

Divine Power and Action: a theological engagement with the work of Joseph Nye.

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Abstract

This paper will engage political theorist Joseph Nye and his work on Hard and Soft Power, and it will apply these terms to theological debates surrounding God's sovereignty and action. It will briefly engage the broad theological camps of determinism (primarily through the lens of Reformed theology), open theism and foreknowledge (primarily via Thomism). Ultimately, it will argue that using the terms hard and soft power provides some nuance to the debate around God's sovereignty and provides language for articulating a theology which is not wedded to any of the aforementioned schools of thought.

Introduction

Theologians across the centuries have, in various ways and with various aims, discussed both divine and political power. For example, Irenaeus sought to defend the power and sovereignty of God over and against Gnostic ideas.¹ Origen uses power in several different ways throughout *De Principiis* and almost takes for granted the power of God when discussing how Christ's power is concealed.² Thomas Aquinas discusses ideas around the Law and its role.³ While many more examples could be referenced, what can be seen from these three is that theologians have, throughout history, and in some of the earliest writings of the Church, discussed either divine power or power and its function in society. Naturally, political theorists also discuss power and its use in the world today, and so there seems to me to be a natural convergence of possible thematic topics and language. This paper will employ the work of Joseph Nye as a means of reframing some theological debates. Nye's work on soft power redefined how political science understood the types and exercise of power. It will

¹ St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.1.1-2, Translated by Frederick Crombie. In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885) taken from *New Advent*, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103201.htm>.

² Origen, *De Principiis*, 1.2.2.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Benziger Bros. 1947), taken from Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL), https://ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa/summa.FP_Q45_A3.html, I-II, Q92.

employ Nye's thought on hard and soft power and suggest that Nye's work provides a possible use of language that would help us understand and discuss the way in which God acts towards creation. This paper will briefly engage theological accounts of human and divine agency, specifically what I will call 'strict determinism', 'foreknowledge views' and 'open views' of agency, to suggest that these three broad positions are drawing on important biblical and theological themes, but that by reshaping the language used to describe the work of God, one can develop a nuanced view between these positions is best used to articulate the activity of God towards the world. Additionally, one of the positions I will discuss is the Thomistic schema, as the work of Aquinas could be considered somewhere between determinism and open theism. This theological framework will highlight some of the problems of attempting to articulate a nuanced view of the work of God and the linguistic struggles that surround this theological debate. Developing a new approach to human and divine agency, or at least the language used to articulate these discussions, will be done using language from political theory.

While I have selected three specific ways of construing the divine-human relationship and select voices within to give a sense of these positions, I do not claim that there are no other ways of construing divine action and human freedom; rather, these three views represent the most common ways of presenting these discussion points. Thus, this paper seeks to provide one way of describing this relationship via the medium of political philosophy rather than developing an entire system for understanding God's action in the world. Likewise, this paper will not attempt to address the myriad of connected issues, such as divine being, temporality/eternality and the like, which profoundly affect the ways in which these issues are understood theologically. While I will propose my own view for understanding God's power, agreeing with my proposal is not the only possible outcome. Rather, this paper will suggest that re-framing the language is positive in that it provides nuance to debate, asking questions about what power is, and how God acts in creation, rather than simply asking 'is God powerful'.

Hard and Soft Power

Joseph Nye in *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* argued that conventional political theory focused on what might be termed 'hard power', that is to say, military might, the ability to cripple an economy through sanctions and similar, these might be termed 'sticks' or the ability to entice cooperation through the benefits of partnership or trade 'carrots'. He argues, however, that modern politics has seen a rise in soft power. Soft power is that by which, without having 'carrots' or 'sticks', one can still get the outcome one desires; it is the power of attraction. As

Nye writes, 'Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others.'⁴ In other words, can I convince you to do something based on my values, desires, and so on? For example, countries may be inclined to pursue a shift to Western values (democracy, free press, etc.) based on the perceived cultural gains of Western society. The end of the Cold War, for example, might be one place where soft power and the ability of nations to influence cultures have had a dramatic influence on the world stage.⁵ While Nye's view is applied to people and nations, I believe this way of thinking can help us re-imagine the way one considers human/divine action and agency. As such, I will now very briefly discuss determinism, open theism and Thomistic views of divine action in relation to human agency.

Divine and Human agency

There are various ways of approaching the question of divine and human agency. In this section, I will briefly summarise three predominant ways of envisioning the relationship between Divine and human agency: namely, Determinism, Foreknowledge, and Open views. It should be noted that there are various ways of interpreting these schools of thought. I will offer a broad overview of these approaches, but it should be recognised that there is more nuance to these views than I can provide here. Nonetheless, this overview does offer the central arguments of each position, whilst recognising the divergence and nuance within these traditions.

Determinism

Such a schema advocates for a high view of God's sovereignty and preordination to the extent that either it denies any form of true 'free will' or, it makes a more minimal claim, that any sense of human 'free will' is situated under divine ordination, at least in some ways.⁶ This position is emphasised in both Lutheran and Reformed circles, as John Calvin writes,

God is deemed omnipotent, not because he can act though he may cease or be idle, or because by a general instinct he continues the order of nature previously appointed; but because, governing heaven and earth by his providence, he so overrules all things that nothing happens without his counsel.⁷

⁴ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004) 5.

⁵ There is also an economic and military dimension to the end of the cold war, but the effects of soft power are also on display.

⁶ For example, in some reformed positions, one might be considered free in the sense that they have been saved by Grace and so are able to sin or refrain from sin, but this 'freedom' of the will is only enabled to act in this way because God has first acted in one's life to liberate the will.

⁷ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book 1, 16.3, translated by Henry Beveridge, (Pacific Publishing studio, 2011) 102.

This is a particularly strong claim of Calvin; such a view essentially denies human agency, at least human agency as it is typically understood, noting that God has ordained all things that will come to pass. This has several practical implications for Christian life, including deterministic accounts of prayer, where the idea of petition is not considered to ‘change’ or ‘affect’ anything.⁸ Indeed, when writing about prayer, Oliver Crisp suggests that, ‘God knows what we want and what we need and his knowledge of these things is not affected one whit by our petition’.⁹ Crisp’s point here is that prayer cannot affect God because God also sovereignly ordained what will come to pass. Importantly, this does not rule out the importance of prayer; it simply reorients it away from petition.¹⁰ Likewise, for Calvin, one’s desires are shaped and changed by God through our relationship with him, and so is our prayer life. Calvin writes,

Although believers sometimes ask to have their heart trained to the obedience of the divine law, as David does in several passages (Ps. 51:12), it is to be observed, that even this longing in prayer is from God. This is apparent from the language used. When he prays, ‘Create in me a clean heart...’¹¹

And similarly, Luther writes,

By contrast if God works in us the will is changed, and by being gently breathed upon by the Spirit of God, it again wills and acts from pure willingness and inclination and of its own accord not from compulsion so it cannot be turned another way by any other opposition...but it goes on willing and delighting in and loving the good, just as before it willed in and delighted in and loved evil.¹²

In both these thinkers, God works through prayer and his relationship with the believer to shape and change their desires. But, given that God has determined all things, even if human will ‘exists’ in a reduced form, this might be understood as God’s ‘hard power’. God’s will and action cannot be affected by the will and action of creatures. In some ways, this is a perfectly classical way

⁸ It’s worth noting that some reformed thinkers will deny that this rules out human agency see, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology; an Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, (Inter varsity press; Nottingham, 2015) 674.

⁹ Oliver Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine: Essays in Reformed Theology*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2010) 135.

¹⁰ Though defenders of this approach to sovereignty argue that if God ordains all things, then this does not render petitionary prayer meaningless because everything involved is ordained by God. See Oliver D. Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine: Essays in Reformed Theology*, 150-151.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, II. ii. 27, 246-247.

¹² Martin Luther, *Bondage of the Will* (1525), ed. Philip S. Watson, vol. 33, p. 65, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter LW.

of understanding Godself. For if God is A Se, then one should not expect to be able to 'change'. Moreover, such views are usually consistent within their theological frameworks. Luther and Calvin, for example, reorient the purpose of prayer. The 'point' is not to change God's mind, given that God knows what we will pray,¹³ but to form us. In Luther, especially, there is a relational dynamic to the purpose of prayer, as it is through prayer that humans draw closer to God and God to us.¹⁴

Open accounts

Open theology accounts seek to maintain strong senses of human agency, whilst denying strict determination and/or traditional ideas of foreknowledge. In other words, accounts which significantly differ from the Thomistic (or Arminian) endeavour to allow human freedom, and divine knowledge and power (sometimes referred to as sovereignty). This usually means arguing for some sort of free will account. Robert Kane defines free will as meaning that one has 'the power to be the ultimate creator and sustainer of one's own ends or purposes.'¹⁵ Open views usually suggest that humans have free will, in the sense described by Kane, and God has the power to work in our lives and circumstances. God is seen as having an active but not deterministic presence in the world and our lives. He may sustain and move, but does not 'force' his power over creation.¹⁶ An example of this is what Joshua Sijuwade terms causal openness. As he writes, 'That is, the future is causally open *because* God has created creatures that possess libertarian freedom.'¹⁷ Such a view aims to maximise both human and divine freedom. God works to influence by His presence in creation rather than by determining the actions and reactions of creatures. This, in part, requires a redefining or rejection of some classical theological ideas, such as the way in which omniscience is often understood. Richard Swinburne, for example, suggests that God's omniscience ought to be understood in a way which is quite different to the understanding of classical theology to preserve divine freedom. He writes, 'God, if He is necessarily and eternally perfectly free, must be ignorant of his own future actions.'¹⁸ For Swinburne, God's omniscience is not compromised in the sense that omniscience is understood as God 'knowing' all that can be known. As the future is dependent upon the present, it does not exist,

¹³ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology, a Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), 353.

¹⁴ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 353.

¹⁵ Robert Kane, *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, 383

¹⁶ There are of course exceptions to this; one might argue that God's supernatural intervention is an example of this, however, even if God softens a human heart this view of agency still requires humans to actively move themselves.

¹⁷ Joshua R. Sijuwade, 'Elucidating Open Theism.' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 94 (2): 153.

¹⁸ Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 134.

and so is not something that can be known. For other open theists, the future may not be totally unknown, but as David Woodruff puts it:

A noticeable consequence of this commitment is that Open Theists affirm that the future is open in the sense that in many cases what will occur is not specifically foreordained by God, but is also the result of the free acts of humans.¹⁹

In this sense, the core commitment of open theism is that the future is not determined, but God is (self)limited.²⁰ What this means is that, God is *either* understood to limit Godself, and so acts only in such a way that is in keeping with His desire that humans maintain their freedom. Or God is understood to be limited, as compared to the classical understanding of God, which emphasises His power/sovereignty or knowledge in God's actions towards the world. In either case, humans are understood to be free in a more radical sense than the deterministic schema outlined above.

Such an approach to divine and human action raises a number of questions, such as how God can be understood to act. For example, if one's prayers involve other humans or human actions, can God answer this prayer if that means impinging on human freedom? Such questions show how describing human freedom in the God-world relationship presents a number of problems.

Given the approach of open theists as outlined above, and the desire to maintain both human and divine freedom, whilst also maintaining God's ability to influence the world, the open account could be understood in terms of divine soft power, where God acts in such a way to influence, but not determine human action.

Foreknowledge

Thomas Aquinas's account of human and divine action represents one of the most sophisticated views on what might be called divine foreknowledge. The foreknowledge position is shared by Arminians and Wesleyans, amongst others, but for this paper the primary interlocutor will be Aquinas. His account of divine and human agency is fundamentally connected to his ideas around causality, by which certain things are 'caused' to work in specific ways, but this is also not 'strictly' determined; for example, God creates my hands in such a way that I can pick up my phone, but he does not determine that I pick up my phone. As Brian Davies writes, 'Aquinas thinks that God's omni-

¹⁹ David Woodruff, 'Presentism and the Problem of Special Relativity' in *God in an Open Universe; Science, Metaphysics, and Open Theism*, eds., William Hasker, Thomas Jay Oord, and Dean Zimmerman (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011), 94-95.

²⁰ This sort of view can be found in both, Robin Collins, 'Prayer and Open Theism' in *God in an Open Universe*, 171. And Burce McCormack, *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, 190.

causality does not act as a rival to the causality of creatures, since it actually empowers this or makes it to exist.²¹ The suggestion is that God's ordination occurs within the context of foreknowledge, and this view of foreknowledge forms one part of a theological system which explains the relation between both divine action and human freedom. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas suggests that, while humans do receive answers to prayers, and so prayer 'matters', it does not affect God's knowledge.²² So while humans 'choose' their actions, or at least some of their actions, this is foreknown by God. The significant question for this view, however, is whether this approach does in fact make a difference when compared to deterministic accounts, given that one could suggest that, as all events are foreknown, and so in some sense, are a foregone conclusion, at least from the perspective of God. This is because if God knows the future, then the future is not open to change, and so the actions of human beings are restricted to those actions which God knew they would do. Geldhof and Geybels, in describing petitionary prayer in the thought of Aquinas, would seem to make this very point, they write,

Petitionary prayer cannot intend to change God's will, which is an impossible act...One wants to obtain something from God according to one's own will, but without changing God's eternal will. In fact, individuals ask for something to happen which is in accordance with God's will, while they conform their will to God's. Individuals cannot pray that God change what He has foreseen in His eternal providence, but they can hope to discover what God has planned for them.²³

As we can see, God's will and knowledge are really important when thinking about how one might understand the relationship. Moreover, given how important God's knowledge is to this schema, some may argue that this then opens itself to incoherence. Indeed, Elenore Stump gives an account as to whether Aquinas is, in fact, helpful in making sense of petitionary prayer (under the traditional readings of Aquinas), given his accounts of free will, sin and causation, concluding he is not helpful.²⁴

Summary

The first two of these positions, determinism and open theism, operate in very different ways with two very different ways of construing divine and human action and power, which are in

²¹ Brian Davies, 'Prayer', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, eds. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford University Press, 2012), 469.

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q.83, A.2, rp1-3.

²³ Joris Geldhof and Hans Geybels, 'Aquinas' Prayer as *locus theologicus*', *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, 95, no 2 (2019): 216.

²⁴ Elenore Stump, 'Petitionary Prayer' *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1979): 86.

part related to how they construct their dogmatic theology regarding the nature of God. Likewise, the third option, as elucidated via Aquinas, attempts to take a nuanced stance and aims to maintain human and divine agency, but as Stump points out, traditional readings of Aquinas could well result in the same problems as the deterministic account. What this overview shows is that there are complex, connected theological issues which surround the topic of divine-human agency, and yet each position comes with its assorted problems. In the next section, I shall examine how all three of these accounts trace their theological ideas back to the biblical narrative. I will then seek to reframe the discussion to focus on the language we use regarding divine sovereignty/power and how it relates to human agency.

Biblical support

A core issue is that all three views described in this paper draw from various biblical passages and are underlaid by other theological presuppositions. As is already apparent, the first two articulations of divine action or power, determinism and open theism, can also be described in terms of political theory. A deterministic account suggests a God who exhibits hard power, enforcing Divine will upon the world. Meanwhile, an open account suggests an entirely soft power approach, where God influences humans, but the effects are not determined in a 'hard sense', rather God's power is exerted in an attractional method, that influences the world but leaves humans free to decide their own futures.

Both these arguments draw from biblical and theological arguments to articulate their case: for example, in support of soft power, the story of Elisha and King Jehoshaphat in 2 Kings 13,²⁵ or James 4:8 'Come near to God and he will come near to you'.²⁶ Conversely, accounts of hard power might draw on God hardening Pharaoh's heart, or commonly Romans 9:22-23.²⁷ Additionally, some passages could be claimed by both positions. In the account of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), is this God revealing himself and drawing Paul to Him, or does Paul now not have a choice, given the strength of the revelation and/or the determination of God? If, in this case, God uses soft power, then one could say that God's explicit revelation allows Paul to reject God despite

²⁵ Then he said, "Take the arrows," and the king took them. Elisha told him, "Strike the ground." He struck it three times and stopped. 19 The man of God was angry with him and said, "You should have struck the ground five or six times; then you would have defeated Aram and completely destroyed it. But now you will defeat it only three times."

²⁶ 'Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded'

²⁷ 'Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use? What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction?'

overwhelming evidence. While such a rejection might be considered a foolish decision on the part of Paul, he is not forced to follow Christ. As Paul does indeed convert, one can never know the result of this counterfactual. These passages represent only one small selection of the biblical data available to us; other passages that reference human freedom and divine will include: the fall narrative in Genesis 3, the calling of Moses in Exodus 3, God calling people to him (1 Corinthians 1: 26-30), our submission to God and resistance to the Devil (James 4:7), ridding ourselves of slander of every kind (1 Peter 2:1-3) and the list could go on as almost every book in the bible engages these themes in some way. Given the complexity and breadth of texts which discuss divine agency and human freedom, I contend that suggesting God only works via hard or soft power alone is an oversimplification of the revelation seen throughout scripture, as the examples cited above would suggest. In this sense, finding a means to balance these sometimes competing theological ideas is indeed a challenge, but one way to navigate this problem is to consider how the problem itself is framed; it is this to which I now turn.

Engaging Joseph Nye

How might one apply the work of Nye to the theological debates around agency? I believe we might be able to make the claim that God acts generally through soft power and occasionally through hard power. An example might be my own more ordinary conversion. In the biblical text, as well as throughout the Christian tradition, God can be clearly seen to work through people and circumstances. I would argue that God not only influences one's heart but also influences people in one's life. For example, if God works through the mundane circumstances of life, then, for example, my own parents' conversion, their decisions on what churches to attend, what school to send me to and where to live might all be influenced by God. Such experiences would perhaps count as forms of soft power. But this is not to deny that God might also work via hard power. Because God ought to be understood to influence the world both in explicit and implicit ways, an account of divine agency should, in the language of this paper, involve both hard and soft power. Such a view of divine-human agency means that, for example, specific acts of the Holy Spirit could be either hard or soft forms of action. Thus, in the scenarios above, there is still scope to suggest that God moved, or moves, in a hard or 'deterministic' sense in my life, but this does not entail that all God's actions are deterministic.

In Nye's approach to political power, there is a sense in which nations can act with hard or soft power, and this can take a multitude of forms, such as 'carrots' and 'sticks' in hard power usage. But the ability of nations to use different forms of power is important here, as it does not assume that all actions of power rely on the same form of power. In a similar way, one might suggest that

some of God's actions engage creation and use soft power, and some of God's actions are deterministic, and so use hard power.

Importantly, while the use of power in world politics is often focused around 'gain', envisioning God's use of power is different. Political uses of power are often dependent on violence, such as the use or threatened use of a nation's military, or the ability to impose economic restrictions or sanctions. Political power is usually focused on improving a nation-state. This is, of course, different to God's power in a number of crucial ways, which I shall outline below.

First, while God is relationally engaged and cares about His creation, He does not 'need' creation. And so while God might desire humans to act in specific ways, this should not be mistaken for God 'needing' creation in the way political forces seek to gain over others.

Second, political states and power do not usually act from a position of Love. But as God is Love (1 John 4:8), all His actions should be understood through this rubric. This is certainly not the case for political actors. Now, such a claim about God does not mean there are no questions regarding God's actions in the world, especially in how one reads the biblical texts that would seem to suggest violence (such as Jeremiah 47:4). But the understanding that God is Love, especially as revealed in the person and work of Jesus, ought to inform what is under consideration when encountering difficult texts.²⁸

Third, the use of physical force is not always to be understood as violence. Danny J Weaver's *Non-violent Atonement* provides one way of understanding how this could be framed.²⁹ One need not agree with Weaver's approach to atonement in order to suggest that God's deterministic actions might at times impinge on human freedom, but this does not necessitate that they are 'violent'. A discussion on how divine power and violence relate is surely warranted, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

Finally, the purpose of this paper is, primarily, to show that concepts used in political philosophy can be adapted to theology, in order to provide scope for new questions and discussion. But while these terms might be analogous, they are by no means synonymous. The differences between God's perfect action and sinful worldly actors are important and should not be understated.

²⁸ One might follow Moltmann here, in emphasising that through the Cross shows a Loving God who cares for creation in a passible sense, or one could understand this a classical way and follow Luther's 'Crux probat Omnia'. See, Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 3rd ed., trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden, (Munich: SCM Press, 2008) 222.

²⁹ Danny J Weaver, *Non-violent atonement*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001) 9.

Concluding remarks

The major issue with this paper is that I have not addressed the underlying assumptions of the positions articulated. For example, the deterministic accounts in reformed and Lutheran articulations connect human agency to discussions on sin, atonement, and soteriology, among others. And so there remain some real questions of how a 'mixed' approach to divine power, action and agency works in relation to wider systematic questions. Importantly, I do believe that such systematic questions, such as God's relationship to creation and eternity, can be resolved.³⁰

That said, I believe this paper provides a possible way to give greater clarity in linguistic terms, via the language of hard and soft power, to the discussion surrounding divine action. The strengths of this paper are only enhanced if the answers to the wider systematic questions can be developed. Even without this, I believe this language provides one notable advantage in terms of lay theological discussion. This is that it implicitly gives nuance to the common debate between Calvinistic and Arminian/Wesleyan or even Thomistic theology. By this, I mean, a common misinterpretation (that I have often seen) is that proponents of deterministic accounts suggest that alternative accounts deny that God is sovereign. Framing the conversation in terms of power allows for both positions to have a 'powerful' God, and one that is, in a traditional sense, a sovereign one. Thus, the nuance that is often lacking in lay debates regarding the power and action of God, can be reconciled by adequately resolving the linguistic barriers. In a similar vein, the use of power language helps us to get to the core of some of these debates without carrying much of the baggage that many theological words already carry. As highlighted in this paper, these discussions do raise alternative problems and questions, but they show some of the potential for utilising alternate language in theological discussion.

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³⁰ Jack Johnson, *The Eternally Passible God: a theological study on the compatibility of divine passibility and immutability*, (The University of St Andrews, 2025), <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10023/31058/Thesis-Jack-Johnson-complete-version.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y>, Accessed 18th November 2025.

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