

PRESERVING HUMAN FREEDOM:

Aquinas on Divine Transcendence and Creaturely Contingency

KELLY JANAKIEFSKI

I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Aquinas, in his thoroughly Catholic philosophical and theological system, was committed to each of the following principles: that God foreknows all events, even future contingents; that God causes the being of all things, even contingent effects; and that the creatures He creates act contingently in accordance with their free will. On this formulation, the problem almost jumps off the page. How could it possibly be true that creatures may act contingently—that is, act in a way that is not predetermined and not necessary—if God knows what they will do before they do it and, in fact, causes them to actually do it? What kind of free will would that be? And yet, Aquinas insists that divine foreknowledge and divine causation are compatible with creaturely contingency.

Unlike many suggestions offered in support of the so-called “compatibilist” view, Aquinas does not attempt to weaken any of the above principles. He holds that God’s omniscience truly requires Him to know all past, present, and future events, both necessary and contingent; that God’s role as First Cause does in fact involve giving being to all things, even effects contingent upon free-choice acts; and that the free will of creatures actually involves the ability of the will to freely choose one apparent good over another equally possible alternative. So what satisfactory solution could possibly be offered for the reconciliation of these seemingly contradictory principles? Although many philosophers try to deal with this issue as just one problem, here

I will follow Harm Goris in suggesting that Aquinas parses the problem into two separate, albeit related, questions, providing one solution for the problem of God's foreknowledge, and another for the problem of God's causality. Goris calls these the solutions to temporal fatalism and causal determinism, respectively.¹ Ultimately, the answer to both lies in the utterly transcendent nature of God, who knows and causes in a way fundamentally different from His creatures.

II. CONTEXT: CLARIFYING THE PROBLEM

Aquinas identifies the two relevant problems arising from God's relationship to contingency early on in his career, as evidenced in his commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*:

“For contingencies seem to elude divine knowledge for two reasons. First, because of the order of cause to what is caused. For the effect of a necessary and immutable cause seems to be necessary; therefore, as God's knowledge is the cause of things and as it is immutable, it does not seem that it can be of contingencies. Second, because of the order of knowledge to what is known; for, as knowledge is certain cognition, it requires from the notion of certainty, even if causality is excluded, certainty and determination in what is known and contingency excludes that.”²

In other words, God's knowledge seems to be incompatible with the existence of contingents for two reasons. First, the irresistible efficacy of God's unchanging will means that effects must necessarily be as He causes them to be, and this kind of necessity seems to preclude contingency. Since God gives being to all things, including every secondary cause and its effect, we might conclude that no cause or effect can be contingent. And second, God's perfect knowledge requires that the object of His knowledge be certain, and this certainty seems to preclude contingency. Given that God knows all events, including those in the future, we might conclude again that no event is contingent. Thus it would seem that the nature of God is in fact incompatible with contingency. But Aquinas certainly thinks otherwise; on the subject of free choice, he concludes that “particular actions are contingent matters, and so with respect to them the judgment of reason is related to different alternatives and is not determined to just one. Accordingly, by the very fact that he is rational, man must have free choice.”³ And thus arises the problem of reconciling God's acts of foreknowledge and causation to contingency.

1 Harm Goris, “Divine Foreknowledge, Providence, Predestination, and Human Freedom,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, Rik Van Nieuwenhove et al., eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), p. 99-122.

2 Aquinas, *Sentences*, I ds 38 1.5, quoted in Harm Goris, *Free Creatures of An Eternal God* (Nijmegen: Thomas Instituut te Utrecht, 1997), p. 55.

3 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Alfred Freddoso, I 83.1. All subsequent quotations from the *Summa Theologiae* are taken from the Freddoso translation.

Before diving into Aquinas' solutions, however, it will be helpful to consider the framework he sets up for discussing theological questions of this kind. Aquinas generally takes the approach of negative theology, claiming that "in the case of God we cannot know His real definition, but can only know what He is not...by excluding from God certain things that do not befit Him, e.g. composition, change and other things of this sort, it is possible to show what His mode of being is not."⁴ For the purposes of this discussion, two very important points emerge. First, from the fact that there is no composition in God of any kind, Aquinas finds Him to be absolutely simple.⁵ Although in the following discussion I will deal separately at times with God's knowledge and His will, divine simplicity demands that we recognize these to be one and the same as they exist in God. Second, from the fact that God is unchanging and immutable, Aquinas finds that God "is His own eternity," such that he exists timelessly in "the simultaneously whole and complete possession of interminable life."⁶ God's timelessness, as we will see, has important implications for the question of God's foreknowledge – for if God exists outside of time, His "fore"-knowledge will necessarily look rather different than the way in which foreknowledge is normally conceived.

The previous considerations were conclusions arising from Aquinas' pursuit of negative theology, or what can be said not to be true about God. But if we want to say positive things about God, by ascribing appropriate names or perfections to Him, different rules are at work. Most importantly, we must keep in mind God's transcendence. Accordingly, Aquinas writes that the names of God "signify the divine substance, but in an imperfect manner" and argues that "these names must be said of God and creatures in an analogous sense."⁷ In other words, there is a fundamental divide between the nature of God and the nature of His creatures, one that our language may approximate but can never fully accommodate. For our purposes, it is important to keep in mind the inevitable problems that will arise in our discussion of divine foreknowledge and divine causation, always remembering that we are trying to use human language to talk about a mode of being "that elude[s] our grasp."⁸

III. SOLUTION TO TEMPORAL FATALISM

With these considerations in mind, I will now turn to Aquinas' solution for the problem which arises from the necessity seemingly imposed by God's foreknowledge. In answering the question "Does God have knowledge of future contingents?" Aquinas points out that a contingent thing may be thought of in two different ways: in itself, or in its cause. With regard to the latter, a contingent effect as it exists in its cause is indeterminate, such that it is open to both opposites; for example, before

4 ST I 3 prologue

5 ST I 3.7

6 ST I 10.1, 2

7 ST I 13.2, 5

8 Harm Goris, "Divine Foreknowledge," p. 115.

he makes up his mind, Socrates is free either to sit or not to sit. But with regard to the former, a contingent effect may be thought of in itself as already actual, and present to one's sight; thus Socrates was free to choose whether to sit or not to sit, but once he actually is sitting, his act of sitting is certain. That is to say, when a contingent effect actually occurs, it can at that point be a certain object of knowledge. Now God knows all things through their causes, by which He knows them as either contingent or necessary (more on this in the next section). But He also knows them in themselves, "for His cognition, like His esse, is measured by eternity...His gaze extends from eternity to all things as they exist in their presentness."⁹ As such, we might say that God knows a future contingent to be contingent, insofar as He knows its cause; to be future, insofar as He knows its temporal aspect; and to be certain, insofar as it is timelessly present to Him.

From this, it is clear that God, as He exists timelessly, knows things in a fundamentally different way from human beings. Given that Aquinas relies heavily on Boethius' understanding of God's eternity, we might borrow here a helpful passage from Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*:

"Since God abides for ever in an eternal present, His knowledge, also transcending all movement of time, dwells in the simplicity of its own changeless present, and, embracing the whole infinite sweep of the past and of the future, contemplates all that falls within its simple cognition as if it were now taking place. And therefore...thou wilt more rightly deem it not foreknowledge as of something future, but knowledge of a moment that never passes."¹⁰

Just as a man on a watchtower could be said to exist on a different spatial plane from the procession he observes, God exists on a "plane" (that is, eternity) which is separate from the procession of time. All events are present to God's gaze, just as all the people walking below are visible to the man on the watchtower. This fact in no way eliminates the temporal aspect of things: events are truly past, present, or future in themselves and in their relationships to us, just as the people in a procession really are walking in a particular order. Thus we could say that God knows all events, past, present, and future, not as past, present, or future, but rather by knowing their respective temporal aspects. It is simply the case that the transcendence of God's "knowledge of vision" allows all events to be present to His sight at once, in a way that our knowledge does not. Therefore, to repeat Aquinas' answer to the question at hand, insofar as future contingents are present to God, there is no necessity imposed by God's certain knowledge: this is the solution to temporal fatalism.

⁹ ST I 14.13

¹⁰ Ancius Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book V, Prose VI, as translated by Harm Goris in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*.

IV. SOLUTION TO CAUSAL DETERMINISM

The argument in the previous section focused on showing that God does not impose necessity on future contingents by having prior knowledge of them. But even if God's eternal "knowledge of vision" leaves room for contingency, the problem remains that His knowledge, considered as the cause of everything which exists, does still seem to impose necessity. Thus we still encounter the problem Goris calls "causal determinism." For Aquinas' response to this problem, we can look to his discussion of free choice, as the relevant kind of contingency for this discussion (contingency in natural, as opposed to voluntary causes, has a more straightforward explanation having to do with impeding causes and the like).¹¹ On free choice, however, Aquinas writes:

"Free choice is a cause of its own movement in the sense that through free choice a man moves himself to act. However, freedom does not require that what is free should be the first cause of itself – just as, in order for something to be a cause of another, it is not required that it be the first cause of that thing. Therefore, God is the first cause and moves both natural and voluntary causes. And just as, in the case of natural causes, He does not, by moving them, deprive their actions of being voluntary, but instead He brings this very thing about in them. For within each thing He operates in accord with what is proper to that thing."¹²

Like the solution to temporal fatalism, the appeal made here is once again to God's transcendent nature, such that the mode of His causation far surpasses the mode of causation of the things He creates which act as secondary causes. God's causal activity involves giving being of a particular nature to the things He creates, and it is precisely a thing's nature which determines whether that thing's causal acts are the result of necessity, or of its own free will. God does not merely cause an effect, but also shapes the way in which that effect acts as a secondary cause.

In support of this argument, consider the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Goris summarizes Aquinas' relevant teaching on this point: "Only God, who is subsistent being itself, causes being as such, and to him belongs exclusively that causal act that does not presuppose anything, namely, creation out of nothing. Within the existent created order, creatures do have their proper causal role: they cause something to be this, or to be such."¹³ God's primary act of creation is the "complete emanation of the totality of an entity," the effect of which is the existence of a thing where nothing was before. This is utterly unlike the effects of secondary causes, which can merely cause changes in existing things as proper to their own nature.¹⁴ In communicating *esse* to His creatures, God's act of creation not only brings about a thing's existence, but also

11 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, trans. John P. Rowan, Joseph Kenny, ed., VI 3.1210.

12 ST I 83.1 ad 3

13 Harm Goris, "Divine Foreknowledge," p. 114.

14 ST I 45.1, 5

its mode of existence – including its ability to act freely or necessarily as appropriate to its nature.

On this system, the two kinds of causes, primary and secondary, do not exclude each other, but rather operate on different planes. We can truly say that God is the first cause of every effect, in that He gives being to every effect, but His transcendent act of causation allows Him to give being to contingent effects *as* contingent in accordance with the free acts of their secondary causes; this is the solution to the problem of causal determinism. On a related note, it is worth pointing out that on Aquinas' view, God Himself acts freely; Aquinas maintains that "God acts, in the realm of created things, not by necessity of His nature, but by the free choice of His will."¹⁵ Although God's free choice to create this particular world does not solve the problem of causal determinism arising from God's causal activity in the world He created, it does address the related problem that would arise from God's necessarily creating this particular world, or from His necessarily creating at all. Aquinas' conception of God avoids this particular criticism.

V. OBJECTIONS TO AQUINAS

Finally, in this section, I will deal with objections to and alternative explanations of Aquinas' solutions to temporal fatalism and causal determinism. I will focus on the sort of objections which arise from a lack of consideration given to the aspect of God that I have stressed the most: His complete transcendence. One such objection is voiced by William Craig, who claims that, although God's knowledge of vision does not impose logical necessity, His causal knowledge (or *scientia approbationis*) does impose *causal* necessity:

"To say that [an event] is contingent means that it is not causally determined by its *proximate* causes in the temporal series. But this seems entirely irrelevant; for the event, whatever its relation to its proximate causes, is still causally determined to occur by the divine *scientia approbationis*. Worse still, Thomas seems to have forgotten that those secondary causes are themselves also similarly determined, so that even on this level contingency seems to be squeezed out."¹⁶

This objection can be rather straightforwardly refuted in the framework established above. Recall that Aquinas thinks, in the case of secondary causes that are free beings, that God "does not, by moving them, deprive their actions of being voluntary, but instead He brings this very thing about in them."¹⁷ Now, whether Craig should accept this claim from Aquinas is of course a point that could be debated; it might be that Craig finds it simply untenable that there is a first cause which is even *able* to give

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. James F. Anderson, II 23.1.

¹⁶ William Lane Craig, "Aquinas on God's Knowledge of Future Contingents," *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 54, no. 1 (1990), p. 78.

¹⁷ ST 83.1 ad 3

being to something as contingent upon a secondary cause's free choice. Either way, Craig is certainly wrong to claim that Aquinas has *forgotten* about the contingency or necessity of secondary causes. For the sake of discussion, if we grant Aquinas' conception of a transcendent God who creates *ex nihilo*, it seems that we do have good reason to believe that He is perfectly capable of giving being to causes precisely as necessary or free, voluntary or natural. Thus we might claim that, at the very least, Aquinas would think Craig's objection could be answered on the basis of the transcendent nature of divine causation.

Likewise, Aquinas could respond in a similar way to the objection put forth by Prior regarding the argument for God's timeless act of knowledge. It seems to Prior that in the statement "God knows *p*," those wishing to support the timelessness of God must think of the verb "knows" as tenseless; this means that, strictly speaking, at any given *time* God knows nothing. But, Prior claims, "it seems an extraordinary way of affirming God's omniscience if a person, when asked what God knows now, must say "nothing," and when asked what he knew yesterday, must again say "nothing," and must yet again say "nothing," asked what God will know tomorrow."¹⁸ In response, we might say that Prior has hit the nail on the head. Aquinas' solution is necessarily "extraordinary" – it seeks to describe the extraordinary nature of God. Of course God doesn't know anything *now*. *Now* is an accident belonging to things in the created world, not to the Creator. Immutable, timeless knowledge belongs to God, who exists and knows in a way fundamentally different from ours. In a sense, Prior gets it exactly right; he just doesn't quite recognize the truth of his own argument in support of the transcendence of divine knowledge.

Finally, I would like to address two alternative solutions to this problem which are particularly interesting, namely the Bañezian and Molinist theories. These two rival camps emerged to debate the *De Auxiliis* controversy at the end of the 16th century, with both sides operating under the assumption that Aquinas had not fully explained his view, and thus working provide the necessary support for the true Thomistic doctrine.¹⁹ On one side, Bañez and the Dominicans held that "God had predetermined the eternal decrees of his will to concur in an irresistibly efficacious way with the activities of creatures in time, even when they act freely."²⁰ That is, all it takes for a choice – to be free is for God to determine it to be a free choice; it is perfectly acceptable to think of a free choice as being predetermined but not necessary. Following this view, God foreknows future contingents precisely because He knows how He would predetermine any given situation.²¹ But to the Molinist (or Jesuit) camp this conception seems to be a denial of genuine human freedom. They insist on the doctrine of divine concurrence, whereby God acts *with* or *through* secondary

18 A. N. Prior, "The Formalities of Omniscience," in *Philosophy* vol. 37 no. 140 (1962), p. 116.

19 Harm Goris, "Divine Foreknowledge," p. 99.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 99

21 Alfred Freddoso, "Introduction to the Problem of Free Will and Divine Causality," last edited 19 April 2013, p. 6.

agents rather than *on* them, in order that He not predetermine free choice acts. Then, in order to preserve God's foreknowledge of future contingents, the Molinists introduce a third kind of divine knowledge: middle knowledge. As knowledge of exactly which choice will be made in any given circumstance, whether or not that circumstance actually obtains, middle knowledge could be called "prevolitional;" God has this knowledge before He wills to actualize a particular reality. In this way, although God does not predetermine any free choice act, He considers His middle knowledge and factors that into His providential plan.²²

There remains considerable debate over these two rival interpretations of the correct relationship between God's knowledge, His causality, and the freedom of His creatures. Without attempting to decide the question of which explanation is correct, here I will simply put forward two opposing arguments which appeal equally to the importance of God's transcendence, as we have been discussing throughout the paper. On one side, Alfred Freddoso argues in support of Bañez, claiming "I have little doubt that [Aquinas] would side with the man whom I think of as his most illuminating commentator, viz., Domingo Bañez,"²³ even if Freddoso admits elsewhere that "[his] own sympathies lie with Molina."²⁴ Freddoso's appeal, on behalf of Bañez and Aquinas, is to the transcendence of God's causality:

"God's transcendence makes it perfectly appropriate to hold that His concurrence is not one of the circumstances of the free actions of creatures. As St. Thomas makes clear, God stands *wholly outside* the order of created causes... Thus God can *causally predetermine* that a good effect should be. So God's transcendent causation means there is no worry that the predetermination of a free choice act somehow causes it not to be free."²⁵

On the other hand, Goris uses God's transcendent mode of being to argue against both the Bañezian and Molinist interpretations. Goris is concerned primarily with their imposition of an order of priority onto God's knowledge, whereby God's simple knowledge is "logically prior" to God's causal knowledge, which is again prior to God's knowledge of vision. Although their approaches are different, Goris claims that both explanations are equally inappropriate, because they forget the fundamental teaching of divine simplicity, which precludes any real order in God Himself. Therefore, "it may be the case with *human* knowledge and *human* will that it is necessary that something is known if it is to be an object of the will, but this does not apply to *divine* knowledge and will... What lies, finally, at the root of both Bañez's and Molina's view is one and the same original sin. In both views creatures and Creator are put ontologically on par."²⁶ Thus it is clear that both Freddoso and Goris

²² Ibid, p. 5.

²³ Ibid, p. 3.

²⁴ Alfred J. Freddoso, *Introduction to On Divine Foreknowledge* (Part IV of the Concordia), trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 41.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 41-42.

²⁶ Harm Goris, *Free Creatures*, pp. 80-82.

recognize the need to properly emphasize God's transcendence, although it is not so obvious what conclusion ultimately follows.

VI. CONCLUSION

With respect to the question of the relationship between divine knowledge, divine causation, and creaturely contingency, Goris nicely sums up the heart of Aquinas' position:

“God's incomprehensible, eternal mode of being allows us to say that events which are future and contingent, and hence indeterminate in themselves and in relation to us, are present and determinate in relation to God. Likewise, God's incomprehensible act of giving being as such, including its modal qualifications, allows us to say that the Creator sustains the causal action of creatures and gives being to their effects in accordance with the necessity or contingency of the secondary causes. “Presence” and “causation” are said analogously of the Eternal One and of the Creator, and signify modes of presence and causation that elude our grasp.”²⁷

There are two genuine problems arising from the combination of the principles above: the imposition of necessity by prior certain knowledge, and the imposition of necessity by a perfectly efficacious will acting as a cause. Nevertheless, given divine simplicity, God's “knowledge of vision” and His causal knowledge are part of one and the same eternal act. Accordingly, we are not surprised to find that Aquinas' solution to both problems ultimately lies in the transcendence of God, reflected in His way of knowing and His way of causing that are of an entirely different kind from that of His creatures. God's timeless act of knowing, as His certain knowledge of all events which are eternally present to His gaze, preserves the contingency in future events. Similarly, God's causal activity, rather than precluding contingency in His creation, actually *enables* contingency, as God alone gives being to contingent effects precisely as such. In conclusion, therefore, through his appeal to the transcendence of the nature of God, Aquinas defends the compatibility of divine knowledge, divine causation, and creaturely contingency. ♦

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aquinas, Thomas. “Summa Contra Gentiles.” *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, Translated by James F. Anderson, New York: Hanover House, 1955. <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/english/ContraGentiles2.htm>

²⁷ Harm Goris, “Divine Foreknowledge,” p. 115.

——— “Summa Theologiae.” Translated by Alfred J. Freddoso, University of Notre Dame. 2016 <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm>

Boethius, Ancius. *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Translated by Harm Goris. {See Goris, Harm. “Divine Foreknowledge, Providence, Predestination, and Human Freedom,” 2010.}

Craig, William Lane. *Aquinas on God’s Knowledge of Future Contingents*. Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review 54.1 (1990): pp. 33-79.

Freddoso, Alfred J. “On Divine Foreknowledge (Part IV of the Concordia)” Translated by Alfred J. Freddoso. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

——— “Introduction to the Problem of Free Will and Divine Causality.” Last edited June 19, 2013. <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/papers/freedom%20and%20God.pdf>.

Goris, Harm. “Divine Foreknowledge, Providence, Predestination, and Human Freedom.” In *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, edited by Rik Van Nieuwenhove et al, pp. 99-122. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010.

——— *Free Creatures of An Eternal God*. Nijmegen: Thomas Instituut te Utrecht, 1997.

Prior, A.N. “The Formalities of Omniscience.” *Philosophy* 37.140 (1962): pp. 114-129.