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God is (Probably) a Cause among Causes: Why the Primary/Secondary Cause Distinction Doesn't Help in Developing Non-interventionist Accounts of Special Divine Action

Simon Kittle

ABSTRACT

Several recent authors have suggested that much of the discussion on divine action is flawed since it presupposes that divine and human agency compete. Such authors advocate a re-appropriation of the Scholastic distinction between primary and secondary causation which, it is suggested, solves many problems in the theology of divine action. This article critiques defences of the primary/secondary cause distinction based on appeals to analogical predication, and argues that, even assuming an adequate account of the primary/secondary cause distinction, the distinction provides no help in the development of non-interventionist accounts of special divine action.

KEYWORDS

Divine action; special divine action; primary causation; divine concurrence

Introduction

On one prominent approach to divine action – an approach associated with the Divine Action Project and much of the literature which engages with that project's output – three assumptions are made: first, that divine and created agency compete with each other in the sense that no created event can be produced in its entirety by God and also produced in its entirety by some created agent; second, that there is a theological need to posit a kind of divine action which involves more than God's creative and sustaining activity – this action is thought to include answering petitionary prayers, performing miracles, and other acts sometimes collectively labelled “special divine action”; and third, that special divine action should be *non-interventionist* in the sense that God's special action in the world should not involve breaking or suspending the laws of nature. It is true that not all of those who were part of the DAP, or those who are sympathetic to this general approach, endorse all three assumptions. And diversity of opinion exists concerning the range of divine actions which come under the heading of “special divine action”. Even so, commitment to these assumptions is common enough, and the conjunction of these assumptions leads theorists endorsing this approach to search for a so-called *causal joint* – a point in the causal nexus at which God can act specially in a non-interventionist manner.

Theorists who affirm the first proposition might adhere to any of several diverse models of the God-world relationship. These include a *deist model*¹ according to which after God created the world and instituted its regularities, the world would

operate according to those regularities unless God acts again (i.e. no divine conservation needed); alternatively, such theorists might adhere to a *mere conservationist* position which states that God creates the world and its regularities and then continues to *conserve* or *sustain* all things in being; or such a theorist might endorse a version of panentheism, or something else again. Despite this variety, those who take this approach typically reject the idea that God might *concur* with the causal operations of created entities. Indeed, they typically hold that such divine concurrence is impossible.

In the more recent theology and science literature, a growing number of authors – predominantly writing from within the Thomist tradition – have challenged this approach’s search for a causal joint. While often agreeing with the second proposition (God acts specially in the world) and also the third (special divine action should be non-interventionist), these critics have argued that the search for the causal joint is misguided. This is because, they contend, the first proposition – that divine and created agency compete – is wrongheaded. In making their case, these writers suggest that once we get clear about the transcendence of God and God’s role as the *primary cause* of all that is created, the idea that God’s agency competes with created agency is seen to be mistaken. And this, so the story goes, renders the causal joint thesis irrelevant, since God’s primary causation is understood to be always and everywhere active. The primary/secondary cause distinction as invoked by these writers is – or at least, should be – the idea that God is the primary cause of all that is not God. “Primary cause” here does not mean *mediate* or *distal* cause, and “secondary cause” does not mean *immediate* or *proximate* cause.² Rather, as Ignacio Silva explains,

God ... is said to be the cause of everything’s action inasmuch as He gives everything the power to act and preserves that power in being ... , and applies it to action inasmuch as by His power every other causal power acts.³

Section 2 of this essay expands on the primary/secondary cause distinction and its connection to the doctrine of divine concurrence. Section 3 raises a problem for the distinction, and canvasses two broad approaches to addressing that problem. The first approach is to provide a partial account of how it might work. The second approach is to stress the transcendence of God, the subsequent need for analogical predication of terms like “cause” as they are applied to God, and therefore the dissolution of any apparent contradictions that might be thought to arise from the fact that, given the primary/secondary cause distinction, any given created effect is produced in its entirety by two different agents. The bulk of section 3 is given over to a critique of this second way of defending the doctrine of primary causation. I argue that defending primary causation by appealing to the transcendence of God and analogical predication amounts to a case of special pleading.

In section 4 I put the results of section 3 to one side and assume, for the sake of argument, that we have an adequate defence of the primary/secondary cause distinction. I consider whether the doctrine of primary and secondary causation helps the divine action theorist to make sense of special divine action in a non-interventionist manner. I suggest that while the primary/secondary causation distinction may help us to understand how God could be *intimately involved with* every aspect of the unfolding creation, it provides no help in understanding how God might *guide the unfolding of* creation, nor how God could be *responsive to* creation. We can make sense of God’s providential guidance of creation if we envisage God acting to resolve indeterminacies in the natural

world, but this, I point out, just is to locate God's action at a causal joint and amounts to seeing God as a cause among causes.

Primary and Secondary Causation and the Doctrine of Divine Concurrence

Several recent writings on the topic of divine action in the science and theology dialogue have suggested that the "standard approach" to divine action is mistaken because it presupposes that divine and human action are in competition with each other. This assumption is implicit to many approaches to the God-world relationship (e.g. deism, mere conservationism, among others). And many of those who argue that the assumption is mistaken have attempted to solve – or better, *dissolve* – the supposed problems science raises for theories of divine action by re-appropriating the scholastic distinction between primary and secondary causation.

The basic idea behind the primary/secondary cause distinction is the conviction that, since God is the utterly transcendent Creator of all, we should not conceive of God's agency as even remotely like human agency. As Denis Edwards puts it, "We take something we know a little bit about—the way we human beings act—and apply it analogically to the way God achieves divine purposes with regard to creation".⁴ In doing this, we must remember "the great difference" between our acts and God's action for "the relationship between God and God's creatures is absolutely unique".⁵ God's agency, in short, is *sui generis*. As such, one of the most important things to keep in mind when thinking about divine agency is the recognition that, as the mantra has it, "God is not a cause among causes"⁶ God must be thought of as the *primary cause* where "primary causation" picks out something entirely other than the relation between created causes and their effects. Created substances are labelled "secondary causes" to indicate that they are causally efficacious, but their causal efficacy relies on God's working in and through them. William Stoeger makes the point like this:

It is essential to conceive primary causality very differently from the causes—secondary causes—we discuss and deal with each day. The primary cause is not just another one of these—it completely transcends them and provides their ultimate basis in reality. There are no gaps in the secondary causal chain, but the whole chain demands a primary cause to support and sustain it.⁷

Elizabeth Johnson, another proponent of this view, describes it like this:

we must be clear that these two causes, ultimate and proximate, are not two species of the same genus, not two different types of causes united on a common ground of generating effects. They operate on completely different levels (itself an inadequate analogy), one being the wellspring of Being itself, the Cause of all causes, and the other participating in the power to act.⁸

Johnson's use of the label "ultimate cause" for God and "proximate cause" for created substances is unfortunate because, according to the doctrine of primary and secondary causation, it is *not* the case that God's primary causation is *distal*, *mediate* or in any way *indirect*, as Johnson's labels might suggest. No, God as the primary cause is, as Silva says, "more influential in the effect of the secondary cause than the secondary cause itself".⁹ God, as the primary cause, (i) *gives being to every created substance*, (ii) *sustains the causal power of every created substance*, and (iii) *applies those created causal*

*powers to their effects.*¹⁰ This is what makes it possible to affirm that “the creative activity of God [God’s primary causation] is accomplished *in and through* the free working of secondary causes.”¹¹ Or, as Edwards summarises it, the nature of God’s primary causation means that “God does not need to compete with [creaturely] processes, because God is always acting in and through them.”¹² The key point then, for these theorists, is that *divine and human agency do not compete.*

This view of God’s agency is seen as an alternative to other models of the God-world relationship. As Johnson recognises, many of these other accounts embody “a profound respect for the freedom of the natural world to evolve consistently with its internal laws as discovered by contemporary science.”¹³ Those writing on science and theology from a Thomist perspective agree with this: a theology of divine action *should* have a “profound respect for the autonomy of the science.”¹⁴ Where these authors depart from the approaches of deism, mere conservationism, and so on, is in disagreeing with the presupposition that divine agency and human agency compete. This is a serious mistake which, they contend, arises from a failure to take the transcendence of God seriously enough.

The distinction between primary and secondary causes as understood in the Thomist tradition is closely connected to the doctrine of divine concurrence. One could see statements of the doctrine of divine concurrence as formalisations of what follows from the distinction between primary and secondary causation. Although there are nuances in how the doctrine of concurrence is best formulated, a representative summary is provided by Louis Mancha,¹⁵ who asserts that the concurrentist – in distinction to the deist, the mere conservationist, and the occasionalist – adheres to the following three propositions:

(DO1) God is the sole Creator of the universe and everything in it.

(DO2) God must conserve everything that He creates.

(DO3) God acts immediately in the operations of His creatures and/or in the production of their effects.¹⁶

Intuitively, the point can be put like this: if we stress that God is the transcendent source of all being, then we are led naturally to the view that, not only does God *continually sustain all substances* in being, but also that God sustains *the causal powers* of those substances in being *and* that God is active in facilitating creatures to exercise their causal powers – that is, God *concurrs with* every created causal transaction.

Those writing in the field of science and theology who have recently appealed to the primary/secondary cause distinction are not, of course, oblivious to the fact that they may thereby be committed to the idea that God concurs with each created causal process. Neither, however, do they tend to develop the point in any depth, or explore its implications. Thus, for example, while Johnson says frequently that God “creates and sustains,”¹⁷ there are also hints that she recognises that the doctrine of primary causation requires God’s concurrence with the causal operations of created agents; as Johnson writes, “[the] wonderful word *concursum*, meaning flowing or running together, comes into play to express this idea.”¹⁸ Even so, nowhere does Johnson spell out what this concursus requires. Stoeger is more explicit in noting that God’s primary causation must go beyond sustaining substances in being and extend to created causal processes,¹⁹ but again, there is no in-depth account of what this may involve. Silva is arguably the clearest

on the issue; as outlined above, he states unequivocally that to see God as the primary cause we must say that God concurs with all creaturely causes, and that this involves affirming both that God causes the entirety of each created effect and that the created cause produces the entirety of each created effect.²⁰ After all, if God's concurrence didn't involve this, if divine concurrence only involved, say, God's causing *some aspect* of each created effect, with the rest being produced by the created cause, then God would be acting as a cause among causes. But this is precisely what those who invoke the doctrine of primary and secondary causation think mistaken.

I have stressed this connection between the Thomist understanding of the primary/secondary cause distinction and the doctrine of concurrence because it appears to be taken for granted that (a) the primary/secondary cause distinction is relatively problem free, and (b) that *if* an account of the primary/secondary cause distinction can be successfully developed, *then* it will solve a variety of problems that science might pose for the theology of divine action; in particular, it seems to be supposed that it will solve problems surrounding God's special action in the world. In section 3 I challenge the first of these points; in section 4 I challenge the second.

A Problem for the Doctrine of Divine Concurrence

In the last section we saw that the doctrine of concurrence states that for any given created effect, the entirety of that effect is immediately caused by God, as well as being caused in its entirety – if it is not an indeterministic event or process – by some created cause. Intuitively, this raises several problems. We ordinarily think that if we identify a complete set of natural, causal factors relevant to the production of some effect, then, together with the laws of nature, we have a sufficient causal explanation for that effect. As such, there is nothing left for any other agent to causally explain. Thus, to affirm, in addition to such an explanation, that God too is the cause of that effect seems redundant, if not incoherent. The seriousness of this problem is illustrated by the assessment of one prominent defender of the doctrine of primary and secondary causation, Etienne Gilson, who describes the situation as follows:

The problem in the final analysis comes to this. We must hold firmly to two apparently contradictory truths. God does whatever creatures do; and yet creatures themselves do whatever they do. It is a question of understanding how one and the same effect can proceed simultaneously from two different causes: God and the natural agent which produces it. At first sight this seems incomprehensible.²¹

For many thinkers, this seems incomprehensible on second and third sight, too. Indeed, critics have alleged that the doctrine suffers from inconsistency on multiple counts. Here is just one such worry, which can be traced back at least as far as thirteenth century Franciscan Peter Olivi, who wrote:

[It] is impossible for the same action to be totally and immediately from two agents. But the action of secondary causes, just as the action of the evil will, is totally and immediately from the will or its proximate causes, and nevertheless it is claimed to be totally from God in another immediate way.²²

This objection states, in short, that it is (metaphysically) impossible for one effect to be produced “totally and immediately” by two agents. Yet that is just what proponents of the

Thomist distinction between primary and secondary causation maintain. Silva, also a proponent of the primary/secondary cause distinction, summarises Aquinas's development of the distinction like so:

The same effect, for Aquinas, is ascribed to a natural cause and to God, not as if God were complementing the lack of causal power in the natural cause, or the insufficiency of causality. It is not that part of the effect is performed by God and a part by the natural cause. Rather, for Aquinas the whole effect proceeds both from God and the natural cause, yet in different ways.²³

What can the proponent of the primary/secondary cause distinction say in response to this apparent contradiction? There are, I would like to suggest, at least two broad approaches one might use to defend the primary/secondary cause distinction. The first is to provide an *explanation of how it is meant to work* or, at the very least, provide *the beginnings of such an explanation*: something which might at least hint at how the apparent contradictions are indeed *merely* apparent. One way of doing this is by suggesting that the problem arises due to the assumption of an overly narrow conception of causation, and that once we develop a richer understanding of causation, or deploy multiple concepts of causation (e.g. the four-fold Aristotelian scheme of formal, efficient, material, and final causation), it becomes possible to see how God can sustain all substances in being and concur with all created causes and yet do so without compromising created agency. This approach has been pursued by Silva.²⁴ I have argued elsewhere that it fails to solve the problem.²⁵ Another way of attempting to explain how the interaction between primary and secondary causation works is by providing a metaphysics of causation, control and agency, which one then uses to show how two agencies can interact in the way that divine concurrence states. W. Matthews Grant's recent work is a sophisticated attempt at this.²⁶ Again, I have provided an in-depth critique of Grant's account elsewhere and I will not recount his account or its problems here.²⁷

The second approach to defending the primary/secondary cause distinction is to stress the transcendence of God and the need, given God's transcendence, for all language about the divine to be construed analogically. This opens up the following response to objections such as Olivi's: the alleged impossibility that the primary/secondary cause distinction produces presupposes a univocal use of causal language when applied to divine and created causation; once we see that "cause" is used analogically, the problem dissolves. In the remainder of this section, I will argue that this second approach to defending the primary/secondary cause distinction, when used in the absence of an explanation of divine concurrence, is unsatisfactory.

As outlined, several writers in the field of theology and science have put forward the primary/secondary causation distinction as a way of understanding God's action in the world. Many of these authors appeal to this distinction without providing any account of how it is meant to work. Indeed, sometimes this lack of explanatory power is cited as a virtue: Johnson, for example, approvingly cites Edward Schillebeeckx to the effect that belief in God as the creator is not *meant* to be explanatory and therefore to "[insert] divine action into indeterminate systems reduces holy Mystery who creates and sustains the whole world to a bit player."²⁸ Similarly, Edwards insists that "a theology of divine action not only should *not* spell out how God acts, but should insist that *this is something we cannot know*."²⁹

What I want to do here is precisify the sort of reasoning such authors must be relying on, even if they do so only implicitly. The purpose of spelling out this reasoning is to make it easier to assess. Given the requirements of reconciling statements (DO1) – (DO3), I take it that theologians such as Johnson and Edwards who tend to stress of transcendence and mystery of God, as opposed to providing an account of primary and secondary causation and/or the doctrine of concurrence, are committed to something like the following reasoning:

1. God is utterly transcendent and this means that divine agency is “*sui generis*,”³⁰ “on a different level [to created causes],”³¹ “radically different [from created causes],”³² on a different “plane [to created causes]”³³ and so on.
2. This qualitative difference in agency means that our language about God’s agency must be analogical in nature. Thus, when we speak of God’s *causing*, God’s *choosing*, God’s *willing*, God’s *bringing about* (or whatever one’s verb of choice for describing God’s activity), the *causing*, *choosing*, *willing* or *bringing about* in question is only analogically related to creaturely causing, choosing, willing or bringing about.
3. The analogical predication of agency language to God means that there is no guarantee that any of the standard corollaries that would follow from an assertion of a sentence of the form “Agent A causes E” or “Agent A brings about E” do follow when the agent in question is God.
4. In particular, those corollaries which are thought to be problematic – e.g. that no two causes can each cause the entirety of a given effect – do not hold when God is one of the causes in question.
5. However, some corollaries which ordinarily follow from a univocal use of “cause” *do* apply when “cause” is predicated of God; most obviously, these authors accept that God’s causing event E can ground God’s *control over E* and/or God’s *providential guidance of E*, just as (e.g.) a human person’s causing E might ground that person’s authorship of E.

Step 2 in this reasoning is often supported by asserting that those who deny that agency language can be used of God *only* analogically are (at best) theologically naïve or (at worst) idolatrous.³⁴ In David Burrell’s case, this claim is based on the idea that any metaphysics which permitted univocal predication in the case of God’s being or God’s action would be idolatrous.³⁵ In a similar vein, Johnson asserts that a failure to recognise this qualitative difference would “reduce” God to “a bit player,”³⁶ while Silva suggests “God would be *forced* to act as a cause among causes.”³⁷ While these claims might be effective rhetoric, they are not persuasive arguments. Granted, there is (of course) a qualitative difference between divine agency and human agency. But that doesn’t *entail* that language about divine agency be understood analogically, any more than the qualitative difference between human and dolphin agency entails that language about dolphin agency be understood analogically. Moreover, there is little reason to think that the pejorative descriptions of divine action conceived of in terms of God’s acting as one cause among others are anything more than that, i.e. anything more than pejorative descriptions. Certainly, there is little reason to think they amount to *arguments against* the position, or *reasons for rejecting* the position. To illustrate: if it is metaphysically impossible for one effect to be produced in its entirety by two different causes, then

God is no more “forced” to act as a cause among causes as God is “forced” to accept that two plus two equals four, a proposition the truth of which many Thomists would agree is not within God’s control. We can describe this as God’s “being forced” to act as a cause among causes if we like, but we must be clear that this sense of “forced” is unobjectionable. Likewise, instead of describing *God’s acting as a cause among causes* as God’s being “reduced to a bit player”, one could just as easily describe it as a beautiful act of self-giving love through which God condescends to engage in responsive relationships with his creatures.

I want to be clear about what I’m claiming here. The suggestion is that one way of defending the doctrine of primary and secondary causation is to *focus on God’s transcendence (and what must follow from it) obviates the need for (and perhaps makes impossible) an account of how primary and secondary causation work.* And my contention is that *if one takes that route, then one is committed to something like the above reasoning.* And this is so even if one does not make this reasoning or anything like it explicit. That such thinkers rely on this sort of reasoning, even though it is not made explicit, becomes evident when, for example, in response to the objection that human free will is incompatible with one’s choices being caused by anything except one’s self, it is *simply asserted* that “God’s causality ... enables me to act in freedom as my most authentic self”³⁸ or *simply asserted* that “Creative divine sovereignty and creaturely freedom ... do not compete.”³⁹ These assertions have little plausibility unless one is presupposing that the doctrine of analogical predication can be used to reject the corollaries typically associated with assertions such as “Agent A caused E” that one finds theologically problematic.

What then is the problem with this kind of reasoning? In short, the problem is that it appears to be a case of special pleading, dressed up (sometimes) as a legitimate invocation of divine mystery. When “cause”, “brings about” or “wills” are said of God, some of the typical corollaries are denied while others are affirmed. But no independently plausible rationale is given for deciding which corollaries are to be accepted and which are to be rejected. Instead, the theologically problematic corollaries are said – or rather, *assumed* – not to apply to God due to the analogical nature of the predication while the theologically desirable corollaries are wholeheartedly embraced as unproblematic. The doctrine of analogical predication, then, is used to discard all and any of those corollaries which cause problems for a certain theological position, while the corollaries required for said theological position are not questioned.

To illustrate this point, let us consider in more depth how analogical predication is meant to work when applied to the case of primary and secondary causation. Consider, to begin with, a stock example of analogical predication in the Thomist literature, namely, the term “healthy”. We can predicate the term “healthy” of people (animals, living creatures in general), of lifestyles, of activities, of items of food, and so on. For example, we might say that Andrew *is healthy*, Andrew *has a healthy* complexion, and this apple *is healthy for* Andrew.⁴⁰ These uses of “healthy” are not all on a par. Andrew is healthy inasmuch as his intrinsic make-up is operating well and contributing to his flourishing. Andrew’s health is one of his *intrinsic properties*. But when we say that Andrew’s complexion is healthy, we *are not* saying that his complexion possesses health in the way Andrew himself does. Rather, we are saying that Andrew’s healthy complexion is a *sign of* or perhaps even *constitutive of* Andrew’s own health. Similarly for the apple: the apple is healthy because consuming it would *lead to* or *produce* health in Andrew.

In this example, the primary usage of “healthy” is when it is predicated of a living creature, Andrew. The other uses are parasitic on this primary usage: they are valid predications of “healthy” only because they relate in some way to Andrew’s health. In the terms of scholastic theology, Andrew is the *primary analogate*. Andrew’s complexion and the healthy apple are *secondary analogates* which depend for their application on the primary analogate possessing health as an intrinsic property. As Burrell says, it is distinctive of this form of analogical predication – which the scholastics called *the analogy of attribution* – that there “is one focal meaning” from which the other uses derive from.⁴¹

The analogy of attribution *does* often allow us to distinguish in a principled manner which corollaries *do* follow from an application of an analogous term to the primary analogate and which *don’t* follow when the analogous term is applied to a secondary analogate. Thus, when “healthy” is applied to the primary analogate, as in “Andrew is healthy”, we can infer that Andrew is a living being. But when “healthy” is predicated of a secondary analogate, such as Andrew’s complexion, we cannot infer that Andrew’s complexion is a living being.

The analogy of attribution, however, is not the form of analogical predication involved in appeals to the primary/secondary cause distinction. This is because both God and human agents perform their own actions. Created substances are not said to be agents only because they *relate in some way* to the actions God performs. In some sense, created substances perform their own actions. The mode of analogical predication operative in this case is therefore what the scholastics called *the analogy of proportionality*. In this form of analogical predication we have “an ordered relationship among different uses” rather than a focal meaning from which the secondary meanings derive.⁴²

This difference turns out to be crucial. When we employ the analogy of proportionality, the purpose of applying the term “cause” to God is the same as – or at least very similar to – the purpose of applying the term to human beings. That is, “cause” is applied in both cases as a basis for establishing the agent’s control, guidance, authorship and responsibility. Put otherwise, theologians such as Johnson, Edwards and Stoeger, desire to affirm that God is a *cause* in part so that they can affirm that God has *a measure of control over, guides, or lovingly interacts with*, the created universe. This *exercising control* is also the main role the term “cause” plays when said of human agents. In each case, the purpose is to assert that some agent – God, or some created agent – is the author of a given event or process. This sameness of function is why it strikes critics of the use of analogical predication and the primary/secondary cause distinction as arbitrary for its proponents to gladly *accept* that God’s causing something bestows on God *control over* that thing while at the same time *denying* that God’s causing the entirety of something does not rule out another agent’s causing the entirety of it. If one corollary of the use of “cause” follows for God, why doesn’t the other? No rationale is given for this selective endorsement of the typical corollaries of an application of “cause”. This endorsement of the desirable corollaries and rejection of the theologically problematic corollaries of the application of “cause” appears to be nothing more than an instance of special pleading based on an appeal to mystery. When the doctrine of analogical predication is used to pick and choose which corollaries follow from the application of some concept to God in this manner – that is, with no rationale save the preservation of a favoured theological doctrine – it has good claim to the title “Mystery Card Greater Than Which None Can be

Conceived”. Used in this way it could, no doubt, solve almost any theological problem – perhaps it could even make Molinism coherent!

Note that my claim in this section has not been that *analogical predication itself* is illegitimate, or to be rejected. Nor have I claimed that the doctrine of primary and secondary causation cannot be defended by appealing to God’s transcendence and the subsequent need for analogical predication. Rather, I have contended that *a certain way of deploying analogical predication* is problematic, namely, when it is invoked to reject certain corollaries from the application of some concept to God while accepting others, and when no rationale is given for which corollaries are rejected and which accepted. My point here could be seen as an invitation to those who would like to make use of the doctrine of primary and secondary causation, and who think that the transcendence of God precludes us giving a metaphysics which explains how that causation works, to say more about why the analogical application of “cause” to God allows us to affirm God providentially guides creation but doesn’t require us to say that God’s causing the entirety of an effect precludes other agents from causing it. Without such a rationale, I contend that the theorist who stresses God’s transcendence should concede that, since “the incomprehensible God is ... beyond our knowing”, since “we have no direct access to God’s creative act”, and since “we should not spell out how God acts, but [accept] that this is something we cannot know,”⁴³ then neither can we know whether God *exercises any control over or providentially guides* the created world.

How Would the Primary and Secondary Causation Distinction Help?

In this section I want to consider the following question: assuming that the doctrine of primary/secondary causation can be adequately defended, how does it help when it formulating an account of divine action? In particular, how does it help in developing a theory of divine action which is committed to the following two propositions: (a) that God acts specially in history in a manner which contributes to God’s guiding and/or being responsive to creation, and (b) that God’s special divine action is to be understood in a non-interventionist manner. The first claim is, in one sense, a commonplace of the Christian tradition. As Alvin Plantinga puts it,

Most Christians have concurred ... with the thought that God acts in the world he has created. According to the classical Christian and theistic view of God, he is a person. He is thus a being who has knowledge; he also has affections (he loves some things, hates others); he has ends and aims, and acts on the basis of his knowledge to achieve his ends. ... [and] (according to classical Christian and theistic belief) *God acts in the world in ways that go beyond creation and sustenance*. ... In short, *God regularly and often causes events in the world*—events that go beyond creation and conservation. We can think of divine action that goes beyond creation and conservation as *special* divine action.⁴⁴

Leaving aside Plantinga’s claim that God is a person, which many Thomists would reject, the point here is that it’s a commonplace to claim that God acts to providentially guide the created world. Several of the authors so-far discussed accept something like this picture. Johnson affirms that God acts in a personal, providential manner.⁴⁵ Edwards agrees that God’s action is providential in character⁴⁶ and claims that God’s providential action is constrained by his love, such that divine action should be understood as dynamic and responsive.⁴⁷

The second claim is that God's special, providential actions must be non-interventionist in character. Non-interventionism is the view that God's special actions should not involve God breaking or in any way contravening the laws of nature. Note, I will frame what follows largely in terms of breaking the laws of nature. But this is not essential; all the following argument requires is realism (in some form) about causation. Thus, if one thinks that the natural world behaves as it does because God has endowed each created substance with causal powers which operate according to that substance's nature, then non-interventionism will require that God respect the integrity of the operation of such powers (on such a view, the laws, if they exist at all, are just summaries of how things exercise their causal powers in virtue of their natures).

Among those writing at the intersection of science and theology who have advocated understanding divine agency in terms of God's primary causality, many are committed to non-interventionist approaches to divine action. Johnson reveals this commitment when she asks how we are to "think of the faith confession *without compromising the integrity of what science has discovered?*"⁴⁸ More explicitly, Johnson argues against John Polkinghorne's proposal that God's providential actions might be located where there is indeterminism in the natural world. Johnson does not reject this idea *just because* it would require holding that God acts as a cause among causes (although it would), *but also* on the grounds that the undetermined nature of chance events is essential to them, and so if we supposed that God might resolve the indeterminacies of such events, that would be *to compromise the autonomy of the natural world.*⁴⁹ In putting forward this argument, Johnson reveals her deep commitment to non-interventionism: not even chance events can be interfered with.

Likewise, Edwards thinks interventionism is problematic and is insistent that the distinction between primary and secondary causation allows us to understand divine agency as working "in and through the laws of nature *rather than by violating, suspending, or bypassing them.*"⁵⁰ For Edwards, moreover, adherence to the doctrine of divine primary causation leads directly to non-interventionism since, precisely because God is always acting to uphold the "interacting network of creaturely causes" and is thereby always acting "in and through them", it would make little sense to then suggest there are some things God can only do by "disrupting" or going beyond the created causal network.⁵¹ And in a similar manner to both Johnson and Edwards, Stoeger states explicitly that his aim is for a non-interventionist account of divine action.⁵²

However, it is not at all clear that the distinction between God's primary causation and secondary, created causation is of any help in reconciling these two ideas. Granted, if we assume that there is an adequate account of the primary and secondary cause, then we can easily make sense of the idea that God *causes* any – indeed *all* – natural events, in addition to those events being caused by created causes. This just is what the doctrine of primary causation states.

But there is a difference between *being the cause of* an event, on the one hand, and *being in control of* that event or *providentially guiding* that event, on the other. Being a cause of an event might be necessary for controlling some aspect of that event, but it is not sufficient. And the problem is that a commitment to non-interventionism puts constraints on what God's primary causation can bring about such that God's being in control of or providentially guiding appears to be precluded.

To see this, consider what non-interventionism means for thinkers like Johnson and Edwards. As already mentioned, Johnson is seeking an account which makes sense of the faith confession “without compromising the integrity of what science has discovered.”⁵³ This is because “theology needs to take account of how the world created by God actually works, according to the best of our current human knowledge.”⁵⁴ And so her approach is to provide a theological interpretation of the natural world that “[respects] the integrity of scientific knowledge which exists independently of religion.”⁵⁵ What this means in practice is that God’s action enables creatures to “act according to the fullness of their abilities”, but *God never causes creatures to act contrary to their natures, dispositions, powers.*⁵⁶ Indeed, as we’ve already seen, so opposed is Johnson to God’s intervention in the natural world, that she will not even countenance God’s altering the course of nature by resolving natural indeterminacies.⁵⁷ It’s not clear how Johnson envisages this working, since at the same time she says that God works through chance as well as through the actions of created causes, but what is clear is that Johnson is thoroughly opposed to any sort of intervention. God works through created causes, but only in accordance with the laws which govern them. Edwards says something similar: when God concurs with secondary causes, “God fully respects their integrity, their dignity, and their proper autonomy.”⁵⁸ And as is clear from a passage already cited, Edwards is explicit about what this means: divine agency works “in and through the laws of nature *rather than by violating, suspending, or bypassing them.*”⁵⁹

Given that God must respect the character of the created world in this way, what follows with respect to God’s guidance or providence? Here it is useful to consider the situation in two stages, first on the assumption that the world is deterministic, and then second on the assumption that the natural world is indeterministic.

Suppose, then, that creation unfolds according to deterministic laws. On this way of seeing things, given non-interventionism, God’s sustaining and concurring *must be in line with the deterministic laws.* God, as primary cause, is intimately involved in causing everything that deterministically comes to pass on this picture. But God’s causing, because it must be in line with the deterministic principles, cannot be a matter of God’s *guiding, affecting, or altering* how an already existing creation unfolds. Suppose creation is unfolding in such a way that (say) a storm is going to occur this Saturday. On the current picture, God could not change that fact since his primary causation must respect the integrity of created causes and the laws which govern them. Thus, God must concur with each and every causal process that will lead to the storm. On the picture put forward by Johnson and Edwards, God will be intimately involved in that storm inasmuch as God’s primary causation will be upholding all the water molecules, the forces of the wind, and so on. But God would not have control over *whether or not* the storm occurs. God could not guide creation in a way that avoided the storm. On the deterministic view, the only way God could providentially guide things so as to have some particular event come to pass would be to set up a particular arrangement of the initial conditions and choose a particular set of laws at the initial creation. On this picture, then, it is hard to see how God could act in creation “dynamically, responsively ... and lovingly.”⁶⁰ So while Edwards would be right when he affirms that God, as primary cause, is “always ... at work in all created causes”, he would be wrong to describe this as God’s being “always *providentially* at work in all created causes.”⁶¹

Now suppose instead that creation does not unfold according to deterministic laws. On this picture, created causes sometimes operate deterministically, sometimes not. When created causes operate deterministically, things are much the same as before: the doctrine of primary causation might secure God's intimate causal involvement, but it doesn't secure God's control, because God must concur with what the laws require. But what about the indeterministic causal processes? There is genuine causal openness in the natural world: there will be points at which it will be causally possible, given the entire history of the universe and the laws, for creation to unfold in multiple ways. Given this ontological picture, the divine action theorist who invokes the doctrine of primary and secondary causation and who is committed to non-interventionism faces the following question: does God act so as to influence the outcome of otherwise undetermined events? The authors I've discussed so far appear to be split on this question, although there is some ambiguity. Johnson, for example, explicitly asserts that the undetermined nature of chance events is essential to their character as chancy events, and that therefore God cannot settle the outcome of such an event without compromising the "intrinsic structure necessary for the integrity of their own operation."⁶² This seems to be an outright denial that God might settle indeterminacies to affect the way the universe unfolds, but this interpretation of her view is complicated by the fact that she also affirms that God's primary causation works through chance and randomness.⁶³ It's not clear how to reconcile these two ideas. What we can say, however, is the following: any theorist who denies that God could settle indeterminacies in the natural world to affect the course of nature will be unable to offer any advance on the account of God's control or guidance which can be given in the deterministic scenario, which is to say, God's concurrence with created causes adds nothing to God's ability to guide creation, over and above the guidance God exerts by choosing the initial conditions and deciding which laws of nature will obtain.

Perhaps, though, we can make an advance if we affirm that God can and does settle the outcome of indeterminacies in the natural world, and that by doing so, God providentially guides how creation unfolds? Edwards seems sympathetic to this sort of view when he writes that God acts "through processes that involve chance and lawfulness,"⁶⁴ but again, there is some ambiguity here, since there is a difference between claiming that God uses chance events, and between saying that God resolves indeterminacies in the natural world to affect which way creation unfolds. Whether or not Edwards affirms the latter, it is affirmed by other proponents of the primary/secondary cause distinction. Many such thinkers hold, for example, that human free decisions cannot be determined by natural causes but that nonetheless they are caused in their entirety by God.⁶⁵ Moreover, there is no doubt that resolving indeterminacies in the natural world one way or another would be a method that God could use to providentially guide the universe in a manner consistent with non-interventionism.

But this method of providential guidance is, if not anathema to the proponent of the doctrine of primary and secondary causation, at least opposed to the spirit with which the primary/secondary cause distinction is introduced. After all, part of the supposed benefit of introducing the distinction is to be able to affirm that God is *everywhere* active and guiding the unfolding of creation. Two motivations for such a view were that (a) if God can only exercise providential guidance at certain points in the causal nexus, God's providential control is to that degree limited, and (b) God's special providence

is now operating only at the causal joint. But both of these are commitments that proponents of the primary/secondary cause distinction were aiming to avoid. If, therefore, it turns out that non-interventionist proponents of the primary/secondary cause distinction are committed to them after all, then we may well ask of such proponents why the distinction is worth invoking at all.

Does it run contrary to the doctrine of concurrence to hold that God settles indeterminacies in the natural world? No, since concurrentism states that God is active as primary cause causing wherever it is that creatures cause, and this doesn't preclude God acting without created causes. However, it does relativise the notion of a chance event or a free human decision. A chance event on such a view is one that is chancy with respect to the laws of nature, but not with respect to the entirety of how things are, since that includes God's activity, and God's activity settles – that is, determines – whether or not the event comes to pass. Johnson contends that this would undermine the chanciness of the event, and I am tempted to agree with her on this. When it comes to free human decisions, the problem is more acute, at least if we adopt any version of agent-causation.⁶⁶ According to agent-causation, when someone freely decides to do something, the agent causes in him- or herself an intention to act. So, in the case of a human decision, we do not have the same kind of indeterministic causal joint as we have with a chancy event. We don't have an undetermined event which God can in his special providence determine one way or the other to guide creation's unfolding. Rather, we have the human agent causing the event of a formation of an intention to act. In other words, we have a causal transaction between a created cause and an effect, and this causal transaction is something God would have to concur with in the same manner as God must concur with any deterministic causal transaction. That is, if God concurs with created causes according to their nature (as the non-interventionist holds), God would have to leave the decision up to the human agent and concur with whatever decision the human agent makes. And this precludes such a free human decision being a causal joint where God can exercise any special providential guidance. In any case, even if this last point is mistaken and God could control how people freely decide, even so, the point remains that God would only be exercising providential guidance at such indeterministic causal joints. And this is precisely what the invocation of the primary/secondary causation distinction was designed to avoid. Either way, then, God's concurring with created causes is not dynamic or responsive, but rigid and fixed; respectful of the integrity of the created world, yes, but a matter of interacting to implement the divine purpose, no.

Notes

1. 'Deism' is commonly used as a term of abuse, but here I intend no such abuse.
2. This Thomist understanding of the distinction between primary and secondary causes therefore differs markedly from how these terms are sometimes used in the Protestant tradition, where God's primary causation often amounts to nothing more than God's mediated use of secondary (created, immediate) causes.
3. Ignacio Silva "A Cause Among Causes? God Acting in the Natural World," *European Journal of Political Research* 7:4 (2015), 112.
4. Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 36.

5. *Ibid.*, 36, 47.
6. See, e.g., David Burrell and Isabelle Moulin, “Albert, Aquinas, and Dionysius,” *Modern Theology* 24:4 (2008), 62.; William R. Stoeger, “Describing God’s Action in the World in Light of Scientific Knowledge of Reality,” in F. LeRon Shults, Nancey Murphy and Robert Russell (eds.) *Philosophy, Science and Divine Action*, (Boston: Brill, 2009), 122.; Edwards, *How God Acts*, 46.; Silva, “A Cause Among Causes,” 107.
7. Stoeger, “Describing God’s Action,” 122.
8. (Johnson 2014: 163).
9. Silva, “A Cause Among Causes,” 111.
10. *Ibid.*, 112.
11. Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 163, my emphasis.
12. Edwards, *How God Acts*, 46.
13. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 162–3.
14. Edwards, *How God Acts*, 8, xiii; see also Stoeger, “Describing God’s Action,” 112; Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 9–10, 161.
15. Louis Mancha, “Concurrentism. A Philosophical Explanation.” (2003), 12–4.
16. I take that Mancha’s intention with (DO3) is not just that God acts immediately in the operations of his creatures, *if those creatures perform any acts of their own*, but that (DO3) is to include the assertion that God’s creatures do perform causal acts of their own. In this way, (DO3) distinguishes the concurrentist from both the occasionalist and the mere conservationist. That, at any rate, is how I will understand (DO3) in what follows.
17. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 164, 168, 179.
18. *Ibid.*, 164, emphasis in original.
19. Stoeger, “Describing God’s Action,” 121–3.
20. Silva, “A Cause Among Causes,” 112.
21. Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956), 182.
22. Olivi, as cited in Gloria Frost, “Peter Olivi’s Rejection of God’s Concurrence with Created Causes,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 22:4 (2014), 655–79.
23. Silva, “A Cause Among Causes,” 112.
24. Silva’s approach also relies heavily on the primary/secondary cause distinction, but since this is deployed in combination with the recognition of multiple types of created cause (e.g. formal, efficient, and so on), Silva’s approach is mentioned here. This is not to say it entirely escapes the criticisms which follow, however. Ignacio Silva, “Revisiting Aquinas on Providence and Rising to the Challenge of Divine Action in Nature,” *The Journal of Religion*, 94:3 (2014), 112.; Silva, “A Cause Among Causes.”
25. Simon Kittle, *So-called “richer” accounts of causation help not one jot in accounts of divine action*, (n.d.).
26. W. Matthews Grant, “Can a Libertarian Hold that Our Free Acts are Caused by God?,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 27:1 (2010), 22–44; W. Matthews Grant, “Divine Universal Causality Without Occasionalism (and with Agent-Causation),” in *Free Will and Classical Theism. The Significance of Freedom in Perfect Being Theology*, ed. H.J. McCann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 175–202; W. Matthews Grant, *Free Will and God’s Universal Causality: The Dual Sources Account*, 1st edition, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).
27. Simon Kittle, “The Incompatibility of Universal, Determinate Divine Causation with Human Free Will”, in *Theological Determinism. New Perspectives*, eds. P. Furlong and L.C. Vicens (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming).
28. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 168.
29. Edwards, *How God Acts*, 63, my emphasis.
30. W. Matthews Grant.
31. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*.
32. Edwards, *How God Acts*.
33. Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 89.

34. Burrell and Moulin, "Albert, Aquinas, and Dionysius," 642; Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 157.
35. Burrell and Moulin, "Albert, Aquinas, and Dionysius," 62.
36. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 163.
37. Silva, "A Cause Among Causes," 107, my emphasis.
38. Edwards, *How God Acts*, 48.
39. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 174.
40. cf. Henri Renard, *The Philosophy of Being*, 2nd ed., (Milwaukee: Bruce Pub. Co., 1943), 95; Edward Feser, E. (2014) *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, (Frankfurt: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 285.
41. David Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action*, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 62.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Edwards, *How God Acts*, 63.
44. Alvin Plantinga, "What is 'Intervention'?" *Theology and Science*, 6:4 (2008), 370-1.
45. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 160-1.
46. Edwards, *How God Acts*, 81.
47. Edwards, *How God Acts*, 54-5.
48. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 161.
49. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 167.
50. Edwards, *How God Acts*, 55.
51. *Ibid.*, 45-6.
52. Stoeger, "Describing God's Action," 114-5
53. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 161.
54. *Ibid.*, 9.
55. *Ibid.*, 12.
56. *Ibid.*, 164.
57. *Ibid.*, 167.
58. Edwards, *How God Acts*, 81.
59. *Ibid.*, 55.
60. *Ibid.*, 54.
61. *Ibid.*, 81.
62. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 167.
63. *Ibid.*, 169ff.
64. Edwards, *How God Acts*, 36.
65. e.g., David Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004); Grant, *Free Will and God's Universal Causality*.
66. Timothy O'Connor, *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

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