

St. Thomas on the Philosophical Intelligibility and Plausibility of the Doctrine of Divine Providence: Situating *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3, chap. 64

Aquinas Philosophy Workshop, Mt. St. Mary's College, 2014

Alfred J. Freddoso

1. Introduction: The main topics of this presentation

The assigned title for my presentation is “A Philosophical Notion of Providence.” More specifically, when I asked whether there was any particular topic he wanted me to talk about, Fr. Thomas Joseph White replied, “I really would like to have someone explain why or how there is a philosophical intelligibility to the notion of providence in Aquinas — particularly, for example, in *SCG* 3, chap. 64, ‘That God Governs Things by His Providence’.”

Now you might think that the last thing someone of my age wants or needs is an assigned topic, especially one whose import is not immediately crystal clear. But you would be wrong. Over the past fifteen years I have on several occasions greatly benefitted by, in effect, being treated like an undergraduate and required to write on a mandated topic. For me it always provides a good opportunity to integrate the fundamental starting points that I now take for granted with new material or, as in the present case, with old material looked at from a fresh perspective.

Now I could have asked Fr. Thomas Joseph exactly what he meant, but what fun would that be? Like your typical undergraduate, I decided to think it out for myself without going through the bother of asking the professor. So as I have come to understand it on my own, as it were, my appointed task is (a) to situate the doctrine of divine providence within the broader context of St. Thomas’s natural theology and (b) in this way to exhibit both its intelligibility and its plausibility on the basis of first principles drawn from natural reason. My goal is to present the big picture and to do it in such a way as to suggest lines of further inquiry.

With this in mind, I’m going to do three things in this presentation. First, I am going to rehearse what is, upon reflection, the rather astonishing content of the Catholic Christian doctrine of divine providence as understood both by St. Thomas and by the Church herself in solemn pronouncements. Next, in the central part of my presentation, I will situate this content within St. Thomas’s natural theology, i.e., within the project of *SCG* 1-3. Lastly, I will take a brief look at *SCG* 3, chap. 64, commenting on its structure and on some of its ten arguments.

2. The doctrine of providence as the Church and St. Thomas understand it

So let’s first look at the content of the doctrine of divine providence. As St. Thomas explains in *ST* 1, q. 22, a. 3, God’s providence in the broad sense includes both “a *plan* for ordering the things provided for toward their end (*ratio ordinis rerum provisarum in finem*); and the *execution* of this ordering, which is called *governance* (*gubernatio*).”

According to St. Thomas — and according to the Church — God, the divine artisan or craftsman, freely and knowingly plans, orders, and provides for all the effects, without exception, that constitute His artifact, the created universe with its entire causal history, and He executes His freely chosen plan by playing an active causal role sufficient to ensure its exact realization. Thus, whatever occurs is properly said to be specifically decreed by God. More exactly, each effect produced in the created universe is

either specifically and knowingly intended by Him (*providentia approbationis*) or, in concession to the defectiveness of creatures, specifically and knowingly permitted by Him (*providentia concessionis*). In *SCG* 3, chaps. 71-76 (as well as in *ST* 1, q. 22, a. 2) St. Thomas responds, one by one, to the reasons philosophers have cited to exclude one or another of the following classes of things or actions or effects in the created world from the scope of God's providence: (a) effects that are fortuitous relative to the causal tendencies of their created (or secondary) causes; (b) anything involving a defect of any sort; (c) actions or effects that occur by natural necessity; (d) actions or effects that result from the power of free choice; and (e) *individual* corruptible things (as opposed to their *species*). In other places St. Thomas likewise defends the claim, once again explicitly taught by the Church, that God has comprehensive and absolutely certain knowledge of the future, including the contingent future.

Despite the fact that this conception of divine providence is clearly found in St. Thomas, is firmly established in magisterial teaching (*de fide* according to Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (1960)), pp. 89-91), and does not seem to have been disputed by either Lutherans or Calvinists in the 16th century, it is rejected by many contemporary Evangelical philosophers of religion and even by some prominent Catholics, including Peter Geach and (as I read him) Jacques Maritain. (In the early 1990's I myself was scolded in a book review by a Jesuit for invoking this account of providence; he called it a Stoic, rather than Christian, conception of divine providence!) Many of these thinkers are motivated by the conviction that the Catholic conception of divine providence (or 'meticulous providence', as it has been derisively labeled in the literature) is incompatible with the exercise of human (and, presumably, angelic) free choice. Beyond this, some of them — e.g., those who espouse the so-called 'open-ness' of God and so-called 'theistic personalists' — harbor a more general antipathy to any account of God's providence that in effect attributes to God a greater power and knowledge than St. Thomas himself is willing to attribute to the angelic nature. I suppose that these thinkers are not so much anthropomorphites, to use Hume's charming nomenclature, as they are 'angelomorphites'.

This point is worth dwelling on for a few moments because it tells us something important about St. Thomas's conception of natural theology done aright — viz., that it yields a God who really is utterly weird and unlike anything we can imagine — or, to put it in more traditional terms, a God who really is transcendent and such that when we talk about Him, we barely understand what we are saying.

For, to be fair to the angelomorphites, what is attributed to God by the doctrine of divine providence is indeed truly astounding and literally mind-boggling. It's not just that God has comprehensive and absolutely certain knowledge of the natures and activities of created corporeal beings without being causally acted upon by any of those beings; for, according to St. Thomas (and St. Augustine), angels — who, though very impressive, are still limited or finite beings — have this sort of knowledge by means of the intelligible species that they are naturally endowed with. Again, it's not just that God has cognition of future contingents of the sort that the 'open-ness' crowd assigns to Him, i.e., cognition of all the causal tendencies and inclinations of created beings along with knowledge of their locations and histories; for, according to St. Thomas, angels have as much of this sort of cognition of future contingents as can be had. Again, it's not just that for any place in the corporeal universe, God has the power to act at that place; for this is a power that St. Thomas attributes to any ordinary angel.

It's hard for us to imagine what it's like to be an angel, but it's not impossible. For we can imagine having comprehensive knowledge of the corporeal world at our fingertips — via, say, a super-computer programmed with some ultimate and comprehensive scientific theory of everything and with all the empirical information we would need about the locations and conditions of individuals. And, likewise, we can imagine (sort of) what it would be like to have the ability to act anywhere in the universe. In both cases, it seems from what we know that we would be imagining something that is naturally impossible

for us as corporeal beings, but we can imagine ourselves free of such impediments in the way that St. Thomas takes angels to be free of them. We can even imagine what it would be like to have direct cognition of and communication with angelic beings.

By contrast, God is, so to speak, the creator-genius whose knowledge is, as St. Thomas puts it, a cause of everything, including the angels and their knowledge and power. It's not just that God is omniscient; it's that He's omniscient simply by knowing Himself. Neophytes sometimes joke that St. Thomas sure has a lot to say about God, considering his denial that we can know what God is. But the fact is that all his talk about God's nature, perfections, and activity stretches our language to the breaking point. The very characterization of God as Pure Actuality with no admixture of passive potentiality and as Unparticipated *Esse* in possession of all perfections involves limiting notions that exhibit the strain that a godlike being puts on our conceptual resources. For instance, in the case of God's knowledge, St. Thomas finds that the only way to even hint at the truth is to collapse four elements that are distinct from one another in the case of human and angelic intellectual cognition of the corporeal world:

So from everything that has been said so far, it is clear that in God the following are altogether one and the same thing: (a) the intellect, (b) that which is understood, (c) the intelligible species, and (d) the very act of understanding. Hence, it is clear that when God is claimed to be an intelligent being, no multiplicity is being posited within His substance. (*ST* 1, q. 14, a. 4, resp.)

Once again, we hardly know what we are saying when we talk about God's cognition. What would it be like to know everything without ever having received anything from outside yourself? Even more startlingly, what would it be like to know everything just by knowing yourself? And what would it be like to know everything all at once in a single cognition and without ever taking a break, as it were? Lastly, what would it be like not just to know everything, but to know everything because you're a free and deliberate cause of everything that could have been otherwise?

We are now ready to turn to St. Thomas's natural theology and to see how it leads us to the point of saying such strange things.

3. Divine providence and natural theology

The *locus classicus* for St. Thomas's natural theology is the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. My own aid to the imagination here is to think of St. Thomas gathering up Augustine, Justin Martyr, John of Damascus (Damascene), all the Gregory's, John Chrysostom, Anselm and the other important pre-13th century Catholic thinkers residing in Dante's *Paradiso* and taking a trip to the First Circle of the *Inferno* for a working vacation spent in conversation with the likes of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Avicenna, and Averroes (with Zeno, Empedocles, Democritus, Heraclitus and Anaxagoras perhaps off to the side). I imagine St. Thomas and his friends renting a recreational vehicle and traveling on the Inter-Last-Things Expressway; think of a trip on I-95 from cool and heavenly Portland, ME to, say, Washington, DC.

In the first nine chapters of book 1, St. Thomas addresses interested Catholic readers of all levels of intellectual ability and preparation, introducing them to the notion of philosophical wisdom, showing them the consonance between faith and reason, warning them about the weakness and insufficiency of natural reason unaided by revelation, and assuring them that their faith is on sure intellectual footing even if they cannot understand the high-powered philosophical discussion that is about to begin with the

gentiles in chapter 10.

The conversation is made easier (a) by the fact that all the principal gentile interlocutors are morally upright (they're in Limbo, after all), (b) by the fact that all of them share certain fundamental philosophical assumptions, including metaphysical and epistemological realism, thus ensuring at least the possibility of fruitful joint philosophical inquiry, and (c) by the fact that they are all familiar with (even if they don't all accept) the basic thrust of Aristotle's logic, philosophy of nature, and metaphysics. (By contrast, any latecomers to the First Circle who are under the spell of Kant and Heidegger and believe that scholastic natural theologians were guilty of practicing 'onto-theology' will be expected to read Fr. Thomas Joseph White's [*Wisdom in the Face of Modernity*](#) before they are allowed to participate in the discussion.) St. Thomas's hope is that the best classical philosophers can be led to see, by their own standards of successful intellectual inquiry, that Christian doctrine is a plausible candidate for the wisdom they have been seeking. That is to say, he hopes to remove intellectual obstacles from them by showing that many theses that they have already established on their own, or that they could have established if they had done better by their own standards, are part of Christian revelation. This is why we often find near the end of chapters of the first three books citations from Sacred Scripture. It's as if St. Thomas is telling them, "See? This very thesis that we have just agreed upon is part of Christian wisdom." And it's a pretty impressive list of so-called 'preambles of the Faith' by the time we get to the end of book 3.

As it is laid out in book 1, the natural theology has three principal stages: (a) the proof of the existence of a godlike being (chapters 10-13); (b) the *via remotionis* (chapters 14-28); and (c) the *via affirmationis* (chapters 29-102, as well as books 2 and 3). Even though the third stage is by far the longest (thus the remark that St. Thomas sure has a lot to say about God), it is the second stage — the *via remotionis* — that is of singular importance, since the whole third stage is carried out under its shadow, so to speak.

The first stage is meant to prove the existence of a 'godlike' being — where, like St. Thomas, I am using the term 'god' in what I like to call the "Gallup poll" sense. This gives us a being under some title of preeminence. Here St. Thomas concentrates on the arguments for an Unmoved Mover (or, as I prefer to say, Unactualized Actualizer) and a First Efficient Cause. I will not comment on the arguments themselves, except to direct you to Edward Feser's excellent work on these arguments and the others found in St. Thomas's writings. The arguments turn out to be both intelligible and plausible when understood correctly.

Interestingly, even though St. Thomas uses the description 'Unmoved Mover' to guide the *via remotionis*, he throws in two shorter arguments at the end of chapter 13, the second of which aims to establish the existence of a provident governor of the universe. He attributes the argument to Damascene and claims that it is at least hinted at by Averroes. It goes like this: Some sort of provident governance is required in order for things with contrary and discordant natures to come together into a single ordering within which each tends toward its own fixed end and all of them together tend toward a distinct fixed end. But, says St. Thomas, "In the world we see that things of diverse natures fit together into a single ordering — not rarely or by chance, but always or for the most part. And so there must be a governing being who exercises providence over nature."

This parallels one of the arguments for providence in chapter 64 of book 3, and I will return to it below. Two points are noteworthy here as asides. First, this argument seems out of place in chapter 13 because providence already involves various perfections, whereas (a) it is not until chapter 28, the culmination of the *via remotionis*, that St. Thomas argues for the perfection of the being whose existence

is proven in chapter 13, and (b) it is not until much later, within the *via affirmationis*, that he argues that God has intellect, will, and power. Second, St. Thomas takes the idea of “universal providence” to be one of the main reasons why the common name ‘god’ is imposed to signify a given being (see *ST* 1, q. 13, a. 8). In other words, providence is what many or even most people have in mind when they use the term ‘god’. Perhaps this itself explains the presence of the argument in chapter 13. I don’t know.

In any case, it is the *via remotionis* that I am mainly concerned with at present. We need this ‘way of negation’ because, St. Thomas tells us in chapter 14, we do not have a quidditative grasp of God. What does this mean and why is it a problem? A quidditative concept, as the name suggests, is one that expresses a grasp of what the thing it signifies is. In the paradigmatic case of substances, a quidditative concept is what is expressed by a natural kind term. In our ordinary experience we are able to grasp the essence of things well enough to define them, to situate them within multi-tiered taxonomies, and thus to prepare the way for further experiential and/or scientific inquiry. However, according to St. Thomas, we have the natural ability to do this only with respect to possible objects of sentient cognition. And, at the very least, we have no reason to believe at this point that we have sentient cognition of, or hence a grasp of the essence of, an absolutely Unmoved Mover or an absolutely First Efficient Cause.

So at the beginning we are limited to trying to determine the ways in which an Unmoved Mover differs from (or is removed from — hence the name ‘*via remotionis*’) those things that we do have a positive quidditative grasp of. And here Aristotelians have a distinct advantage. For, first of all, Aristotelian philosophy of nature supplies us with plausible and intelligible specifications of the distinction between actuality and (passive) potentiality that correspond to the two main types of change, viz., (a) the distinction between *substance* and *accident*, corresponding to qualified (or accidental) change, and (b) the distinction between *primary matter* and *substantial form*, corresponding to unqualified (or substantial) change. To these two specifications stemming from actions that involve change St. Thomas adds a third, viz., (c) the distinction between *essentia* and *esse*, corresponding to the action of creation *ex nihilo*. What’s more, by the use of analogy Aristotelianism supplies us with two further ‘logical’ specifications of the distinction between actuality and potentiality, viz., (d) the distinction between the parts of a real definition, viz., *genus* and *difference*, and (e) the distinction between *suppositum* (or *subject*) and *nature*. All the corporeal objects of our ordinary sentient experience involve a composition of potentiality and actuality in each of the five ways just mentioned. These are the cognitive objects which our intellect is naturally at home with and which help shape our conceptual and linguistic resources.

So when St. Thomas argues in chapter 16, on the basis of the nominal definition of an Unmoved Mover, that an Unmoved Mover has absolutely no passive potentiality, he already has in place a very meaty and metaphysically thick way of characterizing the utter other-ness and limitlessness of the Unmoved Mover. For an Unmoved Mover must lack all five of the aforementioned types of composition. The rest of the *via remotionis* in effect spells out the implications of this lack of composition. And since in this case composition implies limitation and receptivity, St. Thomas’s culminating argument for the Unmoved Mover’s perfection in chapter 28 is in effect an argument for the claim that an Unmoved Mover lacks all the kinds of finitude (and, by implication, defectiveness) that we find in the objects of our experience. Hence, the argument for perfection is in effect an argument for utter transcendence.

This is why St. Thomas thinks that our language, which is expressive of our fundamental mode of cognition and which is geared to talking about corporeal substances and their accidents, is woefully inadequate and misleading if we try to use it straightforwardly to talk about God. Nor does he believe that this inadequacy can be remedied by the construction of some ‘ideal language’ that is stipulated to be free of these inadequacies. Just the opposite. He would contend that any putative ideal language will be

conceptually infected with the very same inadequacies. That is, we might *pretend* to be able to understand such a language and to be using it without any conceptual inadequacy, but the reality would be that we are ‘understanding’ it by use of our inadequate conceptual resources after all. This is just part of the human condition, and we must accept it with intellectual humility.

It is at this point that one should experience the temptation, which according to St. Thomas was succumbed to by Moses Maimonides, to despair of being able to say anything positive or affirmative about God at all. On my reading, St. Thomas takes this temptation itself to be an essential moment of any acceptable natural theology. That is to say, St. Thomas thinks that if your natural theology at no point tempts you to claim that all we can say about God is that He is utterly unlike anything we can make substantive affirmations about, then you have a lousy natural theology. You have not provided a basis for the right sort of dread of anthropomorphism or angelomorphism, i.e., for the right sort of intellectual fear of the Lord, so to speak. And this is why the whole of the *via affirmationis* must be conducted under the cloud of the *via remotionis*. We have to be aware at every moment of the inadequacy of our language as applied to God.

This brings us to St. Anselm. As I read St. Thomas, he believes that a natural theology built on the claim that the existence of a perfect being is known *per se* or *a priori* is such that it wholly bypasses the *via remotionis* and reaches divine perfection without the necessary ‘purification’, as it were. (It’s a bit like trying to become holy without any practice of asceticism or mortification.) I suspect that St. Thomas became more and more insistent on this point as he got older. My evidence for this is that in his later treatments (in *SCG* and *ST*) of the claim that God’s existence is known *per se* and of Anselm’s argument he does not even mention St. Anselm by name, a breach of his normal standards of philosophical decorum. Allow me a bit of speculation here; I think that by that time St. Thomas had become a bit embarrassed for St. Anselm on this issue. I say this despite the fact that, from my perspective, St. Thomas’s reply to the ontological argument is less than satisfactory. I have tried many times to interpret what he says in a way that does not beg the question against the argument, and I have never quite succeeded to my own satisfaction. But in the end I don’t think it matters. I think that St. Thomas’s view is that even if an argument like St. Anselm’s or one of the other *a priori* arguments worked, it would still not be a fitting foundational first step for natural theology. Not only that, but it would be downright dangerous to take it as such a foundation. (For more on this topic, you might want to look at Fr. Thomas Joseph’s chapter on Karl Rahner and [at my comment on it.](#))

So, according to St. Thomas, the whole of the *via affirmationis*, including the treatment of divine providence, must take place under the cloud of the *via remotionis* and its thick conception of God’s transcendence. Consequently, we should expect, as we have already seen, intimations of the astonishing and the mind-boggling when we finally get to the *via affirmationis*. (This is where the various accounts of analogical predication come into play. Our language, as noted above, needs to be stretched.) What’s more, St. Thomas’s justification for this claim is one that I have tried to show is fully intelligible and, I believe, fully plausible once you accept — as you should — the basic framework of Aristotle’s philosophy of nature and metaphysics, supplemented by a correct philosophical understanding of the action of creation *ex nihilo*.

With this in mind, I will make a few brief comments about chap. 64 itself.

3. Providence in SCG 3, chap. 64

Chapter 64 contains thirteen paragraphs: The first is introductory; each of the next ten contains an argument for the claim that God governs things by His providence, and the last two serve as the conclusion.

Let me begin at the end. In paragraph 12 St. Thomas cites passages from three Psalms and the book of Job attesting to the fact that God is Lord, King, and Provident Ruler of the universe. This is consonant with the role I ascribed above to citations from Sacred Scripture in St. Thomas's natural theology.

The last paragraph suggests that St. Thomas has particular targets in mind in chapter 64. Though he names just one of them, I want to suggest that there are three, and that the really interesting target is one of the unnamed targets.

The last paragraph is this: "Hereby is excluded the error of the ancient natural philosophers, who claimed that all things proceed from the necessity of matter (*provenit ex necessitate materiae*), from which it followed that everything happens by chance and not because of any providential ordering."

The 'necessity of matter' referred to here does not have to do with natural necessity or physical determinism. Rather, it has to do with the absence of (or, better, neglect of) form and teleology. In *Physics 2*, Aristotle claims that while his predecessors (and here he has Empedocles and Democritus especially in mind) have an understanding of nature as *matter*, they neglect nature as *form*. Hence, as they see it, nature, at least at ontological levels higher than the elemental or lowest-level entities, operates blindly and not as the result of inherent higher-level powers, tendencies, and inclinations — regardless of whether natural operations are deterministic or non-deterministic. (By 'higher-level' here I mean higher than the level of the elemental entities, whatever they turn out to be.) This explains the sense of 'chance' that is operative in this last paragraph. Chance in this sense rules out even higher-level Aristotelian natures such as minerals, plants, and animals — not to mention divine governance. What occurs by chance under this acceptation is such that the world was not tending toward it before it occurred — where the world tends toward something either because of lines of inherent causal tendencies or because of divine governance from the outside or, as on St. Thomas's view, because of both. And, according to the Empedocleans, there is no fact about the world that ensures that there will be discernible higher-level regularities in the course of nature. Maybe there are; maybe there aren't. But if there are such regularities, they are brute facts whose existence admits of no deeper explanation. Nor should such an explanation be sought, according to the Empedocleans. (Needless to say, such Empedoclean reductionism is not unknown among contemporary analytic philosophers.)

Now the fifth argument of chapter 64, contained in paragraph 6, mirrors the argument about providence from *SCG 1*, chap. 13 that I have already alluded to, and it is directed against the Empedocleans. In effect, it refuses to accept the claim that higher-level regularities in nature do not require explanation, and it concludes that a provident God is necessary in order to account for the fact that things of diverse natures are integrated into an orderly whole in which the active and passive powers of each blend with those of the others. More on this in a moment.

The anthropomorphites and angelomorphites constitute another target of chapter 64 — though only a secondary target, since, as noted above, St. Thomas will deal with them more completely in chapters 71-77 when he refutes various arguments for limiting the scope of God's providence. Still, by the time he gets to *SCG 3*, chap. 64 St. Thomas has given a partial answer (a) by providing a metaphysically thick characterization of God's utter transcendence in *SCG 1* and (b) by exhibiting in *SCG 2* the absolute and

total dependence of all created things on God for their being and action. The second argument of chapter 64, found in paragraph 3, picks up on the latter point, inferring from the premise that God makes each thing for the sake of an end the conclusion that He makes use of each thing by directing it toward its end. There are no exceptions.

What's really interesting here, though, is the third target, viz., non-Christian Aristotelians and, by implication, Aristotle himself. These thinkers take themselves to have answered the Empedocleans adequately on their own more limited grounds. Why aren't higher-level Aristotelian natures sufficient in their own right to account for the integrated character of the course of nature? Why aren't they sufficient to undergird the regularities?

I will focus here on two arguments, contained in paragraphs 4 and 5 of chapter 64. The first of the arguments is, as it were, 'from above' and the second is 'from below'.

The first argument tries to show that Aristotelians already have the doctrine of divine providence implicitly built into their conception of an Unmoved Mover, regardless of whether the Unmoved Mover is conceived of as a first *efficient* cause or as a first *final* cause. The key premise in the argument is that the Unmoved Mover effects movement in all the things He has created and He does this not by a necessity of nature but freely through His intellect and will — something that St. Thomas takes himself to have established in *SCG* 2, especially chap. 23.

The second of the two arguments in question is similar to the Fifth Way of *ST* 1, q. 2. It pushes the dialectic between the Aristotelians and the Empedocleans about the underlying explanation of regularities in nature back one more step: How is it that unthinking natural substances have, and act from, their characteristic powers and inclinations, i.e., their very natures, in the first place? How is it that they arrive at the ends which, according to the Aristotelians, are programmed into them by nature? Why should we treat these realities as brute facts, given that they cry out for an explanation — especially considering that we can easily imagine a very different world containing very different natures acting in very different ways for very different ends. Indeed, we can imagine that world being very chaotic as well, with little or no coordination among the various natures and operations. St. Thomas goes on to assert:

Nature's entire operation must be ordered by some sort of cognition. And this must be traced back to God, either mediately or immediately. For every lower sort of art or cognition must receive its principles from a higher one, as is likewise clear in the case of the speculative and practical sciences. Therefore, God governs the world by His providence. (*SCG* 3, chap. 64, #5)

Notice that St. Thomas is here providing us with a Lawgiver for natural law in both of its philosophical uses, the one in philosophy of nature and the other in moral theory. The very same anomaly that Elizabeth Anscombe noted in modern deontological moral theories, viz., laws without a lawgiver (or, at least without an adequate lawgiver), haunts the lively recent literature on laws of nature in analytic metaphysics and philosophy of science as well. Of course, on St. Thomas's view — unlike, say, Descartes's — God does not impose these laws from the outside on form-less corporeal entities which could just as easily have been subject to contrary laws; instead, He builds them right into the natures of corporeal substances. For the laws of nature are just the causal tendencies of natural substances. In St. Thomas's terminology, natural law is God's eternal providential law as embodied and embedded in the very natures of created substances.

4. Conclusion

In this presentation I have tried to exhibit the philosophical intelligibility of St. Thomas's understanding of divine providence by situating the doctrine of providence within his three-stage natural theology, arguing that the metaphysically thick understanding of God's transcendence that emerges from the *via remotionis* makes the doctrine of providence understandable despite the mind-boggling conception of God and of His knowledge and action that it embodies. What's more, though much remains to be done on this score, I have tried to give some indication of the plausibility of the doctrine of providence against the backdrop of an Aristotelian philosophy of nature. Given that at least some aspects of that philosophy of nature are, *mirabile dictu*, being taken seriously nowadays in quarters where until recently they had been dismissed out of hand, perhaps St. Thomas will be making a comeback soon.