing out the goodness of God as a key factor in our talk of God's pure actuality and freedom can reframe the discussion mentioned in the introduction about whether pure actuality conflicts with the freedom of God relative to the economy. In particular, highlighting the place of God's goodness in this discussion can help us to see that God's pure actuality is not an obstacle to affirming his freedom but is in fact the reason that he is free and could choose either to create or not to create the world. For the primary and sufficient object of God's will and delight is God's own infinite goodness. God has always had and actively enjoyed that infinite goodness. It follows that God has no end other than himself, and from there it follows that he does not have to take up certain means (or, indeed, any means at all) in order to possess his end and be satisfied. Accordingly, God is not naturally determined or automatically inclined to willing creation or not willing creation. In this sense, there is *liberum arbitrium* ('free choice') in God relative to the economy. And it is fundamentally by virtue of free choice that an acting subject produces works that are contingent.¹⁷ Taken from the side of the creature, every good thing is derived from and reflective of God's original goodness. Being derived from God, every created good will have to be dependent and finite and neither proportionate nor requisite to the goodness of God.¹⁸ And if there is no undervived, independent good other than God, then it follows that there is no

¹⁶In this respect, what is good is communicative or self-diffusive, orienting others to itself (see e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, vols. 4–12 of *Opera omnia*, Leonine edn (Rome: ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1888–1906), 1.5.4, 1.19.2).

¹⁷See e.g. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentaria in Aristotelis libros Peri Hermeneias*, in vol. 1 of *Opera omnia*, Leonine edn (Rome: ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1882), 1.9.14.8–9, 23–4.

¹⁸Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, in vol. 22/3.1 of *Opera omnia*, Leonine edn (Rome: ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1970), 23.4 corp. and ad 15–16; *De potentia*, in vol. 2 of *Quaestiones disputatae*, 10th edn, ed. P. Bazzi et al. (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1965), 1.5 corp.

underived, independent good other than God that might evoke, move or necessarily terminate and fulfil the operation of God's will.¹⁹

3. The infinite goodness and self-sufficiency of God entail that, even without inactive potency or mutability in God, the divine decision for the economy of salvation is not absolutely necessary but remains free. This point can be articulated through the use of some pertinent technical terms.²⁰ First, in God's volition, the act or exercise of it and the specification or determination of it toward God's own goodness are absolutely necessary. Second, given God's own sufficient goodness and given that God does not need creatures to obtain his end, the specification or determination of God's volition toward creatures and the consequent order and tendency of it toward creatures are marked by a freedom of indifference and contrariety. Third, the immutability and eternity of God's decision for the economy still entails that the specification and tendency of God's volition toward creatures is marked by a hypothetical or suppositional necessity (cf. Isa 46:10; Matt 26:54; Acts 2:23, 4:28; Eph 1:4–5; 2 Tim 1:9); that is, such specification could be otherwise, but, supposing that it is so, it cannot be revoked.²¹ Fourth, while God eternally wills himself and creatures in one and the same act of will, within the context of that one act the specification toward God himself has an ontological priority over the specification toward creatures. For the former is ingredient in God's own fulfilment and well-being, while the latter is not.²² That ontological priority underscores the absolute necessity with which God's will tends toward himself and the freedom of contrariety with which his will extends toward creatures.²³ Furthermore, the specification and order toward creatures being ontologically subsequent need not imply a preceding inactive potential in God or an additional act by which the relation or order of the will toward creatures is established. An analogous scenario might be glimpsed in the fact that even a created will already in act can determine or refer itself toward various objects.²⁴ Indeed, a creature can will an end and contingent means in one and the same act.²⁵

¹⁹See Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia*, 2.15.14–15. In this connection, it is worth noting that a robust account of God's aseity ought to recognise not only that God has no efficient cause, but also that God has no final cause; God is his own end.

²⁰On which, see e.g. Aquinas, *Summa theol.* 1.19.1, 3; 1/2.10.2; Gisbertus Voetius and Engelbertus Beckman, *De libertate voluntatis*, in *Disputatio philosophico-theologica* (Utrecht: Waesberge, 1652); Francis Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, 3 vols, 2nd edn (Geneva: Samuel de Tournes, 1688), 3.13.2–6, 10.3.4; cf. Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), pp. 199–203, 229–31.

²¹Regarding the distinction between absolute necessity, on the one hand, and immutability or eternity, on the other, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, in vols. 13–15 of *Opera omnia*, Leonine edn (Rome: Typis Ricardi Garroni, 1918–30), 1.83; Turretin, *Inst.* 4.2.13.

²²Cf. e.g. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, 1.75–6.

²³The phrase 'freedom of contrariety' signifies a liberty to will something ('a') or to will something else ('not-a', 'b', 'c' and so forth). For the language of tending and extending, see Aquinas, *De potentia*, 1.5 corp.; Gisbertus Voetius, *Selectarum disputationum theologiarum, pars prima* (Utrecht: Waesberge, 1648), 1.13 (240).

²⁴Note Aquinas' observation that the powers of the soul (intellect and will) are 'reflected about themselves' so that 'the will wills itself to will' (*voluntas vult se velle*) (*De veritate*, 22.12 corp.).

²⁵See Aquinas, *De veritate*, 22.14; *Summa theologiae*, 1/2.8.3, 12.4. The key distinction here would be that whereas the divine will's self-determination toward creatures occurs without movement or the reduction of inactive potential to actuality, the created will is still moved in that (a) its exercise is intermittent, (b) its desire is evoked or incited by external objects, (c) it must have such external objects proposed to it by the intellect, and (d) its volition of an end often temporally precedes its choice of means, leaving the latter

In sum, then, when the satisfying goodness of God that is attested in the Psalms informs our discussion of God's freedom, the absence of inactive potential or mutability in God need not be a cause for concern. For pure actuality or immutability alone does not entail an absolute necessity of the economy. It must be coupled with a need for particular means to obtain an end, which does not apply in God's case: 'it is not only from an immobility of nature that something produces from necessity, but from its determination to one thing, which does not belong to the divine will, although in [the divine will] there is the highest immobility'.²⁶

4. Finally, if the infinite goodness of God explains the freedom of God's decree, then this freedom – even the freedom of indifference and contrariety relative to created being – coheres with God's constancy and trustworthiness. This point can be made in several ways. First, God enjoys, primarily, his own goodness and, secondarily, only that which would reflect his goodness in some way. This means that God enjoys only what is wise, kind, upright, pure – never that which distorts or misrepresents true goodness. The free specification of God's will toward creatures, then, would never be irrational or cruel. It would never be 'arbitrary' in the colloquial sense of that term. As the psalmist says, 'You are not a God who delights in wickedness' (Ps 5:4). Whatever God might will to do, he is always trustworthy. Second, the very reason that God is free (i.e. his perfect possession and enjoyment of his own sufficient goodness) implies that God would never abuse creatures in order to benefit himself. 'If I were hungry, I would not tell you.' Third, because God is pure act and in the specification of his will toward creatures does not reduce an inactive potential to act, God *in se* and God *pro nobis* are one and the same God in the strongest sense. Whatever God might will to do, he always remains as he eternally was. 'God is able to do something other than he does; and, nevertheless, if he would do something other, he himself would not be other. And he is able to will something other than he wills, and, nevertheless, his will is not able to be other, nor new, nor mutable in some way.'²⁷

Such observations should make it clear that affirming a divine freedom of contrariety in connection with the economy has nothing to do with thin (be they 'modern' or 'post-modern') conceptions of freedom that fail to take into account what actually befits the essence and telos of the acting subject or what conduces to the well-being of other acting subjects. God wills only what befits his own perfect goodness, wisdom, love and righteousness. He cannot deny himself. Indeed, strictly speaking, his perpetual agreement with himself is not a matter of impotence but of the highest freedom, power and felicity: 'the one who so has what is fitting and what is advantageous that he is not able to lose this is freer than that one who so has this that he is able to lose it'.²⁸ At the same time, while God is free to will only what is good and right, he is indeed free to will this or that good thing, whether it be this or that creature or only himself and no creature at all. The truth that God can will and do only what is good and

to involve, at least initially, a reduction of inactive potential to actuality and thus a second, additional act of the will connecting the means to the end.

²⁶Aquinas, *De potentia*, 3.15 ad 7. For other places where Aquinas suggests that inactive potency is not necessary to ground contingency, see e.g. *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis expositio*, ed. M.-R. Cathala and R. M. Spiazzi (Turin-Rome: Marietti, 1950), 5.14, n. 974; *Summa contra gentiles*, 1.82; *Summa theologiae*, 1.25.3.

²⁷Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*, 3rd edn, Spicilegium Bonaventurianum 4B (Rome: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae ad Claras Aquas, 1971), 1.43, n. 10.

²⁸Anselm, *De libertate arbitrii*, in vol. 1 of *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1946), I (208).

just has to stand together with the recognition that God need not have willed to produce any outward works in the first place.²⁹ Thus Anselm: ‘if God does the good to man that he has begun, although it is not fitting for him to defect from the good begun, we ought to impute the whole to grace because this he has begun on account of us, not on account of himself since he lacks nothing’. It is ‘necessary that the goodness of God on account of his own immutability should perfect concerning man what he has begun, although the whole good that he does is grace’. Regarding the incarnation and the acts and sufferings of Christ, ‘if [God] would not have willed, they would not have been’.³⁰

Conclusion

This essay has considered the Psalms’ teaching on the goodness of God and the psalmists’ gratitude toward God in connection with God’s freedom. The first section argued that the satisfying goodness of God implies that he is sufficient and fully actualised in himself. It also argued that the psalmists’ gratitude toward God implies that God acts in freedom toward creatures: we give thanks only when the one acting for our benefit freely chooses to do so, not when the one acting does so by a necessity of nature. The second section then elaborated on the Psalms’ teaching on God’s goodness by tracing its consequences for discussion about God’s pure actuality, freedom and constancy. The place of God’s goodness in this discussion helps us to see that God’s pure actuality is not an obstacle but a rationale for his freedom and that in his freedom God is entirely trustworthy. Perhaps this elaborative material may move us back into the Psalter itself with a greater appreciation for its teaching that out of all things in heaven and on earth, there is none better or more to be thanked and enjoyed than God himself.

²⁹“God is not able to do except what is good and just,” that is, he is not able to do except that which, if he would do, would be good and just’ (Lombard, *Sent.* 1.43, n. 2).

³⁰Anselm, *Cur Deus homo*, in vol. 2 of *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis archiepiscopi opera omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt (Rome, 1940), 2.5, 17 (100, 125).