

AD MAJOREM DEI GLORIAM

THE PROGRESSION OF THE THOUGHT OF ST.
THOMAS ON THE CAUSAL CERTITUDE OF DIVINE
PROVIDENCE

A paper submitted to Rev. Bernard Lonergan, S. J. as
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Exercitatio Et 42

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INTRODUCTION

Is God's providence a per se cause of every single event, effect, and set of circumstances? This question will be our signpost as I invite you to accompany St. Thomas in his progression of thought on the causal certitude of divine providence. As I shall explain later, St. Thomas himself could have asked such a question only at the final phase of his journey. It is helpful for us to glance at it now, for it shows what road he is on and in which direction he is travelling. It will also prevent us from wandering off into such connected considerations as application and universal instrumental causality, which would extend the itinerary beyond my scope and capacity.

The arduous stage of the journey lies between the De Veritate (1256- 59) and the Summa Contra Gentiles (1261-64). We will, however, look at elements in the Commentarium in Libros Sententiarum (1253-55) and the *Summa Theologica* (1266), his first and last systematic works, to see the length of the road he has traversed.* Evidently, our full consideration has to be limited to only one or two articles in each work.

No confusion should arise from the fact that the articles deal with three notions: providence, fate, and predestination. Since predestination is a part--the most important part--of providence, it is impossible to discuss one without considering the other. Besides, the notions serve to point out the themes of both aspects of the *exercitatio*:

*The chronology is taken from the chart of P. A. Walz, Dict. Theol. Cath. (Paris, 1946), vol. 15/1, col. 639.

- . 1) general, of the whole *exercitatio*: **grace**, which is the handmaid of predestination.
- . 2) particular, of this paper: **providence**, which has for its handmaid fate.

DE VERITATE, Q.6, a.3

I deal with this article at the outset, because it supplies the requisite notions and poses the problem. The question he sets out to answer is, "Whether or not predestination has certitude?" In reply, it is first necessary to distinguish two kinds of certitude:

1) certitude of knowledge: strict conformity of knowledge with reality.

2) certitude of order: "order" is that of cause to effect.

This order is certain when the cause infallibly produces its effect. This is the precise meaning of "causal certitude" throughout this paper.*

Both types are included in predestination, but it is with causal certitude that St. Thomas is primarily concerned in this article. In order to show how predestination adds to the causal certitude of providence, he discusses the latter first. Here he draws another distinction:

a) **in particulari**. or better, in each case. This is verified when some thing, ordered by providence to its particular end, indefectibly attains that end. Such is the case with the motions of the celestial spheres and all necessary natural agents.

* Bernard Lonergan, S.J., "St. Thomas' Theory of Operation," *Theological Studies* III (1942), p.399, note 70.

b) **in universali**, or better, with regard to the end result. This concerns the action of contingent causes. Although a single cause may fail to produce that effect to which it was ordered, yet this very defect is ordered by providence to some end. So, the end result of the divine plan is always guaranteed, despite the fact that some particular ends might not be achieved. He refers to the preceding question to give an example: the perpetuity of the species of corruptible things is guaranteed, even though the individuals can disappear.*

Predestination, however, presents a special problem. Here there is causal certitude in *particulari*, and yet the proximate cause, free will, is not necessary but contingent. So, in the realm of contingent causes St. Thomas sees that he must admit the causal certitude of providence in *particulari* in at least one area—that of predestination. His explanation, however, makes the exception only apparent, for what he ends up with is really the equivalent of causal certitude in *universali*.

Here is how he goes about the explanation in the third part of the article. The distinction drawn gives basically the same two categories as found in the second part. The following parallel of the texts will make this clear. Note that the terms in *universali* and in *particulari* are omitted in Part III.

IN PARTICULARI

P.II res	ad finem particularem devenit	absque defectu	ex prov.
P.III una causa singularis	producit effectum suum	(ad 2m: infallibiliter)	ex prov.

IN UNIVERSALI

P.II defectus virtutum minorum	aliquem finem
P.III multa contingencia et deficere possibles	unum effectum

*De Veritate, Q.5, a.3.

At the end of Part II dogmatic data forced him to admit it that predestination is certain in each case, in particulari. In Part II, however, he has to deny this because he cannot explain it. He is justified in his denial, for his response to the second objection shows that the first member of the above line-up still deals exclusively with causes which always and necessarily produce their single effects. The graces which St. Thomas gives the will, however, simply do not work that way. God prepares so many helps that either the predestined will not sin, or should he sin, he will repent and be saved. There is, therefore, an ambiguity in what St. Thomas means by “in each case.” Each of the elect, it is true, will be saved, but not in such a way that each act of the elect is causally certain.

This statistical manner of arriving at the goal is confirmed by the analogy of the perpetuity of the species. Any member of the species can and will fail. But since God orders things that they do not disappear all together, the species is saved numerically by the succession of one after the other. This is precisely the same comparison used in Part II to exemplify causal certitude with regard to the end result, in universali.

The important point to be gathered from this article is that for St. Thomas divine providence is not yet causally certain in each and every case of the operation of contingent causes. Only in the field of necessary agents could this be verified. Even in the one area of contingent causes where he must postulate such certitude in each case, his explanation does not permit him go that far.

Commentarium in Libros Sententiarum

Let us glance back to an earlier work to see St. Thomas’ answer to the same question: “Whether or not predestination has certitude.” Throughout the article* the emphasis is evidently on foreknowledge. Even the one time in the *corpus* that he speaks of causality is in reference to God's foreknowledge as the first cause. In the response to the objection that predestination cannot be certain because of the contingency of the will, he answers once again in terms of knowledge: these acts have a determinate being insofar as they are in act at some time, and in this way they can fall under the certitude of foreknowledge.

The mere fact, therefore, that in the De Veritate he distinguishes another kind of certitude besides that of knowledge, viz. causal certitude, shows an advance in synthesis. Here is the genesis of this movement. In L.I, d.40, a.1, q.2 he asks whether predestination pertains to knowledge. The formula he gives is a good example of alliteration:

praedestinatio = praescientia, propositum et praeparatio praeter providentiam.

In the Commentary he handled quite well the problems concerned with the *praescientia*. But once he started thinking about the inner workings of *praeparatio*, he shifted his attention to the causal aspect of predestination and providence. In the De Veritate, therefore, he distinguishes the certitude of knowledge from causal certitude, passes over the former for the moment and concentrates on the latter. It was left for the Contra Gentiles to express the synthesis he was groping for.

* Comm. in Sent. L.1, d.40, a.3.

SUMMA CONTRA GENTILES, L.III, q.94.

The question asks whether providence is certain. Causal certitude is under discussion here, for at the end of the article the reader is referred to the first book for the problems connected with the certitude of knowledge.

The dilemma which St. Thomas proposes to solve shows his preoccupation with the problem of contingency: if everything subject to divine providence--even contingent things-- then either providence is not certain or everything takes place out of necessity. What's more, according to Cicero, that particular contingent cause with which we are concerned, viz. free will, cannot be reconciled with the causal certitude of providence. If providence is certain, so is fate; if fate is certain, then there is no such thing as free will (nor any other contingent cause for that matter).

He gives the answer in three steps which admirably synthesize everything he has thus far taught on providence. I will mention only the pertinent points.

1) Nothing escapes divine providence. The genius of the planner is shown when he gets down to the very last detail. The genius of the executor consists in letting everything else do all the work. God is perfect in both respects. He orders every single thing, *quantumcumque minima*. Everything that acts, *quaecumque operantur*, are merely instruments moved by Him.

2) The order of providence cannot be changed. The failure of some agent is no problem, for its very power to act (or not act) is due to the disposition of providence.

3) Nor is such a failure to be avoided. A defect, it true, is beyond the intention of the particular agent—it tries to reach the highest possible perfection. But if it did, the general beauty of the universe would be impaired. The latter postulates that some things be less perfect than others. Yet, all this is according to the divine design, which intends that such and such thing have such and such a perfection.

Here, then, is the solution to the problem of the article-- contingency. The first distinction in perfection is between the necessary and the contingent. It is God who decides that some things will take place necessarily and others contingently. He himself transcends both orders. He is the cause not only of being but also of the causes and modes of being. In the case of free will, God has disposed that what we do be done freely (*ad 4m*).

The point we are looking for is this. Unlike the De Veritate, where only the effects of necessary causes were causally certain in each case, in the Contra Gentiles this is true of every contingent effect, even human acts. Moreover, the former distinction between *in universali* and *in particulari* has no meaning in this conception of the universe. The formula which now expresses his position is found in the answer to the first objection: Divine providence is a direct (*per se*) cause of this future effect (whether contingent or necessary).

This first objection merits closer attention, for it permits St. Thomas to go further. The position of the determinists was as follows: Every effect has a direct cause in the present or past; but once you posit the cause, the effect must follow necessarily. Aristotle solved the difficulty by two responses:

1) some causes can fail;

2) not every effect has a direct cause, for something which comes about accidentally has no cause. St. Thomas' answer makes no explicit mention of the *per accidens*. He is content in showing that even if you posit providence as a *per se* cause, the effect is not necessarily necessary. This answer, of course, would include the *per accidens* situation, but it was left for the Summa Theologica to give it more explicit treatment.

SUMMA THEOLOGICA

Q.115, a.6 asks whether the heavenly bodies impose necessity on those things which are subject to their action. The answer can be summed up by a series of objections and responses.

THESIS: The will does not of necessity follow the inclinations produced by the heavenly bodies.

OBJ: Then at least natural things, which have no freedom, necessarily follow them. For, everything that is, has a cause. But granted the cause, the effect follows of necessity. *Ergo*.

RESP: *Dist.min.* Some causes fail to produce their effects in a few cases.

INST: This failure is due to a hindering cause which itself is necessary.

RESP: Sometimes the impeding cause clashes with the ordered one accidentally. But what happens accidentally has no cause. Therefore, the result of such a clash is not reduced to some preexisting cause.

PROBO MIN. Everything that is a being *per se* has a cause. But that which is *per accidens* has no cause, since it is not truly being nor one.

At first sight it would seem that that St. Thomas is merely repeating Aristotle's answer: the *per accidens* has no cause. The repetition is verbal, however, for what he means by "cause" is restricted to celestial cause (or, more generically, natural agents). This is easily shown in three ways.

1) The context of the article deals with the celestial spheres.

2) In his response to the third objection he explicitly modifies *causam* by *celestem*.

3) In the following article, which we will now consider, he tells us what the cause behind the *per accidens* is: divine providence.

Q.116, a.1 clinches his synthesis. It deals with fate, which is nothing more than the interrelation of all the intermediary causes by which providence produces its effects. In particular he is concerned with the chance situation or lucky event. Although these are completely fortuitous from the point of view of lower causes, they are directly intended by a higher cause. Some have maintained that the heavenly bodies are such a higher cause. But this cannot be for two reasons.

1) *in the field of human activity*. Human acts are only indirectly and accidentally subject to the action of the celestial spheres. But the cause we are looking for must be directly and *per se* the cause of what takes place.

2) *with relation to the per accidens*, which is neither truly being nor truly one. Celestial spheres act as natural principles, which can produce only that which is being and one. In no way can a natural agent like a celestial body produce something which happens accidentally.

This higher cause of fortuitous events, therefore, must be an agent which operates by an intellect and will. By the former He can consider the *per accidens* as one; by the latter He can bring about what He conceives. Evidently, only the intellect and will of God can be in question here, for only God can change the will.

All that remains is to formulate this final element in our investigation:

Divine providence is a *per se* cause of every combination of circumstances, even those involving luck and chance.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Let us look at the question I proposed at the beginning of this investigation: Is divine providence a *per se* cause of every effect and set of circumstances? What answer has St. Thomas a right to give at each stage of his thought?

1) In the **Sentences** he will not even listen to our question, for he is so taken up with foreknowledge that he gives scant consideration to causality.

2) In the **De Veritate** he is now concentrating on our problem but does not fully understand the question. He might answer that providence is a direct cause at least of *necessary* effects .

3) In the **Contra Gentiles** he sees what we are driving at and says that divine providence is a *per se* cause of every effect, whether necessary or contingent.

4) Finally, in the **Summa** he says that not only every effect but also every set of circumstances in which luck, chance, and free will have free rein, is all brought about by divine providence .

As it was intimated in the Introduction, St. Thomas is not to be thought of as asking this question to himself in each work and giving successive partial solutions to it until he found the satisfactory response. This would be simply anachronistic, because in his earlier works he was not thinking in the well- defined categories found in the question. The mere asking of such a question is already the fruit and result of his systematic handling of a problem which began to take shape only as he moved along.

Finally, running the risk of over-simplification, I would like to propose the following diagram. Note that the arrow still points ahead, for what we have regarded as the goal is actually but a stage in the speculative journey which must be continued.

