

Question 69

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ON THE OPINION OF THOSE WHO TAKE AWAY PROPER ACTIONS FROM NATURAL THINGS

[1] From this conclusion some men have taken the opportunity to fall into error, thinking that no creature has an active role in the production of natural effects. So, for instance, fire does not give heat, but God causes heat in the presence of fire, and they said like things about all other natural effects.

[2] Now, they tried to support this error by arguments pointing out that no form, substantial or accidental, can be brought into being except by way of creation. Indeed, forms and accidents cannot come into being from matter, since they do not have matter as one of their parts. Hence, if they are made, they must be made from nothing, and this is to be created. And because creation is an act of God alone, as we showed in Book Two [21], it would seem to follow that God alone produces both substantial and accidental forms in nature.

[3] Of course, the opinion of some philosophers is partly in agreement with this position. In fact, since everything that does not exist through itself is found to be derived from that which does exist through itself, it appears that the forms of things, which are not existing through themselves but in matter, come from forms which are existent through themselves without matter. It is as if forms existing in matter were certain participations in those forms which exist without matter. And because of this, Plato claimed that the species of sensible things are certain forms separate from matter, which are the causes of being for these sensible things, according as these things participate in them.

[4] On the other hand, Avicenna maintained that all substantial forms flow forth from the agent Intelligence. But he claimed that accidental forms are dispositions of matter which have arisen from the action of lower agents disposing matter. In this way he avoided the foolish aspects of the preceding erroneous view.

[5] Now, an indication of this seemed to lie in the fact that no active power is found to exist in these bodies, except accidental form; for instance, the active and passive qualities, which do not appear to be adequate in their power to cause substantial forms.

[6] Moreover, certain things are found, among things here below, which are not generated as like from like; for instance, animals generated as a result of putrefaction. Hence, it seems that the forms of these beings come from higher principles; by the same reasoning, so do other forms, some of which are much more noble.

[7] In fact, some people derive an argument for this from the weakness of natural bodies in regard to acting. For every bodily form is combined with quantity, but quantity hinders action and motion. As an indication of this, they assert that the more that is added to the quantity of a body, the heavier it becomes and the more its motion is slowed down. So, from this they conclude that no body is active but only passive.

[8] They also try to show this by the fact that every patient is a subject for an agent, and every agent, apart from the first which creates, needs a subject lower than itself. But no substance is lower than corporeal substance. Hence, it appears that no body is active.

[9] They also add, in regard to this point, that corporeal substance is at the greatest distance from the first agent; hence, it does not seem to them that active power could reach the whole way to corporeal substance. Instead, just as God is an agent only, so is corporeal substance passive only, for it is the lowest in the genus of things.

[10] So, because of these arguments, Avicenna maintained in the book, *The Source of Life*, that no body is active, but that the power of spiritual substance, passing through bodies, does the actions which seem to be done by bodies.

[11] Moreover, certain exponents of the Law of the Moors are reported to adduce in support of this argument the point that even accidents do not come from the action of bodies, because an accident does not pass from subject to subject. Hence, they regard it as impossible for heat to pass over from a hot body into another body heated by it. They say, rather, that all accidents like this are created by God.

[12] Now, many inappropriate conclusions follow from the foregoing theories. For, if no lower cause, and especially no bodily one, performs any operation, but, instead, God operates alone in all things, and if God is not changed by the fact that He operates in different things, then different effects would not follow from the diversity of things in which God operates. Now, this appears false to the senses, for cooling does not result from putting something near a hot object, but only heating; nor does the generation of anything except a man result from the semen of man. Therefore, the causality of the lower type of effects is not to be attributed to divine power in such a way as to take away the causality of lower agents.

[13] Again, it is contrary to the rational character of wisdom for there to be anything useless in the activities of the possessor of wisdom. But, if created things could in no way operate to produce their effects, and if God alone worked all operations immediately, these other things would be employed in a useless way by Him, for the production of these effects. Therefore, the preceding position is incompatible with divine wisdom.

[14] Besides, the giver of some principal part to a thing gives the thing all the items that result from that part. For instance, the cause that gives weight to an elemental body also gives it downward motion. But the ability to make an actual thing results from being actually existent, as is evident in the case of God, for He is pure act and is also the first cause of being for all things, as we showed above. Therefore, if He has communicated His likeness, as far as actual being is concerned, to other things, by virtue of the fact that He has brought things into being, it follows that He has communicated to them His likeness, as far as acting is concerned, so that created things may also have their own actions.

[15] Furthermore, the perfection of the effect demonstrates the perfection of the cause, for a greater power brings about a more perfect effect. But God is the most perfect agent. Therefore, things created by Him obtain perfection from Him. So, to detract from the perfection of creatures is to detract from the perfection of divine power. But, if no creature has any active role in the production of any effect, much is detracted from the perfection of the creature. Indeed, it is part of the fullness of perfection to be able to

communicate to another being the perfection which one possesses. Therefore, this position detracts from the divine power.

[16] Moreover, as it is the function of the good to make what is good, so it is the prerogative of the highest good to make what is best. But God is the highest good, as we showed in Book One. So, it is His function to make all things best. Now, it is better for a good that is conferred on a thing to be common to many than for it to be exclusive, for “the common good is always found to be more divine than the good of one alone.” But the good of one being becomes common to many if it can pass from one to the other; this cannot occur unless it can diffuse this good to others through its own action. On the other hand, if it lacks the power to transfer this good to others, it continues to keep it exclusively. Therefore, God so communicates His goodness to created beings that one thing which receives it can transfer it to another. Therefore, to take away their proper actions from things is to disparage the divine goodness.

[17] Again, to take away order from created things is to deprive them of their best possession, for individual things are good in themselves, but all things together are best because of the order of the whole. Indeed, the whole is always better than its parts, and is their end. Now, if actions be taken away from things, the mutual order among things is removed, for, in regard to things that are different in their natures, there can be no gathering together into a unity of order unless by the fact that some of them act and others undergo action. Therefore, it is inappropriate to say that things do not have their own actions.

[18] Besides, if effects are not produced by the action of created things, but only by the action of God, it is impossible for the power of any created cause to be manifested through its effects. Of course, an effect does not show the power of a cause unless by virtue of the action which proceeding from the power terminates in the effect. Now, the nature of a cause is not known through the effect unless its power is known through this effect, for the power results from the nature. So, if created things have no actions productive of effects, it follows that no nature of anything would ever be known through the effect. And thus, all the knowledge of natural science is taken away from us, for the demonstrations in it are chiefly derived from the effect.

[19] Furthermore, it is inductively evident in all cases that like produces like. But what is generated in lower things is not merely the form, but the thing composed of matter and form, since every process of generation is from something, namely from matter, and to something, namely form. Therefore, the generating agent cannot be merely a form, but is, rather, the composite of matter and form. Therefore, it is not the separate species of things, as the Platonists claimed, nor the agent Intelligence, as Avicenna held, that is, the cause of the forms which exist in matter; rather, it is the individual composed of matter and form.

[20] Moreover, if to act is the result of a being which is in act, it is inappropriate for a more perfect act to be deprived of action. But the substantial form is a more perfect act than accidental form. So, if accidental forms in corporeal things have their proper actions, by all the greater reason the substantial form has its proper action. But to dispose matter is not a proper action for it, since this is done by alteration, for which accidental forms are sufficient. Therefore, the substantial form of the generating agent is the source of the action, as a substantial form is put into the product of generation.

[21] Now, it is easy to break down the arguments which they bring forward. In fact, since a thing is made so that it will exist, and since

a form is not called a being in the sense that it possesses being but because the composite exists by means of it, so also the form is not made, in the proper sense, but it begins to be by the fact that the composite is reduced from potency to act, which is the form.

[22] Nor, indeed, is it necessary that everything which has a form by participation should receive it immediately from that which is form essentially; rather, it may receive it immediately from another being that has a similar form, participated in the same way, and, of course, this being may act by the power of the separate form, if there be any such. So, it is in this way that an agent produces an effect like itself.

[23] Likewise, it is not necessary, because every action of lower bodies is done by active and passive qualities which are accidents, that only an accident be produced by their actions. For, just as they are caused by the substantial form which, together with matter, is the cause of all the proper accidents, these accidental forms also act by the power of the substantial form. Now, that which acts by the power of another produces an effect similar not only to itself but more especially to that by whose power it acts. For instance, from the action of an instrument there is produced in the artifact a likeness of the form in the mind of the artist. Consequently, it follows that substantial forms are produced from the action of accidental forms, as they act instrumentally through the power of the substantial forms.

[24] In the case of animals generated from putrefaction, the substantial form is caused by a corporeal agent, namely, the celestial body which is the first agent of alteration; and so all things that produce a change of form in these lower bodies do so by its power. And for this reason the celestial power is enough, without a univocal agent, to produce some imperfect forms. But to produce perfect forms, like the souls of perfect animals, there is also required a univocal agent together with the celestial agent. In fact, such animals are not generated except from semen. And that is why Aristotle says that “man and the sun generate man” [*Physics* II, 2: 194b 14].

[25] Moreover, it is not true that quantity impedes the action of a form, except accidentally; that is to say, in so far as all continuous quantity is in matter, and form existing in matter, having lesser actuality, is consequently less powerful in acting. Hence, a body that has less matter and more form, for instance, fire, is more active. But, if we consider a kind of action which a form existing in matter may have, then quantity helps to increase rather than to diminish the action. For instance, the larger a hot body is, granting equal intensity of heat, the more is it able to give off heat; and granting equal degree of weight, the bigger a heavy body is, the more rapidly will it be moved by natural motion; that is why it is moved more slowly by unnatural motion. Therefore, the fact that heavy bodies have slower unnatural motion when they have larger quantity does not show that quantity impedes action, but that it helps to increase it.

[26] Nor, indeed, is it necessary for every body to lack action because bodily substance is generically the lowest in the order of things. For, even among bodies, one is higher than another, and more formal, and more active: as fire is in regard to lower bodies. Nor, in fact, is even the lowest body prevented from acting. For it is clear that a body cannot act in its entirety, since it is composed of matter which is potential being, and of form which is act. Indeed, each thing acts according as it is in act. And because of this, every body acts in accord with its form; and related to it is another body, namely, the patient, which is a subject by virtue of its matter, because its matter is in potency to the form of the agent. But, conversely, if the matter of the agent's body be in potency to the

form of the patient's body, they will be mutually related as agent to patient. This happens, for instance, between two elemental bodies. But, on the other hand, one may be only an agent and the other only a patient in relation to the first, as is the relation between a celestial body and an elemental body. And so, a body that is an agent acts on a subject, not by virtue of its entire body, but of the form through which it acts.

[27] Nor is it even true that bodies are at the greatest distance from God. For, since God is pure act, things are more or less distant from Him on this basis: that they are more or less in act or in potency. So, among beings that is most distant from God which is merely potential; namely, prime matter. Hence, its function is solely to undergo, and not to perform, action. But bodies, as composed of matter and form, approach the divine likeness because they possess form, which Aristotle calls a divine thing [*Physics* I, 9: 192a 16]. And because of this, they act in so far as they possess form, but they undergo action in so far as they possess matter.

[28] Again, it is laughable to say that a body does not act because an accident does not pass from subject to subject. For a hot body is not said to give off heat in this sense, that numerically the same heat which is in the heating body passes over into the heated body. Rather, by the power of the heat which is in the heating body, a numerically different heat is made actual in the heated body, a heat which was previously in it in potency. For a natural agent does not hand over its own form to another subject, but it reduces the passive subject from potency to act.

[29] Therefore, we do not take away their proper actions from created things, though we attribute all the effects of created things to God, as an agent working in all things.

Chapter 77

<http://www.op-stjoseph.org/Students/study/thomas/ContraGentiles3a.htm#77>

THAT THE EXECUTION OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE IS ACCOMPLISHED BY MEANS OF SECONDARY CAUSES

[1] We should attend to the fact that two things are required for providence: the ordering and the execution of the order. The first of these is accomplished by the cognitive power; as a consequence, those who have more perfect knowledge are called orderers of the others. "For it is the function of the wise man to order." But the second is done by the operative power. Now, the situations in these two functions are contrary to each other. For, the more perfect an ordering is, the more does it descend to small details; but the execution of small details is appropriate to a lower power, proportionate to such an effect. Now, in God the highest perfection in regard to both functions is found; in fact, there is in Him the most perfect wisdom for ordering and the most perfect power for operating. So, He Himself through His wisdom must arrange the orders for all things, even the least; on the other hand, He may execute the small details by means of other lower powers, through which He Himself works, as does a universal and higher power through a lower and particular power. It is appropriate, then, that there be inferior agents as executors of divine providence.

[2] Again, we showed above that divine operation does not exclude the operations of secondary causes. But the resultants of the operations of secondary causes are within the scope of divine providence, since God orders all singulars by Himself, as we

showed. Therefore, secondary causes are the executors of divine providence.

[3] Besides, the stronger the power of an agent is, the farther does its operation extend to more remote effects. For instance, the bigger a fire is, the farther away are the things it heats. But this does not occur in the case of an agent that acts without a medium, for whatever it acts on is adjacent to it. Therefore, since the power of divine providence is the greatest, it must extend its operation to its most distant effects through some intermediaries.

[4] Moreover, it belongs to the dignity of a ruler to have many ministers and a variety of executors of his rule, for, the more subjects he has, on different levels, the higher and greater is his dominion shown to be. But no ruler's dignity is comparable to the dignity of the divine rule. So, it is appropriate that the execution of divine providence be carried out by diverse levels of agents.

[5] Furthermore, the propriety of its order manifests the perfection of providence, since order is the proper effect of providence. Now, it is pertinent to the propriety of order that nothing be left in disorder. So, the perfection of divine providence requires that the excess of certain things over others be reduced to a suitable order. Now, this is done when one makes available some good for those that have less, from the abundance of those that have more. So, since the perfection of the universe requires that certain things participate in divine goodness more abundantly than others, as we showed above, the perfection of divine providence demands that the execution of the divine rule be accomplished by those that participate more fully in divine goodness.

[6] Besides, the order of causes is more noble than the order of effects, just as a cause is better than an effect. So, the perfection of providence is better manifested by the first order. But, if there were no intermediary causes carrying out divine providence, there would not be an order of causes in reality but only an order of effects. Therefore, the perfection of divine providence demands that there be intermediary causes as executors of it.

[7] Hence it is said in the Psalm (102:21): "Bless the Lord, all His hosts; you ministers of His who do His will"; and elsewhere: "Fire, hail, snow, stormy winds, which fulfill His word" (Ps. 148:8).

See also the following articles from Part I of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*:

Question 19. The will of God. Article 8: "The divine will imposes necessity on some things willed but not on all."

<http://newadvent.org/summa/1019.htm>

Question 22. The providence of God. Article 3: "God's immediate provision over everything does not exclude the action of secondary causes."

<http://newadvent.org/summa/1022.htm>

Question 23. Predestination. Article 5: "Now there is no distinction between what flows from free will, and what is of predestination; as there is not distinction between what flows from a secondary cause and from a first cause."

<http://newadvent.org/summa/1023.htm>

Question 44. The procession of creatures from God, and of the first cause of all things.

<http://newadvent.org/summa/1044.htm>