


Article

Contingency, Free Will, and Particular Providence

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Abstract: The results from contemporary science, especially the theory of evolution and quantum physics, seem to favor process theology. Moreover, the evil committed by free will leads some theologians to reduce divine action in order to prevent God from being responsible for evil. Thus, among those who defend a particular providence, Molinism finds many followers. This article first argues that contemporary science does not constrain us to deny particular providence. Second, it criticizes the implicitly deterministic character of Molinism. Thirdly, a Thomistic solution is proposed as an alternative which, by means of a different metaphysical approach to cosmic contingency and freedom of will, defends particular providence without reducing divine activity except in personal sins.

Keywords: determinism; Molinism; Aquinas; Francisco Suárez



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1. Introduction

On a touching dialogue in *Crime and Punishment* by F. Dostoevsky, a disbelieving Raskolnikov proves the faith of Sonya, a humble young woman who has been forced to prostitute herself to support her miserable family, with these piercing questions:

“So you pray a great deal to God, Sonya?” he asked her.

Sonya said nothing. He stood and waited for her answer.

“What should I do without God?” she said in a rapid, forceful whisper, glancing at him for a moment out of suddenly flashing eyes, and pressing his hand with hers.

“Well, there is it!” he thought.

“And what does God do for you in return?” he asked, probing deeper.

Sonya was silent for a long time, as though unable to answer. Her flat little chest heaved with agitation.

“Be quiet! Do not ask! You are not worthy!” she exclaimed suddenly, looking at him severely and indignantly.

“That’s it, that’s it!” he repeated to himself, insistently.

“He does everything”, she said in a rapid whisper, her eyes again downcast”.

Dostoevsky (1998, p. 311)

Sonya could very well be counted among the people “abandoned by God”. Motherless, with a drunken father, turned into brothel fodder to support her siblings . . . Yet she puts herself in God’s hands and abandons herself to His providence. Dostoevsky presents her to us as an icon of traditional faith who, despite her tremendous weakness, through her love defeats the pretended *Übermensch* represented by Raskolnikov, the man who relies only on his own energy.

My purpose in these pages is to take into consideration the thesis of particular providence defended by classical theism here personified by Sonia: “God does everything”. All events in human life, whether originated by unconscious nature or produced by free persons, can be referred back to God in one way or another.

To do this, I will start first with the view of divine providence put forward by process theology, an approach that seems to have the results of contemporary science in its favor. Secondly, I will look at Molinism, which, despite presenting itself as a form of classical theism safeguarding free will in the best possible way, actually contains certain deterministic factors fatal for it. Thirdly, I will present a Thomistic alternative to this system. My point is that the Thomistic theology, while attributing to God omniscience and an infallible will, safeguards freedom and contingency better than Molinism.

2. Indeterminism and God's Impotence

The idea of a particular providence could contrast with the scientific worldview of contemporary man, who could look with disdain on the simple confession of faith that Dostoevsky puts on Sonya's lips. Of course, events being traceable back to natural causes, conscious or not, has never been a problem for the notion of providence sustained by classical theism. However, the various advances in the sciences motivate the revision of traditional approaches to the subordination of causes to God. For example, some understand that quantum mechanics would mean a contribution to the debate between determinism and indeterminism. However, although at first glance quantum mechanics would seem to favor an indeterministic position, further reflection indicates that it can be integrated into both a deterministic and an indeterministic framework:

"It is a matter for metaphysical decision which of these alternatives is to be chosen, a point made clearly enough by the existence of both an indeterministic interpretation (Niels Bohr) and a deterministic interpretation (David Bohm) of quantum theory, each having the same empirical adequacy in relation to experimental results, so that physics by itself cannot settle the issue between them".

[Polkinghorne \(2005, p. xi\)](#)

As Polkinghorne attests, the debate is not on the playing field of physics, but is still situated in the realm of metaphysics. Among the ontological reasons to prefer indeterminism, free will stands out. Indeterminism is presented as enjoying the advantage of "making room" for freedom. Only in a world susceptible of different future states of affairs, it would be possible for a free agent to bring about varied results for his actions. In an indeterministic cosmos, however, providence should necessarily be weaker. Thus, Whitehead's process philosophy, partly inspired by quantum mechanics ([Epperson 2004](#)), leans toward a certain indeterminism. Accordingly, his disciple [Hartshorne \(1958\)](#) argues that free will requires causal indeterminism, and Whitehead himself understands divine action as

"to move, from within, the concrescent opening of beings towards the achievement of their formal and ontological growth: it is an action that is persuasive, loving and gentle because it does not interfere with or put conditions on the freedom of movement of nature and only comes from itself, although under the impulse of a divine force that is persuasive and not coercive which tries to bring the world to better itself".

[Montserrat \(2008, p. 838\)](#)

This divine action at the same time frees God from the burden of the evils of the world. Moreover, He is not only innocent, but also becomes a sufferer in solidarity with human beings who suffer:

"God, in some sense, suffers evil in the same way that actual entities do, by seeing the impulse towards good blocked. God, immersed in process (by way of its primordial, superjective and consequent nature) is not responsible for Evil but rather the fellow sufferer that understands, the faithful friend that suffers as we do, who accompanies us and who understands us".

[Montserrat \(2008, p. 839\)](#)

This model of understanding providence has the advantage of making God innocent of evil in the world but, since it sees Him as powerless to remedy it, He becomes much less meaningful for the religious man, who cannot count on God's action in the world (Böttigheimer 2013, pp. 26–28; Böttigheimer 2016, p. 3). Perhaps Sonya could be comforted by thinking of God's compassion for her, a weak God who suffers the same sorrows as she does by virtue of His divine solidarity. This could perhaps provide her with some moral support, but He would not be the God "without whom she couldn't do anything". The divine providence of classical theism offers the advantage of providing the believer with confidence in a God who is truly able to embrace everything under His plan, even evils, although the role of most of those evils cannot be understood for the moment for us.

One can apply some words addressed by Rousseau to Voltaire to process theology's providence. In a letter sent to him on 18 August, 1756, the French philosopher expressed that questioning divine providence before the so-called "horrendous evils", instead of providing relief to man's sufferings, rather aggravates them:

"You charge on Pope and Leibniz with insulting our evils by maintaining that all is well [*or*: good], and you so greatly magnify the picture of our miseries that you heighten our sense of them; instead of the solace I had hoped for, you only distress me. It is as if you feared that I might not see clearly enough how unhappy I am; and believed that you would greatly calm me by proving that all is bad. | Make no mistake about it, Sir; the effect is the very opposite of what you intend. This optimism which you find so cruel yet consoles me amid the very pains which you depict as unbearable".

Rousseau (1997, pp. 232–33)

A philosophy that dispossesses God of one of His main characteristics for classical theism, omniscience, and almighty power, risks rendering theism insignificant for human life: a God powerless against evil is not able to raise hope; we may mourn with the All-solidary, but we cannot ask Him to "deliver us from evil". For this, we need the Almighty, someone capable of sustaining our hope "against all hope" (Rom 4:18).

3. Molinism as a Determinism

A logic similar to the one that permeates process theology had already influenced classical theism. Even if God is omniscient and almighty, He should have to reduce His action in free human acts in order to "make room" for free will: such is the Molinist view. In a way, this system participates in the thesis according to which free will cannot exist if God determines the results of processes, actions, and changes, hence the need to "make room" for freedom. Despite this, I will try to suggest that the conception of causality held by Molinism is not only a theological determinism, but also includes a natural determinism.

A number of scholars hold Molinism today. I take here Craig's (2000) exposition of divine knowledge, according to the Molinist position. De Molina (1588) speaks of three kinds of divine knowledge. The first is the "natural knowledge" by which God knows Himself insofar He penetrates comprehensively into His divine essence. In knowing Himself He would also know all the possible creatures that He could create as likenesses of His essence. By this knowledge, "He knows all the possible individuals he could create, all the possible circumstances he could place them in, all their possible actions and reactions, and all the possible worlds or orders which he could create" (Craig 2000, p. 129). In addition to this natural knowledge, there would be a "free knowledge" that is properly the foreknowledge of everything that is going to happen. This knowledge is logically founded on the divine decision to create this precise world with these concrete persons placed in such and such circumstances. Thirdly, in the middle of both modes of knowledge, Molinism situates a "middle knowledge", which is the one by which:

"God knows what every possible creature *would* do (not just *could* do) in any possible set of circumstances. For example, he knows whether Peter, if he were placed in certain circumstances, would deny Christ three times. By his natural

knowledge God knew in the first moment all the possible things that Peter *could* do if placed in such circumstances. But now in this second moment he knows what Peter would in fact freely choose to do under such circumstances. This is not because Peter would be causally determined by the circumstances to act in this way. No, Peter is entirely free, and under the same circumstances he could choose to act in another way. But God knows which way Peter *would* freely choose. God's knowledge of Peter in this respect is not simple foreknowledge. For maybe God will decide not to place Peter under such circumstances or even not to create him at all".

Craig (2000, p. 130)

As we see, this "middle knowledge" is intended to explain that a person's free decisions are not predetermined by God, but are the product of human free will. God merely establishes the conditions under which free will is to unfold. The outcome depends only on the created free will. In order to make true the divine knowledge of this outcome, God must comprehensively understand the nature of each free will, as the same author explains:

"God by his infinite understanding knows each creature so completely that he discerns even the creature's free decisions under any conceivable circumstance. Since the moment of middle knowledge is logically prior to God's creation, no actual creatures exist at that moment, but God comprehends them as they exist in his mind as possible creatures. He knows them so well that he knows what they would freely do in any situation".

Craig (2000, pp. 133–34)

The result is a complete foreknowledge of all the contingent events of reality, the fruit of the combination of a comprehensive penetration into the essence of each free will and of all the circumstances involved in its action: "Only an infinite Mind could calculate the unimaginably complex and numerous factors that would need to be combined in order to bring about through the free decisions of creatures a single human event" (Craig 2000, p. 135).

A celebrated defender of Molinism such as Plantinga has stated: "I don't believe there *are* any good arguments against counterfactuals of freedom, or middle knowledge, or the claim that some of God's actions are to be explained in terms of middle knowledge" (Tomberlin and Van Inwagen 1985, pp. 378–79). However, I believe that the chief criticism that can be made of Molinism lies in its conception of causality, which, at the end of the day, destroys what it was intended to save: free will. This is throwing the baby out with the bathwater. That Molinism is a theological determinism was already claimed for instance by Langston (1990, p. 71), but let us read here how Leftow draws the same conclusion in a recent publication:

"God can control my actions using Molinist tools. Since if I were in a situation S, I would do A, God can take advantage of this to make me do A, because he can put me in S. Moreover, a Molinist God *cannot stop* controlling my actions. If he creates me, he must put me in one particular situation or another. He controls the situation in which he puts me in. Therefore, he has control over what I do. [. . .] Therefore, in Molinism, God is compelled to predetermine my choices. Furthermore, even though God does not cause me to do what I do, but only puts me in a situation in which I choose to do this without being caused to do this choice, it is He, not I, who sets my action in motion. [. . .] Molinism is a form of theological determinism. Again, for the world to be deterministic at a time *t* it is enough that, given its history from *t*, it has only one possible future. [. . .] The counterfactuals of free will and divine decisions *imply* all future history. Therefore, if God's decisions are exhaustive, as the Molinists believe, a Molinist world is deterministic".

Leftow (2021, pp. 90–91)

Indeed, if God knows exhaustively every created free will and He decides to place it in certain circumstances, the result of the divine decision to create that particular person with his personal idiosyncrasy and place him in those certain circumstances is only one concrete and *determined* choice. That is precisely why divine middle knowledge is accurate according to the Molinist account. Nevertheless, if this is so, then the result is always deterministic, in the sense that, once God chooses the existence of this personal free will and these circumstances, the result produced in the world can only correspond to a precise (supposedly) free decision.

Interestingly, the greatest opponent of Molinism, the Dominican Domingo Báñez, also a Spanish scholar, already noticed this deterministic nature of Molinism at the time when this doctrine was born. Before we read his words, let us keep in mind that, in the Catholic context where these theologians debated, it was crucial to include among the concurrent factors in a given situation the degree of divine motion, that is, the help or push coming from God to the human will. According to the Molinists, this motion was not fatal to freedom of will, because the person was free to use or not to use this impulse to do a good deed. Moreover, it is a famous and controversial affirmation of [De Molina \(1588, p. 53\)](#) that, given two men, one could receive a stronger divine impulse than the other and nevertheless not take advantage of it to do a good action and commit a sin, while the other, with equal or even less divine help, could perform a virtuous act. Divine foreknowledge, since it comprehends all the circumstances, including the degree of divine motion that God freely wants to give, plus the nature of the free will of each person, knows exactly how each person is going to behave. Let us now read how Báñez proves the deterministic character of Molinism:

“[. . .] I argue in your own way against you. Free will is that which, given all the requisites to act, can both do one thing and do the opposite (see [De Molina 1588, p. 12](#)). Now, given all your requisites for consent, it is impossible for the will not to consent. Therefore, it does not consent freely. I prove the minor premise: only three things are necessary for the complete efficacy of the help of prevenient grace, namely, 1st the entity of the divine help with its force and motion by which the mind of a human being is stimulated, 2nd the congruence and accommodation with the free will according to the opportune moment, 3rd the infallible foreknowledge of God. These three things fulfill divine efficacy. However, if these three elements are verified, it is impossible for the will not to consent. Therefore, it does not consent freely. This is confirmed by noticing that the following consequence is necessary: if these three things are verified, then the will consents. The ‘antecedent’ [affirmation] is the cause of the ‘consequence’ and is not in the power of the creature; therefore, neither the ‘consequent’ is in his power. You will not deny the minor premise [. . .]. Therefore the ‘consequent’ is true”.

[Báñez \(2021, p. 308\)](#)

The sum of the circumstances plus the divine help and nature of each individual’s free will produce only one effect, a *determined* choice. In this sense, according to the premises accepted by Molinism, only one result is possible. The system fails to save what it claims to defend, namely, free will. This conclusion does not depend on foreign definitions of the concepts used by Molinists, but it relies on their own conception of free will and divine motion.

4. A Structural Problem of Molinism: Causal Determinism

There is one central element of Molinism, which indicates an obvious structural limitation: its notion of freedom. No one can argue that people are to some extent predictable and that the more rational a person is, and the better formed his character is, the more predictable he is. However, the Molinist idea, according to which God could know the behavior of a person placed in certain circumstances due to an exhaustive knowledge of free will, indicates a rather deterministic notion of the very nature of free will. The debate

about the relationship between divine omnipotence and freedom usually takes place on a Molinist playing field, for it focusses the notion of freedom on independence from all external coercion. However, this approach loses sight of the core of free will as explained by Aquinas. Notice that for Molina himself the opinion of Aquinas was authoritative and indeed his famous book (the *Concordia*) was presented as a commentary on some questions of St. Thomas' *Summa theologiae*.

Aquinas' notion of free will is the capacity for self-determination. Human beings do not necessarily follow sensory inclinations, but this independence from them is not the ultimate root of free will (Pilsner 2006, pp. 59–66). This freedom is sustained by the intellectual potency that grasps the finite nature of the goodness of any election (see for instance *De malo*, q. 6). Only an infinite good is wanted in a necessary way. Consequently, the finitude of the goodness involved in any election makes every election not necessary even if such election is, so to say, predictable. Let us take the example of a human person whose inclinations are well integrated thanks to virtue and is even confirmed in grace, Jesus Christ. If the devil tempts Jesus to blaspheme, He will surely refuse to do it, but He will act knowing that His election is a finite good that does not constrain the capacity of the will. The capacity for self-determination depends on an intellectual apprehension and exists even in such a case like Jesus' free will. The concrete election cannot come from the will in a necessary way. Even in the case of Jesus, He can avoid sin in many ways and none of these is necessary for any will. They are different finite goods that do not compel the will. Of course, some possibilities are preferable for a given person in a given set of circumstances, but the will is not constricted to choose them, because the intellect recognizes that no alternative is necessary. Therefore, another finite good can always be sought. In that sense, there is nothing in the so-called "singular nature" of a personal free will that can make it possible to foresee with certainty (not only with a height probability) how a person will act. It would seem Aquinas means, not even God could foresee it.

To continue this discussion, I want to refer now to Francisco Suárez, who is an important defender of Molinism, although he disagrees with Molina on some points. He also affirms that "God understands the capacity and inclination of the human will and all the ways and means by which it can be inclined to give its consent or to reject it" (Suárez 1599, p. 190). This seems like an idea of divine supercomprehension of free will similar to Molina's: choices ultimately spring from a kind of "singular nature" of each free will, as if this nature would necessitate the precise choice that *has to* be elected by such person in such circumstances. According to Echavarría (2017, p. 59), Suárez considered divine supercomprehension insufficient as the root of the certainty of middle science. However, it must be recognized that the Jesuit theologian does not offer many more precisions in this regard either.

On another occasion I have dealt with Suárez's understanding of freedom, centered on the impulse of the will, as opposed to the Thomistic idea of freedom as defended by Báñez (Torrijos-Castrillejo 2021). In this opportunity, I would like to go deeper into the metaphysical problem embedded in a Molinist way of conceiving reality. To introduce this kind of exploration, let us read some lines written by the aforementioned Dominican theologian as a response to Suárez: "[. . .] it is astonishing that those assertors understand how the infallibility of divine providence does not remove the contingency of many natural effects, and do not understand how divine providence itself determines the acts of free will without destroying human freedom" (Báñez 2021, p. 142). I believe that Báñez would not be so surprised had he availed himself of the time to read Suárez more carefully (Báñez 2021, p. 152). In that case, Báñez would have noticed the new metaphysics taking shape in his mind. Reading the works by this Jesuit, we could find that, when all is said and done, contingent things are not really contingent for him, but are in fact endowed with necessity:

"If one considers the power and mode of action of the proximate cause of such an effect [sc. the effect of the lower natural causes, insofar as it happens without the intervention of some free cause] there is no contingency in such an effect, because its cause does not possess an intrinsic power of its own to avoid its production

but works by an intrinsic necessity, given all the requisites. Since this cause is imperfect and can be impeded in its action by the interference of another, such an effect can be contingent. Now, such contingent things are called contingent in a qualified sense (*contingentia secundum quid*) because they are so only with respect to a cause that can be impeded by another, but not with respect to the whole of all the concurrent causes”.

Suárez (1599, p. 289)

This declaration of Suárez’s idea of necessity and contingency is very illuminating because it puts his metaphysics of causation at antipodes of Aquinas’ one. To explain the Thomistic account on this topic, I will use a very instructive article by Stephen Brock, where he compares St. Thomas’ conception to the contemporary idea of “determinism”. Today we tend to consider deterministic

“the thesis that given the things that there are, with the tendencies or laws of their natures plus the conditions in which they are found at a given moment, all subsequent events are inevitable. Thomas is only arguing against doctrines that hold that the sheer laws of the natures of things, *by themselves*, make everything happen necessarily. For his purpose, it suffices to show that the natures of the things do not themselves completely determine the original conditions, i.e., that some of the conditions are merely accidental to the things”.

Brock (2002, p. 229)

Aquinas does not admit the first species of determinism because a precise result cannot necessarily follow from the set of states of affairs that affect the material nature. He is especially interested in the second type of determinism: an effect cannot necessarily follow from a contingent cause, that is, by virtue of its intrinsic nature. It is true that he agrees with Suárez in admitting that, “given a cause, then its effect necessarily follows, unless there is an impediment” (*In Metaph.*, VI, lect. 3; [Thomas Aquinas 1964](#), §1193; [Brock 2002](#), p. 222). However, what kind of necessity is that? Is Suárez right when he says that events produced by unfree causes and able to be impeded are only contingent in a qualified sense (*secundum quid*), but not absolutely contingent (*simpliciter contingentes*)? Aquinas thinks exactly the opposite: such a kind of events would be *absolutely contingent* and would *only* be necessary in a qualified sense (*necessaria secundum quid*). On the contrary, absolutely necessary events (*necessaria simpliciter*) would be those that were intrinsically inevitable, i.e., brought about by a cause that could not be prevented in any way ([Brock 2002](#), p. 231). An example of a necessary event within the paradigms of physics that he handles is the motion of the planets.

Suárez understands that an event produced by a cause able to be impeded is “contingent” only because of an extrinsic factor that does not affect the event itself but its cause. He would probably call this predication of the word “contingent” a *denominatio extrinseca*, an external qualification. Quite the reverse, for Aquinas, the very nature of the cause qualifies the nature of the causation. A cause that acts in a way which is susceptible of being impeded is a non-necessary one and so are its effects. That is not something alien to the cause: the possibility of being impeded belongs to its own nature. The nature of causation is linked to the nature of the cause and the effect is contingent or not because of the causation itself. Even if, in the case that anything impedes the causation, the effect follows from a contingent cause, that cannot be considered a necessary effect but in a qualified sense. Let us read Aquinas himself (*Expositio Peryermeneias*, I, lect. 15; [Thomas Aquinas 1989](#), vol. 1.1, p. 81, 36–42; [Torrijos-Castrillejo 2020a](#), p. 170):

“One cannot simply and absolutely say that everything that is necessarily is and everything that is not necessarily is not, because it does not mean the same thing that ‘every being, when it is, is by necessity’ and that ‘every being absolutely (*ens simpliciter*) is by necessity’, since the first means hypothetical necessity (*necessitate ex suppositione*), while the second means absolute necessity (*necessitatem absolutam*)”.

Contingent events are, in an unqualified sense, contingent. If a certain necessity is attributed to them, it is merely conditional: supposing that under such precise conditions, they are actually verified, and then it is “necessary” that they happen. However, this necessity is conditional or hypothetical and, therefore, must be considered only a necessity in a qualified sense (*secundum quid*). As we see, Suárez departs completely from Aquinas’ view in this point and inaugurates a much more “deterministic” conception of nature. For this reason, in the same article mentioned above, Brock (2002, p. 231) confronts the conception of causality held by St. Thomas with that of Suárez by quoting a passage from the *Disputationes metaphysicae* (19, 10, 5–6), published in 1597, which is very similar to the one we have copied above:

“A contingent effect in respect to its proximate cause which works naturally, if compared with the whole order and series of causes in the universe (when any free cause intervenes either by applying other causes or by removing eventual impediments), possesses no contingency but necessity [. . .]. Thus, it is true, absolutely and without doubt, with respect to the whole order or arrangement of agent causes, that there cannot be any contingency in the effects, unless in that arrangement some free cause intervenes”.

Suárez (1861, vol. 25, p. 736)

It is easy to recognize here a metaphysics very similar to the Stoic one, a position expressly criticized by Aquinas. He understands that these philosophers identified fate with “a certain series of causes” affirming “there is nothing that has no cause and, given a cause, it is necessary to put the effect. If this or that effect happens, it has had a cause and this cause another cause and so on: as if one is killed at night because he left home, and he left home because he was thirsty, and he was thirsty because he took something salty; consequently, since he ate something salty, he died in a necessary way” (*Quodlibet*, XII, q. 4, co.). This kind of approach is explained by the fact that the Stoics distinguished necessity from contingency according to the “external elements that impede events: indeed, they said that something is necessary if anything can’t prevent it from becoming true; something is impossible if its truth is always impeded; something is possible if its truth can be impeded or not impeded” (*Expositio Peryermeneias*, I, lect. 14; Thomas Aquinas 1989, vol. 1.1, p. 73, 168–72). Nevertheless, their distinction is invalid because “it is founded on something external and accidental (*per accidens*), for something is not necessary because it does not possess an impediment but, being necessary, then it cannot be impeded” (*ibid.*, 178–81). Similarly, elsewhere he calls the Stoic view “irrational”, since “we call necessary something that by its very nature cannot not be, while we call contingent something that happens frequently and may not be. It is proper to the contingent to have impediment or not to have impediment, for nature does not prepare an impediment to something that cannot not be, because to do in this way would be superfluous” (*In Phys.*, II, lect. 8; Thomas Aquinas 1965, §210). As we are seeing, Aquinas has a very good taste to identify a *denominatio extrinseca*, but here he thinks that the fact that something can be impeded or not does not belong to the relationship of this cause with others, but to a proper characteristic of this cause and its fallible power: if it would be a true necessary cause, no impediment could prevent its causality.

Nevertheless, as we have seen above, Suárez establishes necessity by connecting the causes among them so that he raises all of them to the same level of necessity. There are no longer the two levels of necessity, and the intrinsic or absolute contingency (*simpliciter contingentia*) coined by Aquinas disappeared. In this way, we have a much less rich picture of physical nature. A type of metaphysics like that of Suárez will fit very well with Newton’s classical mechanics, as the philosophy of Descartes does. However, it probably is less able to adapt to the kind of natural reality that contemporary science is discovering.

5. A Thomistic Alternative

These difficulties observed in Molinist metaphysics make it hard to agree with Leftow (2021, p. 102) when he claims “Molinism is the best version of theological determinism”.

I would rather suggest that Thomism reveals itself as a more solvent alternative for addressing the problems involved in the relationship between divine activity and creaturely contingency. In a certain sense, one might call it a “theological determinism” insofar as Aquinas admits that divine will is always fulfilled and divine knowledge embraces every past, present or future event. However, he believes that the infallibility of divine intelligence and will does not eliminate the contingency of things. It neither represents a threat to freedom, nor does it mitigate the contingent nature of much natural causes. Thomas’s world is not deterministic in the sense that the sum of physical and free causes does not necessarily produce the future states of affairs.

For Aquinas, the mere divine foreknowledge of contingent events does not necessitate them. Because of knowledge’s very mode of being, to know an event in no way affects its contingency or its necessity. Taking up an idea from Boethius, Aquinas explains that my knowledge of “Socrates sitting” does not necessarily cause Socrates to be sitting (*S.Th.*, I, q. 14, a. 13, co.). By the very nature of his agency, Socrates is free to be sitting or standing. Similarly, I can certainly know that “it is raining now”, but raining is, by its very nature, a contingent event. My certain knowledge of what is happening does not nullify its contingency.

While Socrates is sitting, it is necessary to affirm that Socrates is sitting and, while it is raining, it is necessary to affirm that it is raining. The same is true for past events: it is necessary to affirm that Socrates remained seated in prison on his death day, although he was free to get up and leave, it is necessary to affirm that, on the eve of Waterloo, it rained, although it might not have rained. This is the merely “hypothetical” or “conditional” necessity to which Aristotle had already referred: “What is, insofar as it is, it is necessary that it be” (*De interpretatione*, 19a23–4). Now, this type of necessity resides in the proposition, not in the thing; the thing is, by its very nature, contingent, necessary, or free, according to the intrinsic ontological elements that constitute it. The observer’s knowledge cannot alter this.

In the case of divine foreknowledge of contingent futures, St. Thomas also makes use of a metaphor partly inspired in Boethius (*S.Th.*, I, q. 14, a. 13, ad 3): God would be like an observer surveying a road from a mountain; while the people on the side of the road only notice who passes by them, the elevated observer can also see the walkers who have not yet arrived at a certain point and those who have already crossed it. Likewise, God, from the watchtower of His eternity, could contemplate past, present, and future, for He possesses a kind of specific perspective, since He does not live temporal events as successive but in their respective actuality.

The divine eternal knowledge of temporal things cannot be understood as if, thanks to eternity, things somewhat “inform” God about them and thus He learns the events. Rather, Aquinas believes that the divine understanding knows the truths concerning temporal things not as our intelligence, which should adapt to those things, but rather temporal things should adapt to divine intellect (*De veritate*, q. 1, a. 2, co.). For this reason, divine knowledge with respect to created things cannot dispense with the divine will to create this world with these precise characteristics (*S.Th.*, I, q. 14, a. 8). After all, every contingent thing depends on divine will and this will “is always fulfilled” (*S.Th.*, I, q. 19, a. 6). This does not prevent Aquinas from affirming that the divine will is neither a direct nor an indirect cause of sin, because God does not will sin in any way, although He “permits” that some persons will to commit sin (*S.Th.*, I, q. 19, a. 9; I-II, q. 79, a. 1).

Now, divine intervention on contingent things neither dissolves their contingency, nor cancels freedom even if it moves created free will to do a good deed. Furthermore, infallible divine will ensures the contingent nature of contingent things (Torrijos-Castrillejo 2019, pp. 445–46). Things do not become contingent insofar as God “steps back” and “makes room” for contingency, but it is precisely the efficacy of divine will that safeguards that contingent events are such (*S.Th.*, I, q. 19, a. 8).

Perhaps this can be well understood with the help of an example given by [Oderberg \(2016, pp. 214–15\)](#) in an article on this subject. He tells us how he was teaching his son to write:

“[. . .] I sometimes hold his hand [sc. my son’s hand] while it grips the pencil, guiding his formation of the letters. Sometimes I force his hand to move in a certain direction, to be sure, but most of the time I do not. So let us focus on the times I do not force his hand. My son has free will: he has the power within himself not to comply with my physical guidance. Sometimes he does not, and his hand moves willfully off in the wrong direction. I am not responsible for that transgression: if he wants to depart from my guidance he can, since I am not compelling him. But consider the cases where he does freely comply. Here, he willingly submits to my physical guidance (not to mention my moral exhortation) and moves his hand in accordance with the motion of my own guiding hand. Although my son has the power to do otherwise, he does not exercise it”.

I think this example is interesting because our experience reveals this type of relationship with causes subordinate to us. When a principal free agent intends to achieve an effect by means of a subordinate free cause, there are only two possibilities: either the influence on the subordinated cause is so soft as it can be refused, or the self-determination of the subordinate cause is suppressed by coercing its body. In that sense, a created principal free agent must “leave space” to the subordinate free agent if he wants the latter to continue to act freely, but in such a case he cannot determine the outcome of his action. However, when Aquinas says that God works upon free agents by concretely ordering the outcome of each deliberate action (e.g., *S.c.G.*, III, 91–2), He does so in such a way that His concurrence does not abridge their freedom in any way, but it is not limited to a mere soft influence. It could not just be a “moral motion”, as Molinism thinks, which would make God both the conservator of the created power to act and a cooperative cause of the new act produced by the creature, so that God would not be responsible for the actual causation itself ([De Molina 1588, pp. 169–70](#)). Within Aquinas’s metaphysics, God does not only cause the things but also their capacity to cause and even the actual use of this capacity. God’s constant conservation is necessary for creatures to continue to exist and, in a similar way, His continuous intervention in their capacity to produce the being of another thing each time it is originated is required (*S.Th.*, I, q. 105, a. 5; [Silva 2014, p. 281](#)). For this reason, He cannot only intervene in the power and in the new act produced by it, but also in the causation itself.

Ultimately, the view that leads to “making space” for freedom and contingency insofar as God should “step back” from creation tends to see divine causality as if it were a created one. However, Aquinas insists on the transcendent nature of divine causality. God is not a cause comparable to created causes that enter into categorical orders of causation: either they are necessary or they are contingent. God, on the contrary, stands outside both orders; He transcends them (*In Metaph.*, VI, lect. 3; [Thomas Aquinatis 1964, §1222](#); [Roszak 2017, pp. 6–9](#); [Torrijos-Castrillejo 2020a, pp. 166–71](#)). God is outside any finite order. Let us recall that an event is *intrinsically* contingent if its cause is contingent (i.e., if it is such a cause that can be impeded) and necessary if its cause is necessary (i.e., if it cannot be impeded in any natural way). If God is outside both orders of causality, even if His action is infallible and no event escapes from His providence’s order, the events do not receive their own qualification by divine action, but by their proximate causes. That means that an event could be infallible for divine action while absolutely contingent provided its proximate cause is a contingent one. Necessity and contingency represent characteristics of created ways of causation. Divine infallibility is beyond contingency as well as necessity.

The idea of the transcendence of divine action should not lead us to a certain deism by virtue of which we would reduce divine intervention to a generic influence that is only determined via created causes. Divine transcendence does not mean that God only acts with a general providence and merely causes “the being” or “the conservation” of things in a broad way. Rather, all novelty in the world, with all its minutiae and all the

richness it contains, is due to an active and detailed exercise of providence (Bonino 2020, 231–32). Nevertheless, this transcendent and therefore incomprehensible nature of the divine way of acting in all things implies that, although divine providence foresees sins as something hateful and not willed by it but only tolerated, God is in no way the cause of them (*S.Th.*, I-II, q. 79, a. 2). It is difficult for us to understand how God can have foreseen and tolerated all the elements of which an evil action consists without Himself being the cause of it, but the disorder of sin as such is not willed by providence either as a means or as an end. Above all, it is necessary to recognize that the type of causal influence by which God moves and guides creatures, created and preserved by Him, surpasses our intelligence and probably constitutes an idea more difficult to understand than *creatio ex nihilo* itself (Torrijos-Castrillejo 2020b, p. 454).

6. Conclusions

In contrast to classical mechanics, quantum mechanics, and other new areas of contemporary science, such as the theory of evolution, seem to require an ontology able to explain a flexible nature capable of acting on its own. Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics and traditional theism do not constitute an obstacle as such for the explanation of the new kind of facts discovered. Indeed, as recently expressed by Feser (2019, p. 310), “quantum mechanics, is as neutral between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian interpretations as [. . .] relativity theory is when rightly understood. But an even stronger claim can be made, because there is a sense in which quantum mechanics actually points toward Aristotelianism[.]” As we have suggested, the Aristotelian-Thomistic theory of causality may be even more apt to explain contemporary physics than various philosophies elaborated in modernity. Process theology is thus not the only alternative for elaborating a system of thought consistent with the new discoveries regarding physical nature. Unlike it, classical theism allows us to safeguard a conception of God that makes Him more relevant for the religious man: an omniscient and almighty God who can hear our prayers and elaborate plans to seek the concrete good for each believer.

Particular providence could be justified with a Molinist approach, but this theological system shares with process theology the idea that God must “step back” from His creature to some extent, in order to “make room” for contingency and freedom. However, Molinism in fact conceives of nature and free will in an intrinsically deterministic way. In contrast, Thomism understands that God, the cause of contingency and freedom, can move creatures in a concrete and infallible way without harm to created action. Although the combination of divine action plus created action brings about determinate results, created things are, in each case, intrinsically and absolutely (*simpliciter*) contingent or free. Only in an accessory or improper sense (*secundum quid*) could it be said that events are necessary because they are under the control of the infallible divine will, which acts in a way that is incomprehensible for us and does not interfere with the nature of every event.

This sort of philosophy of providence does not need to safeguard contingency by reducing the efficacy of the divine motion, but rather, above all, it bears on divine transcendence. On the opposite side of process theology in this regard, a Thomistic God is not part of the world. The world may well remain contingent even if God has a determinate knowledge of all things and acts effectively in the course of events. His incomprehensible transcendence places divine activity on a transcendent level that allows Him to act without altering the intimate nature of things.

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