

**Introduction to the Problem of Free Will and Divine Causality**  
**Aquinas Philosophy Workshop, Mt. St. Mary's College, 2013**

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(Last edited - 6/19/2013)

**I. The Context: Divine Providence (Plan)**

- A. God, the divine artisan, freely and knowingly plans, orders and provides for all the effects that constitute His artifact, the created universe with its entire history, and executes His 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 creaturely defectiveness, specifically and knowingly *permitted* by Him (*providentia concessionis*).
1. This is an important one of the elements shared in common by both Dominicans and Jesuits in the 16th century *De Auxiliis* controversy. There are many other such elements, which I will enumerate below.
  2. Despite the fact that this conception of divine providence is clearly found in St. Thomas, is well established in Catholic doctrine (close to *de fide*, I would say), 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 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.) Without this strong conception of 'meticulous providence' (as it is derisively called by one analytic philosopher of religion), the *De Auxiliis* controversy disappears. Of course, the watered-down, anthropomorphic replacement accounts of divine providence are not exactly nothing to write Rome about.
- B. This conception of providence entails that God has comprehensive knowledge of creation in general and, more specifically, comprehensive knowledge of future contingents. For, as St. Thomas puts it, God's knowledge is a cause of things, and not vice versa. That is to say, God has comprehensive foreknowledge because He antecedently knows what He Himself is going to do and He knows what will ensue, given what He is going to do—and His knowledge extends not only to *necessary* effects but also to *contingent* effects. Dominicans and Jesuits again agree on this much. Their dispute is over the details of exactly *how* all of this can be true. More below.
- C. One last point of agreement between the Dominicans and Jesuits, and Garrigou-Lagrange is very clear about this in *The One God*: The doctrine of divine providence entails that God has comprehensive foreknowledge not only of *absolute future contingents*, which will in fact be actualized, but also of *conditional future contingents*, which describe what would take place under *any* given circumstances, even those that will never be actualized. The Dominicans rely here on the very same Scriptural passages Molina cites

when he is trying to show that God's comprehensive and infallible foreknowledge cannot be wholly accounted for by the presence of absolute future contingents outside their causes in eternity. God's knowledge goes way beyond that. The difference between the two groups is over just *how* God knows conditional future contingents, and this is directly related to their differences over freedom and divine causality, to be discussed below.

## II. The Context: Divine Governance (Execution of the Plan)

- A. The Christian doctrine of divine governance includes God's creating the world *ex nihilo* and, as an extension of the doctrine of creation, His directly conserving each thing from the top down, as it were, at every moment it exists. It also includes as a crucial element (and one that arguably follows from divine conservation) the claim that every effect brought about by a created agent is also brought about immediately by God as an efficient cause, so that the creatures of the world depend radically on God not only for their *esse* but also for their *agere*. This is the so-called doctrine of divine general concurrence with secondary causes, and it is a causal means by which God executes His providential plan—and, again, this is a point on which the 16th century Dominicans and Jesuits agree.
- B. Let me spell out this agreement on God's general concurrence in more detail. (Remember that this applies to *all* agents, whether they are acting *naturally* or *freely*.) Here are five tenets which Dominicans and Jesuits hold in common; you might think of them as spelling out the metaphysical implications of St. Thomas' arguments for the existence of a First Mover and of a First Efficient Cause:
1. God is a *per se* and immediate cause of any effect produced by a created agent.
  2. In producing such an effect, God and the created agent act by the very same cooperative action.
  3. Even though there is just a single action, God and the secondary agent act by different powers and within diverse orders of causality. More specifically, the secondary agent acts by its created or natural powers as a *particular* cause of the effect, whereas God, the First Agent, acts by His uncreated power as a *general* or *universal* cause of the effect. The point of calling God a *general* or *universal* cause of the effects of secondary agents is, in part, that any communication of *esse* by a secondary agent is a participation in God's own communication of *esse*-as-such, and that God's manner of allowing for this participation is to tailor His proper causal influence in each case to what is demanded by the natures of the relevant secondary agents. So certain features of the effect, e.g., its being something rather than nothing and its being something good, are traced primarily to God's contribution, whereas the specific nature of the effect, along with any defects, are traced primarily to the secondary cause's contribution.
  4. The secondary cause's contribution to the effect is causally subordinate to God's contribution.

5. In any given case the cooperative action of God and the secondary cause with respect to a given effect is such that the influence actually exercised by the one would not have existed at all in the absence of the influence exercised by the other. This follows from the fact that a secondary cause is unable to effect anything without God's concurrence, taken together with the fact that in any given concrete situation God's general concurrence complements the particular concurrence of the secondary cause and hence does not overdetermine the effect.
- C. You will find each of these tenets, in more or less the same language, in the texts of St. Thomas. Indeed, they gave rise to a number of slogans commonly invoked by commentators on St. Thomas to describe the relation of the First Cause to created or secondary causes—slogans that are more or less based on the analogy between secondary causality and ordinary instrumental causality: (a) 'A secondary cause does not act unless it is moved (or: pre-moved) by the First Cause', (b) 'A secondary cause is applied to its action by the First Cause', (c) 'A secondary cause is determined (or: predetermined) to its effect by the First Cause', (d) 'A secondary cause acts in the power of the First Cause', and (e) 'A secondary cause is subordinated in its acting to the First Cause'. As we will see below, the Jesuits reject this assimilation of secondary causality to instrumental causality, in large measure because they are convinced that it is destructive of human free choice, though they think that it destroys the rightful (limited) autonomy of non-rational natural causes as well. Still, out of respect for the tradition, they try to hang on to the slogans just listed. For instance, it's sort of fun to watch Suarez strive mightily to preserve the truth of these slogans by, shall we say, creative reinterpretation in *Metaphysical Disputations* 22.2 §§46-60.
- D. . One last preliminary note before we turn to free choice. The middle years of the 20th century witnessed no shortage of commentators (Bernard Lonergan the most preeminent among them) who claimed that St. Thomas had in the 13th century already solved all the problems that the 16th century Dominicans and Jesuits argued so passionately about. Given the brilliance of the 16th century thinkers, this claim sounds a tad suspicious on the surface; and, indeed, a close perusal of the relevant 20th century works shows (or so I say) that it is just plain false. The fact is that St. Thomas never explicitly addressed certain key claims that became the focus of the *De Auxiliis* dispute. And though I have little doubt that he would side with the man whom I think of as his most illuminating commentator, viz., Domingo Bañez, the fact is that Luther and Calvin had managed to sharpen the focus of Catholic theologians in new ways on the relation of free choice with grace, divine foreknowledge, providence, predestination, and reprobation. (Hence, the full title of Molina's most famous work, *Liberi Arbitrii cum Gratiae Donis, Divina Praescientia, Providentia, Praedestinatione et Reprobatione Concordia*.) To my mind, the 16th century debate was a stunningly sophisticated—perhaps, in the eyes of some, *too* sophisticated—development on topics for which St. Thomas had established the general framework.

### III. The Heart of the Matter: Free Choice

- A. Leave out of consideration for the moment God's concurrence with acts of human free choice, and concentrate just on the order of created or secondary causes. Then, I claim, there is no substantial difference among, say, St. Thomas, Molina, Suarez, and Bañez (as interpreted by Garrigou-Lagrange) about the nature of what I will call *metaphysical freedom* (or so-called *freedom of indifference*). Some later Thomists, looking for something like a Leibnizian sufficient reason for each act of free choice, had indeed put in extra stuff and come up with what looks like a sort of intellectual determinism—but not St. Thomas or the others mentioned here. Take my word for it. The use of the expression “freedom of indifference” is perhaps unfortunate, because it has suggested to some writers a complete randomness or a voluntarism unanchored to human nature. But this was certainly not the intent of those who coined the expression as a term of art for the two powers of will that St. Thomas calls *freedom with respect to exercise* and *freedom with respect to specification*. Prescinding from God's concurrence, the relevant definition goes like this:

(FI) An agent *A* is free at time *t* in circumstances *C* just in case, with all the prerequisites for acting having been posited at *t* in *C*, *A* is (a) able to act – that is, to will – and also able not to act (*freedom with respect to exercise*) and (b) able to will an object and also able to will some contrary object (*freedom with respect to specification*).

In contemporary parlance, both Dominicans and Jesuits are ‘libertarians’—and not compatibilists or hard determinists—with respect to the order of created causes. What's more, metaphysical freedom includes but is stronger than voluntariness, which requires just an interior appetitive principle plus cognition of some sort.

- B. Side note 1: *Metaphysical freedom* is to be distinguished from what I will call *moral freedom* or *moral autonomy*. Moral freedom is as contentious a notion as metaphysical freedom is. In classical moral theory, moral freedom is the *telos* or *end* of metaphysical freedom and goes by names like *freedom for excellence* or *moral self-possession* or, with Socrates, *freedom from enslavement to the passions*—or, in the Gospels, *freedom from sin*. In modernist and post-modernist moral theories, on the other hand, moral freedom or autonomy takes on, shall we say, more disturbing connotations. (See Chapter Two of *Veritatis Splendor*).
- C. Side note 2: With gratitude and utter enthusiasm, I recommend highly and without qualification (get it?) two papers by David Gallagher on St. Thomas's account of the will and free choice: “Thomas Aquinas on the Will as Rational Appetite,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29:4 (1991), pp. 559-584; and “Free Choice and Free Judgment in Thomas Aquinas,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 76 (1994), pp. 247-277. For St. Thomas, to will an object in a situation of choice is, basically, to freely endorse one line of practical reasoning over another. But why *this* line of reasoning rather than *that* one? Easy: for the *reasons* embodied in *this* line. It's not a Leibnizian sufficient reason, but it's more than enough to undergird a reasonable, even if not praiseworthy, *free* choice.

D. Now we can characterize the difference between the Dominicans and Jesuits on freedom. What follows is a rough characterization of the dialectic. The real thing is quite a bit more complex and subtle than I can capture in a brief presentation, but what follows will at least highlight the main moves:

1. **Jesuit position:** The Jesuits insist that (*FI*) is perfectly adequate as it stands, even taking into account God's general concurrence and cooperating grace.

"But don't God's concurrence and cooperating grace in some sense *pre-move* or *predetermine* the agent to a particular act, and so don't they count as 'prerequisites for acting?'" No, reply the Jesuits. For God's concurrence is not in any sense an action *on* the free secondary agent or on any other agent; rather, God acts '*through*' secondary agents by acting *with* them rather than *on* them, and the only relevant prerequisite for free choice is God's *willingness* or, better, *readiness* to concur as a cooperating cause *with* whatever choice the agent freely makes. God's direct causal contribution to an action is perfectly coordinated with the created will's contribution; they act *together* and *with* one another. But God does not in this mode of causality act *on* the secondary agent itself. The same holds for God's *cooperating* (as opposed to *prevenient*) grace. By way of a rough analogy, think of two guys lifting a refrigerator when neither of them can budge it on his own. They bring about the effect together, but without acting on one another. This is a better analogy than, say, someone using a hammer as an instrument to pound in a nail. After all, is your will a merely passive instrument like a hammer?

"Doesn't that mean that the free agent is able to initiate acts of will on its own?" No, a created agent cannot act without God's concurrent causality; if God does not concur, there is no act of choosing. The same holds for the order of grace; God's *readiness* to grant His cooperating grace is a prerequisite for any meritorious act. But neither God's cooperating grace nor His general concurrence *causally pre-move* the secondary agent and thereby *causally predetermine* that agent's act. Otherwise, the metaphysical freedom of created agents would be undermined, as it is on the Dominican account.

"Well, then, if God does not predetermine the free agent's choice, how can He have providence over the act? How can He have certain knowledge of what the outcome will be?" The Jesuit reply is that God's knowledge of conditional future contingents is, like His *natural knowledge* of metaphysically necessary truths, both absolutely certain and not subject to God's control. This knowledge is *prevolitional*, if you will, and Molina gives it a special name, *middle knowledge*. So God's providential plan is such that, even though His *causal* concurrence, whether natural or supernatural, does not *predetermine* any act of free choice that is within a created agent's power, He nonetheless *knows* exactly which choice will be made in any given circumstances and factors that into His providential plan. This is the only way to preserve true human freedom within the context of divine providence. We don't want to be Calvinists, right?

2. **Dominican position:** The Dominicans, needless to say, demur. They claim that (*FI*), taken without qualification and interpreted in such a way as to rule out God's

pre-motions and predeterminations, grants to the created free agent an excessive (and, indeed, impossible) degree of independence from God in acting; what's more (*FI*), so understood, undermines the doctrine that God is the first source of all the moral goodness to be found in any created will. For an un-pre-moved agent would be, as it were, a self-starter and a first cause in its own right, and thus the first source of its own moral goodness, even in the order of grace. We don't want to be Pelagians, right?

“Well, how is created metaphysical freedom compatible with God's causally predetermining allegedly ‘free’ choices?” If God were just another created cause, you would have a legitimate worry; and—don't you see?—that's just what you Jesuits are doing, viz., treating God like a created agent. You seem to have lost all sense of God's transcendence and devolved into anthropomorphism. God's predeterminations are gentle and perfectly coordinated with the created will. There is no hint of coercion or involuntariness. As St. Thomas indicates, God determines not just the *nature* of created effects, but their *modality* as well. And in the cases in question, that means that He determines them to be *free* choices. Besides, God's causality “necessitates” the action only in the composed sense. That is, it's a necessary truth that if God acts in *this* way, the created will acts in *that* way. But this is still compatible with the created will retaining its natural power *not* to act in *that* way.

“But it can't *exercise* that power!” Well, that's a matter of interpretation. It still has this power, and it would exercise it if God pre-moved it to! The only thing that follows is that it *won't* exercise a power it *could have* exercised under slightly different circumstances, viz., if it were pre-moved toward a different outcome. So God is the first source of all goodness in the created will.

“But doesn't your view make God a direct cause of evil acts?” No, the defectiveness of any act of will is always traceable to the faulty human or angelic instrument, and not to God's causality—just like St. Thomas said, and just like you Jesuits say. You're basically in the same position as we are on this particular issue.

What's more, God has comprehensive knowledge of conditional future contingents because He knows how he would predetermine everything even in counterfactual situations. And so we Dominicans don't have to posit anything as bizarre, incredible, or implausible as your precious *middle knowledge* to account for God's knowledge of conditional future contingents. What's more, pre-motions and predeterminations are easy to understand from our experience of instrumental causality—and, by the way, not all instruments are merely passive—whereas it is impossible to give a coherent model of the Jesuit claim that in concurring with the acts of secondary agents God somehow acts *through* those agents and *with* them but not *on* them. Picture *that*, or, better, *try* to picture that. And don't give us that old two-guys-lifting-a-refrigerator example. Neither of the guys has sufficient power to do the job, whereas both God and the secondary agents have sufficient power within their own orders of causality.

**E.** In 1607, after ten years of intense study and disputation, the *Congregatio de Auxiliis* ended when Pope Paul V issued a decree forbidding the antagonists to call one another's views heretical or even temerarious, in the technical language of theological censure. The Holy See would, the pope continued, resolve the issue at an opportune time. This opportune time has yet to arrive. (Me? I'm still inclined toward the Jesuit position, but the strength of that inclination has decreased markedly over time as I have pondered the ramifications of the doctrine of God's transcendence.)

**F.** You can find this outline at <http://www.nd.edu/~afreddos/papers/freedom and God.pdf>