

**CAN GOD IMMEDIATELY PRODUCE A NECESSARY EFFECT?**  
**SOME REMARKS ON GLORIA FROST'S *AQUINAS AND SCOTUS ON***  
***THE SOURCE OF CONTINGENCY***

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**Abstract:** This discussion note aims to call into question the first part of Gloria Frost's article, *Aquinas and Scotus on the Source of Contingency* (2014), devoted to Aquinas's thought on the source of contingency in creation. I shall discuss three controversial claims that represent the key points of Frost's interpretation of Aquinas's account of contingency: (1) with respect to existence, every creature exists contingently on the grounds that no creature is necessarily willed by God; (2) with respect to cause-and-effect relationship, only those effects that derive from a voluntary cause are contingently caused; (3) God's will, as a voluntary cause, is a contingently operating cause and thus cannot immediately produce a necessary effect. According to my analysis, Frost's misinterpretation of Aquinas's position on contingency in creation derives from the erroneous assumption that, for Aquinas, the freedom of a cause implies the contingency of such a cause and of all the effects following from it. I shall prove that Frost's misunderstanding consists in neglecting that Aquinas does not endorse this co-implication between freedom and contingency: in fact, if the freedom of a cause indicates that it can refrain from producing its effect, the contingency of a cause means its mutability and fallibility, namely that it can be prevented in producing its effect.

**Keywords:** Gloria Frost; Thomas Aquinas; contingency; freedom; divine will.

In her article *Aquinas and Scotus on the Source of Contingency*, published in *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* (2/2014, pages 46–66), Gloria Frost aims to challenge Thomas Cajetan's and Leibniz's interpretation on Aquinas's and Scotus's account of contingency in creation. According to Cajetan,<sup>1</sup> first, and Leibniz,<sup>2</sup> later, "for Scotus, created objects are such that they could have pos-

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1 CAJETANUS 1882, 246.

2 LEIBNIZ 1985, 348.

sibly not existed because their cause, which is God's will, could have possibly not caused them";<sup>3</sup> on the other hand, for Aquinas, created objects have a certain modality (*i.e.* contingency or necessity) "because God wills them to have it and nothing God wills can fail to be as he wills it."<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, Cajetan and Leibniz detect an essential incompatibility between Aquinas's and Scotus's positions on how explaining contingency in creation. Frost intends to show that Aquinas's and Scotus's account are not in opposition. To do this, she distinguishes two kinds of contingency: contingency as mode of existence and contingency as mode of causation.

In this discussion note, I shall focus on the second paragraph of Frost's article, devoted to Thomas Aquinas's thought on "the ontological cause of contingency in creation."<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I shall discuss three controversial claims that represent the key points of Frost's interpretation of Aquinas's account on contingency: (1) with respect to existence, every creature exists contingently (*i.e.* could have not existed) on the grounds that no creature is necessarily willed by God; (2) with respect to cause-and-effect relationship, only those effects that derive from a voluntary cause (*i.e.* a cause that can decide whether to produce its effect or not) are contingently caused; (3) God's will, as a voluntary cause, is a contingently operating cause and thus cannot immediately produce a necessary effect. Frost's analysis essentially relies on two texts by Aquinas: *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate (De Ver)*, question 23, articles 4 and 5.

With respect to (1), I will prove that, for Aquinas, the fact that God's will is not constrained in its volitions does not imply that all its effects exist in a contingent way. With respect to (2), I will point out that, according to Aquinas,

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3 FROST 2014, 48.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, 49.

nas, the freedom of a cause not to produce its effect does not imply neither the contingency of the effect nor the contingency of the cause itself. Instead, the contingency of a cause and the effects following from it depends on the mutability and fallibility of the cause itself in achieving its effects; therefore, if divine will were a contingently operating cause, it would be a mutable and fallible cause; which is clearly absurd. In light of this, with respect to (3), I will demonstrate, first, that Aquinas rejects the idea that God's will is a contingent cause; and, later, that Frost's position that God cannot immediately produce a necessary effect precisely presupposes the implication, refused by Aquinas, between freedom and contingency.

### 1. Frost's position: a reconstruction

Before illustrating how Aquinas justifies contingency in creation, Frost introduces some preliminary definitions, which constitute the theoretical assumptions guiding her analysis of *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 4 and 5. She first distinguishes the contingency of an effect considered with respect to existence ("*contingently existing*") and with respect to its cause ("*contingently caused*").

With respect to existence, an effect contingently exists inasmuch as it "could have not existed";<sup>6</sup> with respect to its cause, an effect is contingently caused inasmuch as its proximate cause "has the power to elicit or not to elicit the operation through which the effect is caused."<sup>7</sup> From the definition of "contingently caused effect," Frost draws the conclusion that the effects stemming from natural agents – namely agents that, lacking will and reason, cannot choose to produce or to not produce their own effect – are necessarily caused. Accordingly, for Frost, "being contingently caused" can only be at-

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6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

tributed to the effects deriving from voluntary agents, namely agents that have “the power to elicit or to not elicit the operation” through which their effect is caused.<sup>8</sup>

By virtue of these preliminary definitions, Frost concludes that: A) “all *contingently caused* effects exist *contingently*,” since their proximate cause, as a voluntary agent, can decide not to produce them,<sup>9</sup> and B) “not all *contingently existing* effects are *contingently caused*” since not all contingently existing effects arise from voluntary agents. All the effects resulting from natural causes are included in the domain of contingently existing effects, though such effects are necessarily caused since natural causes, considered in themselves, cannot refrain from producing them.<sup>10</sup> More precisely, in the domain of contingently existing effects we can find: the effects of natural impedeable causes since the action of such causes can be prevented by external impediments; the effects of natural non-impedeable causes since (even) these causes “could have possibly not existed.”<sup>11</sup> To express contingency with respect to existence Frost adopts a counterfactual meaning of *contingens*: *x* contingently exists inasmuch as it could have not existed.

In the second paragraph (*Aquinas on the cause of contingency in creation*) Frost investigates Aquinas’s strategy for explaining the contingency in creation. The core of § 2 is represented by the analysis of *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5, where Aquinas identifies divine will as the ultimate source of the contin-

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8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, 50.

10 On the difference between natural and voluntary agents in Aquinas see AQUINAS 1929 (2) *In II Sent*, d. 18, q. 2, a. 2; AQUINAS 1976 *De Ver*, q. 20, a. 2, *ad.* 6; AQUINAS 1988 *St*, I, q. 19, a. 4; I, q. 41, a. 2; I, q. 47, a. 1, *ad.* 1; I, q. 116, a. 1; I-II, q. 1, a. 5; I-II, q. 50, a. 1; I-II, q. 55, a. 1; AQUINAS 1982 *De Malo*, q. 6, a. *un*; AQUINAS 1949 *De Pot*, q. 5, a. 8, *ad.* 1; AQUINAS 1977 *In Met*, VI, lect. 2 e 4. Clearly, this difference recalls the Aristotelian difference between irrational and rational potencies: see ARISTOTLE 1957, *Metaph.*, IX, 2. 1046a 36–b 23.

11 FROST 2014, 50.

gency in creation. To fully understand this article, Frost begins with considering *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 4, for it provides the theoretical context of article 5.

In article 4 Aquinas tackles the question of whether God necessarily wills whatever He wills (*Utrum Deus de necessitate velit quicquid vult*).<sup>12</sup> In response to this question Aquinas proposes an argument that could be reconstructed as follows: P<sub>1</sub>) the created objects that God wills “are only willed insofar as they are related to God’s goodness”; P<sub>2</sub>) “no created object is necessary for God’s goodness”; C) “no created object is necessarily willed.”<sup>13</sup>

According to Frost, from (C) it follows that, for Aquinas, all created objects contingently exist. And to support this claim she gives two reasons: 1) the first lies in what Frost calls the “contingent mode of the divine will’s causation,” namely on the fact that God could not have caused every created object;<sup>14</sup> 2) the second reason lies in the idea that no created object is necessary for God’s goodness, so (the existence of) each of them is “only contingently related” to divine goodness.

After reconstructing Aquinas’s argument in article 4, Frost goes on to examine *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5, where Aquinas addresses the question of whether God’s will makes all the objects that He wills necessary (*Utrum divina voluntas rebus volitis necessitatem imponat*). Unlike article 4, where Aquinas deals with the meaning of contingency with respect to existence, in article 5 it is the meaning of contingency and necessity with respect to cause-and-effect relationship that comes into play.<sup>15</sup>

In his *responsio* Aquinas explicitly denies that divine will imposes neces-

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12 Besides *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 4, Aquinas also addresses this issue in *ScG*, I, c. 80–83 and *St*, I, q. 19, a. 3.

13 FROST 2014, 52.

14 *Ibid.*, 53.

15 Undoubtedly, Frost refers to efficient causation.

sity on whatever it wants. Aquinas's solution can be divided into two parts: in the first, Aquinas calls into question the idea that the contingency of effects can be *completely* justified only by the contingency of their own proximate causes, given that this idea implies that God cannot immediately produce a contingent effect without the mediation of secondary contingent causes; to avoid this inconvenience, in the second Aquinas ascribes to God's will the role of ultimate source (*ratio principalis*) of the contingency of effects.<sup>16</sup>

Let me quote Frost's translation of the second part of Aquinas's response:

It is accordingly necessary to assign a different principal reason (*principalem rationem*) for the contingency in things, to which the previously assigned cause [i.e. secondary causes] will be subordinated... Now the divine will is a most powerful agent (*agens fortissimum*). Hence its effect must be made like it in all respects. Not only that which God wills happens, but it also happens in the mode in which God wills it, as necessarily or contingently (*Ut non solum fiat id quod Deus vult fieri [...]; sed ut fiat eo modo quo Deus vult illud fieri, ut necessario vel contingenter*)... And the divine will preordains the mode of things from the order of his wisdom. According to how it disposes some things to happen in this way or that way, it adapts causes for them in the mode which it disposes (*Secundum autem quod disponit aliquas res sic vel sic fieri, adaptat eis causas illo modo quem disponit*). It is able to nevertheless introduce the mode in things even without the mediating causes (*quem tamen modum posset rebus inducere etiam illis causis non mediantibus*). And so we do not say that some of God's effects are contingent only on account of the contingency of secondary causes, but rather on account of the disposition of the divine will which provides such an order for things.<sup>17</sup>

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16 See FROST 2014, 55.

17 *Ibid.*, 54. Here is Aquinas's text: "Et ideo oportet aliam principalem rationem assignare contingentiae in rebus, cui causa praeassignata subserviat. Oportet enim patiens assimilari agenti: et si agens sit fortissimum, erit similitudo effectus ad causam agentem perfecta; si autem agens sit debile, erit similitudo imperfecta; sicut propter fortitudinem virtutis formativae in semine, filius assimilatur patri non solum in natura speciei, sed in multis aliis accidentibus; e contrario vero, propter debilitatem praedictae virtutis, annihilatur praedicta assimilatio [...]. Voluntas autem divina est agens fortissimum. Unde oportet eius effectum ei omnibus modis assimilari: ut non solum fiat id quod Deus vult fieri, quod est quasi assimilari secundum speciem; sed ut fiat eo modo quo Deus vult illud fieri, ut necessario vel contingenter, cito vel tarde, quod est quasi quaedam assimilatio secundum accidentia. Et hunc quidem modum rebus divina voluntas praefi-

The premise of Aquinas's argument coincides with the idea of similarity between the agent and the patient: the more powerful an agent is, the more the effect resembles it, since the causative virtue of the agent will be imprinted in the effect in a more efficient and perfect manner.<sup>18</sup> Unlike natural causal agents, God's will is the most powerful agent; which means that its effects resemble it in every way ("omnibus modis assimilari"). Let me clarify this point.

Affirming that the divine will is the most powerful agent implies that everything that God wants not only happens, but also happens according to the modality He wants it to happen, *i.e.* necessary or contingent. Aquinas therefore recognizes that God's will determines the modality of the effects and, based on that, adapts the modal status of their proximate causes: God provides secondary necessary causes to produce necessary effects and secondary contingent causes to produce contingent effects.<sup>19</sup>

Aquinas makes a further precision: God can assign a contingent or necessary status to an effect without the mediation of secondary causes ("quem tamen modum posset rebus inducere etiam illis causis non mediantibus").<sup>20</sup> However, according to Frost's interpretation, this claim cannot be taken

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nit ex ordine suae sapientiae. Secundum autem quod disponit aliquas res sic vel sic fieri, adaptat eis causas illo modo quem disponit; quem tamen modum posset rebus inducere etiam illis causis non mediantibus. Et sic non dicimus quod aliqui divinorum effectuum sint contingentes solummodo propter contingentiam causarum secundarum, sed magis propter dispositionem divinae voluntatis, quae talem ordinem rebus providit" (AQUINAS 1976 *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5, *resp.*, 666, ll. 89-118).

18 On this point see *ScG*, II, c. 45: "Cum enim omne agens intendat suam similitudinem in effectum inducere secundum quod effectus capere potest, tanto hoc agit perfectius quanto agens perfectius est: patet enim quod quanto aliquid est calidius, tanto facit magis calidum; et quanto est aliquis melior artifex, formam artis perfectius inducit in materiam" (AQUINAS 1961 *ScG*, II, c. 45, 164, n. 1220).

19 This aspect is also stressed by SHANLEY 1988, 117-119; MCGINN 1975, 751; GORIS 1996, 298; LAUGHLIN 2009, 654-655.

20 On the relationship between God and the action of the secondary causes in Aquinas see FREDDOSO 1988, 74-118; FREDDOSO 1991, 553-585; FREDDOSO 1994, 131-156; TE VELDE 1995, 170-175. See also DE MURALT 1991, 321-323; SHANLEY 1988, 101-111; SOLÈRE 2019, 155-167.

literally. On the one hand, God can immediately produce a contingent effect since “God is himself a contingently operating cause”;<sup>21</sup> but, on the other, God cannot immediately produce “a necessarily caused effect,” because “any created effect that God wills is willed by God contingently.”<sup>22</sup>

For Frost, the reason for the impossibility for God to immediately produce a necessary effect, can be expressed through the following argument: if God could immediately produce a necessary effect, God would be equated to a natural causal agent that operates necessarily. Indeed, based on the above-mentioned distinction between “being contingently caused” and “being necessarily caused,” Frost denies that God’s will is a necessary cause since, if it were a necessary cause, it would lack the power to refrain from producing its effects.

Lastly, Frost notes that “in his other discussion of the origin of contingent causation in creation” Aquinas does not argue that God can immediately produce “effects *caused* according to both modalities.”<sup>23</sup>

In short, the main results of Frost’s analysis seem to be the following: A) every creature contingently exists since none of them is necessarily willed by God; B) God cannot immediately produce a necessary effect since divine will is a contingent cause, namely a cause that has the power to refrain from producing its effects.

Frost’s account of *De Ver*, question 23, articles 4 and 5, however, encounters some difficulties. I shall discuss first Frost’s reconstruction of *De Ver*,

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21 FROST 2014, 55.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.* Among the texts where Aquinas tackles the question of the origin of contingency in creation, Frost mentions *St*, I, q. 19, a. 8 and *Exp Per*, I, lect. 14. In addition to this, Frost argues that Aquinas’s discussion about “necessary beings” in *ScG*, II, c. 30 “is not ultimately helpful for allowing us to see how God could immediately produce a necessarily caused being” (FROST 2014, 55, footnote 20).



q. 23, a. 4 (§ 2) and later her interpretation of *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5 (§ 3).

## 2. Do all creatures contingently exist? A first critical point

Before discussing Frost's claim that, for Aquinas, all creatures contingently exist since none of them is necessarily willed by God, it is worth clarifying her reconstruction of *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 4. As Frost rightfully recognizes, in this text Aquinas affirms that no creature is necessary for God's goodness "since no perfection can be added to it by other things";<sup>24</sup> however, by affirming this, Aquinas does not mean that no kind of necessity qualifies the relationship between God's will and the wanted objects. In fact, although Aquinas argues that with respect to creatures God wills nothing according to an absolute necessity (*necessarium absolute*), he introduces the notion of conditional necessity (*necessarium ex suppositione*) to express the relationship between God's will and creatures: in so far as divine will is immutable, if God wants or wanted a certain effect ( $x$ ) to happen, then  $x$  will happen.<sup>25</sup> In short, Frost

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>25</sup> "Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod aliquid dicitur necessarium dupliciter: uno modo absolute, alio modo ex suppositione. Absolute quidem dicitur aliquid necessarium propter necessariam habitudinem ad invicem terminorum qui in aliqua propositione ponuntur, sicut hominem esse animal, vel omne totum esse maius sua parte, aut aliqua huiusmodi. Necessarium vero ex suppositione est quod non est necessarium ex se sed solummodo posito alio, sicut Socratem cucurrisse: Socrates enim quantum est de se non se habet magis ad hoc quam ad huius oppositum; sed facta suppositione quod cucurrit, impossibile est eum non cucurrisse. Sic igitur dico quod Deum velle aliquid in creaturis, utpote Petrum salvari, non est necessarium absolute, eo quod voluntas divina non habet ad hoc necessarium ordinem, ut ex dictis patet; sed facta suppositione, quod Deus illud velit vel voluerit, impossibile est eum non voluisse vel non velle eo quod voluntas eius immutabilis est. Unde huiusmodi necessitas apud theologos vocatur necessitas immutabilitatis. Quod autem non sit necessarium absolute Deum velle, hoc est ex parte voliti, quod deficit a perfecta proportionem in finem, ut dictum est. Et quantum ad hoc verificatur responsio prius posita; et eodem modo distinguendum est de aeterno sicut de necessario" (AQUINAS 1976 *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 4, *ad.* 1, 663, ll. 239–267). See also AQUINAS 1961 *ScG*, I, c. 83 and 85; AQUINAS 1988 *St*, I, q. 19, a. 3. On the distinction between absolute and conditional necessity an account is also taken of AQUINAS 1929 *In I Sent*, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1; AQUINAS 1976 *De Ver*, q. 24, a. 1, *ad.* 13; AQUINAS 1961 *ScG*, II, c. 29; AQUINAS 1988

overlooks that in *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 4, while denying that God's volitions are necessary in an absolute way, Aquinas attributes to the relationship between God's will and the wanted objects a conditional necessity (*ex suppositione*) by virtue of the immutability of divine volitions. The conditional necessity, which qualifies every object wanted by God, precisely depends on God's immutable volitions: once an object is freely wanted by God's will, it will necessarily happen.

Strictly speaking, Frost's misunderstanding of *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 4 consists in assuming that Aquinas endorses the following argument: "no creature is necessarily willed by God" given that God's cannot be constrained by anything else to produce or to not produce a certain effect, therefore "all creatures exist contingently."<sup>26</sup> However, in *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 4 there is no evidence for Frost's position.

As a matter of fact, in article 4 Aquinas does not refer at all to the contingent existence of creatures. The main goal of this article is to reject the idea that God is constrained to want what He wants: no creature can force God's will to want it. In this case, Aquinas considers the modality of necessity only in relation to divine will, and not as a qualification of the existence of creatures. By relying on this text, one cannot argue that, for Aquinas, the contingent existence of creatures depends on the freedom of God's will.

The modality of a creature is founded on its intrinsic nature.<sup>27</sup> This point clearly emerges in *ScG*, II, c. 30 and in *St*, I, q. 9, a. 2, where Aquinas explicitly admits that in the universe there are necessarily existing creatures

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*St*, I, q. 82, a. 1; AQUINAS 1954 *In Phys*, II, lect. 10; AQUINAS 1977 *In Met*, VI, lect. 6. The distinction between these two senses of the modal notion of *necessitas* may be found in BOETHIUS 2000, 158, l. 100–159, l. 103; and in ABAELARDUS 1987, 544, ll. 1424–1432. On this distinction in Aquinas see GELBER 2004, 114–118; MCINTOSH 1998, 377–391.

<sup>26</sup> FROST 2014, 56.

<sup>27</sup> See KNUUTTILA 1993, 131.

(viz. angels and heavenly bodies),<sup>28</sup> and that their necessity relies on the fact that they lack in themselves the potency to not to be (*potentia ad non esse*).<sup>29</sup>

For Aquinas, angels and heavenly bodies are necessary in an absolute way, in the sense that they are created in such a way that, by virtue of their essential principles, they are immutable beings (*secundum esse*). In particular, the potency to not be is lacking in angels because they are subsistent forms devoid of matter, whereas it is lacking in heavenly bodies because the potentiality of their own matter is fully actualized by their own form.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, sublunary substances are marked by the potency to not be since their own form does not fully realize the potency of the matter of which they are composed.

Nevertheless, the fact that angels and heavenly bodies exist necessarily (*i.e.* are not characterized by the potency to not be) does not undermine their creatural being: as a matter of fact, the essences of angels and heavenly bod-

28 "Licet autem omnia ex Dei voluntate dependeant sicut ex prima causa, quae in operando necessitatem non habet nisi ex sui propositi suppositione, non tamen propter hoc absoluta necessitas a rebus excluditur, ut sit necessarium nos fateri omnia contingentia esse: quod posset alicui videri, ex hoc quod a causa sua non de necessitate absoluta fluxerunt: cum soleat in rebus esse contingens effectus qui ex causa sua non de necessitate procedit. Sunt enim quaedam in rebus creatis quae simpliciter et absolute necesse est esse" (AQUINAS 1961 *ScG*, II, c. 30, 142, n. 1063).

29 "Illas enim res simpliciter et absolute necesse est esse in quibus non est possibilitas ad non esse. Quaedam autem res sic sunt a Deo in esse productae ut in earum natura sit potentia ad non esse. Quod quidem contingit ex hoc quod materia in eis est in potentia ad aliam formam. Illae igitur res in quibus vel non est materia, vel, si est, non est possibilis ad aliam formam, non habent potentiam ad non esse. Eas igitur absolute et simpliciter necesse est esse" (*Ibid.*, n. 1064). See also AQUINAS 1961 *ScG*, II, c. 55.

30 "In corporibus vero caelestibus, materia non compatitur secum privationem formae, quia forma perficit totam potentialitatem materiae, et ideo non sunt mutabilia secundum esse substantiale; sed secundum esse locale, quia subiectum compatitur secum privationem huius loci vel illius. Substantiae vero incorporeae, quia sunt ipsae formae subsistentes, quae tamen se habent ad esse ipsarum sicut potentia ad actum, non compatiuntur secum privationem huius actus, quia esse consequitur formam, et nihil corrumpitur nisi per hoc quod amittit formam. Unde in ipsa forma non est potentia ad non esse, et ideo huiusmodi substantiae sunt immutabiles et invariabiles secundum esse" (AQUINAS 1988 *St*, I, q. 9, a. 2, *resp.*, 40). On the status of the necessary creatures see WRIGHT 1951, 452–458, JALBERT 1961, 137–147; PORRO 1992, 231–273.

ies, *qua* creatures, are in potency to the being they received by God (*potentia ad esse*). This kind of potency, which essentially characterizes every created essence, is the distinguishing feature of their ontological dependence on God.<sup>31</sup> For Aquinas, however, the fact that creatures receive their own being (*esse*) by God does not determine the contingent existence of all creatures.<sup>32</sup>

The absolute necessity of angels and heavenly bodies is not incompatible with their creatural being.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, all creatures exist in the way that God's will wants them to exist: God has willed some creatures to have a necessary existence (such as heavenly bodies and angels) and other to have a contingent existence (such as sublunary bodies).<sup>34</sup> Now, attributing an absolutely necessary existence to heavenly bodies and angels does not mean that God had to create them. For Aquinas, the absolute necessity does not qualify, as stressed in *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 4, the operations of God's will, but only the incorruptible existence of such creatures, which are freely wanted by God Himself.

A further proof that Aquinas does not endorse Frost's conclusion that every creature exists contingently lies in the fact that it would be inconsistent with the idea, supported by Aquinas, of the perfection of the universe. The notion of perfection means completeness:<sup>35</sup> a perfect universe is a universe

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31 See WIPPEL 2000, 165–167; 586–588.

32 "Hoc autem absolute necessarium est duplex. Quoddam enim est quod habet necessitatem et esse ab alio, sicut in omnibus quae causam habent: quoddam autem est cuius necessitas non dependet ab alio, sed ipsum est causa necessitatis in omnibus necessariis, sicut Deus" (AQUINAS 1929 *In I Sent*, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1, 166).

33 "Esse autem necesse simpliciter non repugnat ad rationem esse creati: nihil enim prohibet aliquid esse necesse quod tamen suae necessitatis causam habet, sicut conclusiones demonstrationum. Nihil igitur prohibet quasdam res sic esse productas a Deo ut tamen eas esse sit necesse simpliciter" (AQUINAS 1961, *ScG*, II, c. 30, 142, n. 1067). On this see WRIGHT 1951, 454–455.

34 See AQUINAS 1949, *De Pot*, q. V, a. 3, *ad*. 12.

35 "Perfectius est igitur universum creaturarum si sint plures, quam si esset unus tantum gradus rerum" (AQUINAS 1961, *ScG*, II, c. 45, 165, n. 1223)

where all grades of being and goodness are actualized; now, since God wants the universe to be perfect, all grades of being and goodness are therefore to be actualized. This means that, as Aquinas stresses in *St*, I, q. 48, a. 2,<sup>36</sup> in the universe there are not only corruptible and contingently existing creatures, but also incorruptible and necessarily existing creatures.

*Pace* Frost, neither *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 4 nor other texts provide evidence that, on the grounds that no creature is necessarily willed by God, Aquinas reaches the conclusion that all creatures exist contingently. The case of angels and heavenly bodies clearly shows that not all creatures have “a contingent mode of existence”:<sup>37</sup> once created, angels and heavenly bodies result into necessary creatures insofar as they lack the possibility of non-existing. As Thomas stresses, affirming this does not mean, however, that God cannot annihilate them,<sup>38</sup> but that such creatures, being incorruptible, cannot cease to exist.

In short, the freedom of divine will does not imply the contingent existence of all its effects. And in the next section, I will demonstrate that, for Aquinas, the freedom of God’s will does not even imply that it is a contingently operating cause.

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36 “Respondeo dicendum quod, sicut supra dictum est, perfectio universi requirit inaequalitatem esse in rebus, ut omnes bonitatis gradus impleantur. Est autem unus gradus bonitatis ut aliquid ita bonum sit, quod nunquam deficere possit. Alius autem gradus bonitatis est, ut sic aliquid bonum sit, quod a bono deficere possit. Qui etiam gradus in ipso esse inveniuntur, quaedam enim sunt, quae suum esse amittere non possunt, ut incorporalia; quaedam vero sunt, quae amittere possunt, ut corporalia. Sicut igitur perfectio universitatis rerum requirit ut non solum sint entia incorruptibilia, sed etiam corruptibilia; ita perfectio universi requirit ut sint quaedam quae a bonitate deficere possint; ad quod sequitur ea interdum deficere” (AQUINAS 1988 *St*, I, q. 48, a. 2, *resp.*, 238–239). See also AQUINAS 1929 *In I Sent*, d. 44, q. 1, a. 2, *ad*. 6; AQUINAS 1961 *ScG*, III, c. 71; AQUINAS 1988 *St*, I, q. 22, a. 4; I, q. 89, a. 1. On Aquinas’s thought on the perfection of the universe (*perfectio universi*) it is worth considering GILSON 1964, 200–202; BLANCHETTE 1992, 130–141; GELBER 2004, 117–118.

37 FROST 2014, 53.

38 AQUINAS 1961 *ScG*, II, c. 30; AQUINAS 1949 *De Pot*, q. V, a. 3, *ad*. 8.

### 3. A second critical point: *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5

A second difficulty concerns Frost's interpretation of *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5, according to which God cannot immediately produce a necessary effect because His will is a contingently operating cause inasmuch as no created object is necessarily willed by Him. Such an interpretation should be nuanced by at least three points.

First, Aquinas undeniably affirms that God can confer not only the modal status of contingency but also that of necessity on an effect, and also that He can do it without the help of secondary causes ("Secundum autem quod disponit aliquas res sic vel sic fieri, adaptat eis causas illo modo quem disponit; quem tamen modum posset rebus inducere etiam illis causis non mediantibus").<sup>39</sup> As shown in § 1, the context makes clear that in this passage Aquinas is referring to contingency as well as necessity: in-so-far as God's will is the most powerful agent, this means that God establishes the modality (*i.e.* contingency or necessity) according to which an effect occurs. Therefore, God's will adapts the modality of secondary causes according to the modality (*illo modo*) established for the effect.

Second, in addition to this textual evidence, there is also a more abstract reason for rejecting Frost's interpretation. Two assumptions underpin her interpretation: (P1) God's will is a contingent cause since it is free (namely, in no way constrained); (P2) a contingently operating cause can only produce a contingent effect as well as a necessarily operating cause can only produce a necessary effect.

Concerning (P1), Frost assumes that the freedom of God's will entails its contingency. Strictly speaking, this assumption follows from the definition of "being contingently caused" proposed by Frost: what determines the con-

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<sup>39</sup> AQUINAS 1976 *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5, *resp.*, 666, ll. 110-113.

tingency of an effect and, thus, of the causal operation from which it results, is the power of the cause itself “to refrain from producing its effect.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, in-so-far as divine will is a voluntary cause that can decide not to produce its effects, it follows that God’s will is a contingently operating cause and all its effects are contingent.

However, Aquinas does not accept this assumption. In *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5 no co-implication is admitted by Aquinas between the notion of freedom and that of contingency: the fact that a certain cause ( $x$ ) may choose not to produce an effect does not imply that it is contingent and vice versa.

As a proof that Aquinas rejects such a co-implication, one can take into consideration other works by him. In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, for example, Aquinas argues that in-so-far as the contingency means mutability and imperfection, divine will cannot be contingent (*i.e.* a contingently operating cause):<sup>41</sup> what God wants is wanted in an immutable and eternal way by Him. Hence, a cause can be free (namely, in no way constrained) without being contingent (this is the case of God’s will); and, conversely, a cause can be contingent without being free to not produce its effect (such as natural causal agents). If the necessity of (the action of) a cause indicates perfection in finalizing its causal action (a necessary cause cannot fail to produce its own effect), the contingency means the lack of perfection (a contingent cause sometimes fails to produce its expected effect).

Accordingly, for Aquinas, what distinguishes a necessary cause from a contingent cause is the fact that the former is not mutable and defectible,

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40 FROST 2014, 50.

41 “Ad quartum dicendum, quod non est dicendum voluntatem Dei esse contingentem aut operationem ipsius, quia contingentia mutabilitatem importat, quae in Deo proprie nulla est; sed tamen est libertas voluntatis et operationis, prout exit a voluntate” (AQUINAS 1929 *In I Sent*, d. 43, q. 2, a. 1, *ad.* 4, 1009).

whereas the latter is mutable and fallible.<sup>42</sup> As an example of contingent cause Aquinas mentions the generative virtue of a plant: it is a contingent cause as it is mutable and can fail to achieve its effect, namely the plant's flowering. On the other hand, as an example of necessary cause Aquinas gives that of the movement of the sun: it is a necessary and immutable cause because the sun is always moving in the same way and it always causes its proximate effect, namely the sunlight.<sup>43</sup>

As a contingently operating cause is a mutable cause that can fail to realize its effect, in *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 1, *ad. 2* Aquinas explicitly excludes that God's will is a contingent cause precisely based on its immutability: "Voluntas Dei non est causa contingens, eo quod illud quod vult immutabiliter vult."<sup>44</sup> If divine will were a contingent cause, it would not be a perfect, immutable and efficacious cause. This last remark leads to discuss the second assumption (P2), namely that a contingently operating cause can only produce a contingently caused effect as well as a necessarily operating cause can only produce a necessarily caused effect.

Denying that God can immediately produce a necessary effect, Frost assumes the validity of (P2): a contingently operating cause, such as divine will, can immediately produce only contingently caused effects. As said in § 1, the domain of contingently operating causes coincides with that of voluntary agents, to which God's will belongs.

Now, in the case of natural agents, it is true that the modality of an effect follows from the modality of its cause: a contingent natural agent can only cause contingent effects as well as a necessary natural agent can only

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42 On the relationship between contingency and mutability, see GEVAERT 1965, 130-149; PICARD 1966, 207-216; AERTSEN 1998, 239-247; PORRO 2012, 441; TE VELDE 2014, 542-545.

43 See AQUINAS 1929 *In I Sent*, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5; AQUINAS 1961 *ScG*, I, c. 67; III, c. 72.

44 AQUINAS 1976 *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 1, *ad. 2*, 654, ll. 207-209. See also AQUINAS 1988 *St*, I, q. 19, a. 7.



cause necessary effects.<sup>45</sup> However, this does not apply to voluntary agents. In the case of voluntary causes, in fact, the modality of an effect depends on the volition of its causal agent.<sup>46</sup> To be clearer, the necessity attributed to a voluntary agent entails that the modal status of its effects (*i.e.* their being contingent or necessary) is fully determined by the will of the agent itself; whereas the contingency attributed to a voluntary agent entails that its effects do not always happen according to the modality established by this agent.<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, a necessary voluntary agent is a perfectly effective agent in determining the modality according to which its effects occur; on the other, a contingent voluntary agent cannot always produce its effects and determine their modality.

Applying this distinction to the case of God, the fact that God's will is a necessary voluntary agent does not imply that all effects stemming from it are necessary, but only that each effect happens according to the modality

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<sup>45</sup> Strictly speaking, for Aquinas, the modality (*i.e.* contingency or necessity) of an effects follows from the modality of its proximate cause, and not on that of its remote cause. As an example of this principle, in *In I Sent*, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5, Aquinas gives that of a plant's flowering: in this case, the remote cause coincides with the movement of the sun and the proximate cause is the generative virtue of the plant itself. The movement of the sun is a necessary and immutable cause: indeed, the sun is always moving in the same way and it always causes its proximate effect, namely the sunlight. On the contrary, the generative virtue of the plant is not a necessary and immutable cause given that it can be prevented and thus it can fail to achieve its effect, namely the plant's flowering. Hence, the plant's flowering is a contingent effect since its proximate cause (*viz.* the generative virtue of the plant) is contingent and fallible. See AQUINAS 1929 *In I Sent*, d. 38, q. 1, a. 5; AQUINAS 1988 *St*, I, q. 19, a. 8.

<sup>46</sup> On this specific point see *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5, *ad*. 1: "Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod ratio illa sequitur in causis agentibus de necessitate naturae, et quantum ad effectus immediatos; sed in causis voluntariis non sequitur; quia ex voluntate sequitur aliquid eo modo quo voluntas disponit, et non eo modo quo voluntas habet esse, sicut accidit in causis naturalibus in quibus attenditur assimilatio quantum ad eandem conditionem causae et causati; cum tamen in causis voluntariis attendatur assimilatio secundum quod in effectu impletur voluntas agentis [...]. Nec etiam in causis naturalibus sequitur quantum ad effectus mediatos" (AQUINAS 1976 *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5, *ad*. 1, 666, ll. 119-131).

<sup>47</sup> See AQUINAS 1976 *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5, *ad*. 1.

(*i.e.* contingency or necessity) provided by divine will itself.<sup>48</sup> Hence, the necessity of divine will in no way prevents God from immediately producing a necessary effect.

Frost's general statement that, with the exception of *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5, one cannot find in any other texts by Aquinas the idea that God can immediately produce effects according to both modalities (*i.e.* contingency or necessity), is simply groundless. As a matter of fact, we have seen that there are texts where Aquinas clearly admits that God can immediately (*i.e.* without the mediation of secondary causes) produce necessary effects (such as angels and heavenly bodies).<sup>49</sup>

Summing up, Frost's interpretation, according to which in *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 5 Aquinas would deny that God can immediately produce a necessary effect, should be rejected. It is based on the false idea that the freedom of God's will implies its contingency, which Aquinas explicitly refuses both in *In I Sent*, d. 43, q. 2, a. 1, *ad.* 4 and in *De Ver*, q. 23, a. 1, *ad.* 2. Moreover, it makes confusion between voluntary and natural agents, and more importantly, between a necessary voluntary agent and a necessary natural agent.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

My criticism of the interpretation, proposed by Frost, of Aquinas's account of the source of contingency in creation involves the following three key points: (1) with respect to existence, every creature is contingent (*i.e.* could have not existed) on the grounds that no creature is necessarily willed by God; (2) with respect to cause-and-effect relationship, only those effects that derive from a

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48 See AQUINAS 1996 *Quodl* XI, q. 3, a. *un*; AQUINAS 1961 *ScG*, I, c. 85; AQUINAS 1988 *St*, I, q. 19, a. 8.

49 See AQUINAS 1988 *St*, I, q. 61, a. 1; I, q. 70, a. 1; AQUINAS 1988 *De Pot*, q. 3, a. 18, *ad.* 10.

voluntary cause (*i.e.* a cause that can decide whether to produce its effect or not) are contingently caused; (3) God's will, as a voluntary cause, is a contingently operating cause and thus cannot immediately produce a necessary effect.

Concerning (1), although Aquinas assumes that no creature is necessarily (in an absolute way) willed by God, he however does not conclude from this assumption that all creatures contingently exist. In fact, for Aquinas, some creatures (*i.e.* angels and heavenly bodies) necessarily (in an absolute way) exist, namely they, if considered in themselves, lack the potency to not be and are incorruptible. According to Aquinas, the freedom of divine will does not imply, therefore, that all its effects contingently exist.

Concerning (2), Frost presupposes that the distinction between contingently operating and necessarily operating causes perfectly corresponds to the distinction between voluntary and natural causes: on the one hand, the domain of contingently operating causes coincides with that of voluntary causes, which can decide if produce their effect or not; on the other, the domain of necessarily operating causes coincides with that of natural causes, which, considered in themselves, cannot but produce their effect, though their action can be sometimes prevented by external impediments. The implication between contingency and freedom underpins such a position: a cause is a contingently operating cause inasmuch as it can freely decide not to produce its effect.

However, we have seen that this implication is explicitly rejected by Aquinas. As a matter of fact, in Aquinas's view, the meaning of contingency is strictly connected to the idea of fallibility, and not to that of freedom: a contingently caused effect is an effect that results from a cause that can be impeded and thus fails in being produced. Hence, the distinction between con-

tingently operating and necessarily operating causes does not coincide with the distinction between voluntary and natural causes. The domain of contingently operating causes includes both voluntary and natural causes that can be impeded and thus fail in their action; whereas the domain of necessarily operating causes includes both voluntary and natural causes that cannot be impeded and thus fail in their action. In this latter domain we can find divine will, which is the most powerful voluntary agent determining the modality (*i.e.* necessity and contingency) of all created effects and, according to this, of all their own causes.

If, as said, the contingency of a causal action indicates its imperfection and defectibility, it follows that God's will cannot be a contingent cause as its causal action is perfectly effective and can in no way fail. Indeed, in *De Ver*, q, 23, a. 5 Aquinas emphasizes that if God wants an effect to happen, then such an effect will happen, and it will happen according to the modality (*i.e.* necessity or contingency) willed by God Himself, without exception.

Claim (3) too calls for qualification: A) divine will is a voluntary agent; B) it is a necessarily operating cause as it cannot fail in producing its effects according to the established modality. From (A) and (B), it follows that C) God's will can immediately (*i.e.* without the mediation of secondary causes) produce a necessary effect in the same way that it can immediately produce a contingent effect.

Ultimately, Frost tends, against all evidence, to assimilate Aquinas's account of the contingency in creation to Scotus's position. Although the distinction between the two senses of contingency (*i.e.* contingency as mode of existence and as a mode of causation) is undoubtedly helpful to deeply understand Aquinas's texts on contingency, Frost however neglects that the notion of contingency, considered both as mode of existence and as a mode of

causation, is not connected with the notion of freedom, but expresses the idea of mutability, imperfection and fallibility. For Aquinas, a contingently caused effect is an effect stemming from a mutable and impeditable cause; and a contingently existing effect is an effect that, considered in itself, is mutable and corruptible, namely characterized by the potency to not to be. However, in Aquinas's view, just as not all effects arise from contingently operating causes, not all effects exist contingently.

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