New Blackfriars (2024), 1–11
doi:10.1017/nbf.2024.54

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Primary Causality, Providence, and Scripture

Gaven Kerr

Faculty of Philosophy, St Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth, Ireland
Email: Gaven.kerr@spcm.ie

(Received 1 July 2024; accepted 5 September 2024)

Abstract

This paper brings together several issues in Aquinas's thought on God's primary causality, providence, and the reading of scripture. Herein I argue that God's primary causality is to be understood in terms of His being the source of all actuality. From there I go on to integrate Aquinas's account of providence with the account of God's primacy. With God's primary causality and providence in place, I then go on to address the theme pertinent to this special edition, and that is God's response to sin in Aquinas's reading of scripture.

Keywords: Aquinas; God; primary causality; providence; scripture

It has been noted that whilst classical theism is committed to a shared way of conceiving God, e.g., simple, eternal, immutable, good, etc., the approach that individual classical theists adopt when considering God differs for each.[1] Accordingly, whilst classical theists may affirm, simplicity, eternity, goodness, etc., they do so for different and sometimes conflicting reasons. Within the thought of Aquinas, God is considered from the viewpoint of His being the absolute primary cause of all things.[2] In this paper, I wish to move on from the focus of God as primary cause and consider how the absolute primacy of God impacts upon Aquinas's views on providence, scriptural interpretation, and, with reference to the theme of this volume, God's response to the problem of sin, suffering, and evil.

1. God's primacy and providence

In numerous places, St Thomas offers argumentation for the existence of God. A common approach adopted throughout is to isolate some feature of causal actuality without which there would be nothing, locate that causality in a particular type of

[1]See for instance Edward Feser, 'The Neo-Classical Challenge to Classical Theism', *Philosophy Compass*, 17 (2022), e12863, see also my paper, 'From God's Existence to God's Nature' in *Collected Articles on the Existence of God* (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid: Editiones Scholasticae, 2023), pp. 263–73.

[2]This is clear in his procedure in the *Summa Theologiae* (Turin: Marietti, 1926), Ia, qq. 2–11 where Thomas first establishes God as the absolute primary cause of all things (qu. 2) and thence establishes the divine attributes on the basis of God's being the absolute primary cause (qq. 3–11).

causal series which terminates in a primary cause, and infer that such a primary cause is *per se* actual with respect to the causality in question.[3] The most important feature of this reasoning is the causal series within which the causal actuality is located; it is through understanding the metaphysics of this causal series that one understands God's primary causality.

It is well known that Aquinas distinguished between *per se* and *per accidens* ordered series, and there have been significant advances made in the literature in understanding the nature of these series.[4] Aquinas argues that whilst *per accidens* ordered series do not require some first cause in order to be the series that they are, *per se* ordered series by contrast cannot be without a primary cause. Let us focus on the metaphysics of these series.

A *per accidens* ordered series is a causal series in which the members of the series possess the causality of the series in virtue of what they are. The common example is a series of fathers producing sons. Peter is the father of James and James is the father of John. Each member of the series has the causality of paternity in himself in virtue of being a biologically functioning male. Whilst James may be dependent on Peter for his generation, he is not dependent on Peter for his own ability to generate. As soon as James is generated, he can grow to maturity and possess his own causal powers of generation independently of Peter; indeed, Peter need not even exist, yet James can go on to father John. Hence, earlier members of this series can drop out and the series can remain precisely because the members possess the causality of the series in themselves and so as long as any one member remains the series remains. Such series need not have a first.

By contrast, the members of *per se* ordered series do not possess the causality of the series in virtue of what they are; rather they derive such causality from a cause which does possess that causality essentially. For instance, the mental agent moves his hand to move the stick to move the stone. The hand, stick, and stone do not have motion in terms of being a hand, stick, or stone; they can be what they are without being in motion. Accordingly, were there not a cause for their causality, they would remain what they are but simply inefficacious with respect to motion. So unless there is a cause for their causality, they would be immobile. The cause of their causality possesses the causal actuality of motion in virtue of what it is, that is, it possesses

[3]I defend this reading of Aquinas's proofs of God in the paper, 'Aquinas's Metaphysical Way to God' in *Summa metaphysicae ad mentem Sancti Thomae: Essays in Honor of John F. Wippel*, ed. by Therese Scarpelli Cory and Gregory Doolan (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2024).

[4]See my articles, 'Essentially Ordered Series Reconsidered' and 'Essentially Ordered Series Reconsidered Once Again', in *Collected Articles on the Existence of God*. See also Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), pp. 148–54, and *Five Proofs for the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), pp. 20–26; Caleb Cohoe, 'There Must Be a First', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 21 (2013), 838–56. One objection to the metaphysics of *per se* ordered series that has emerged in recent literature is that of existential inertia. There have been several responses to this objection, most of which note that the metaphysics that would motivate the existential inertia objection is quite at odds with Thomistic metaphysics. Hence, a defender of existential inertia would need to justify that metaphysics before pressing the existential inertia objection. See Feser, 'Existential Inertia and the Five Ways', *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 85 (2011), 237–67; Kerr, 'Existential Inertia and the Thomistic Way to God' in *Collected Articles on the Existence of God*; Jack Bockzar, 'Existential Inertia and Thomistic *Esse*', *New Blackfriars* (2024), 1–12.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2024.54 Published online by Cambridge University Press

such causal actuality *per se*; otherwise it could not originate that causality, but would simply be another member of the series with its causality derived from another. The mental agent in this case is perfectly able to originate motion in the hand, stick, stone without depending on another for its motion.[5]

Now notice something about the *per se* ordered series, it cannot be a causal series unless there is a primary cause that causes the causality of the series. Were it not for the mental agent, the hand, stick, and stone would not constitute a causal series; there would simply be a hand, stick, and stone without any causal interaction. However, once the mental agent originates motion in the series, the hand, stick, and stone are now co-ordinated within a causal series originated by the agent. Remove the primary cause and you remove the causal efficacy of the series, in which case there is no causal series in question.

The primary cause is primary precisely because it originates the causality of the series of which it is the primary. All effects within the series participate in the causal efficacy of the primary cause, in which case they are secondary with respect to the primary cause. Although they are secondary, the secondary causes have their own causal efficacy; and this is an important point. The hand, stick, and stone are genuine causes; yet they cannot act as causes unless for the primary. The primary grants causal efficacy to the hand, stick, and stone, yet the hand, stick, and stone exercise their own causality which is derived from and a specification of the causality provided by the primary cause. Whilst the primary cause is primary, it is not the only cause. The hand, stick, and stone are used by the primary cause as hand, stick, and stone in order for the primary to exercise its causality.[6]

This account of *per se* ordered series can be enlarged to incorporate final causality. Thus far we have been considering some kind of efficient causality: the mental agent moving his hand to move the stick to move the stone. But the mental agent would have no causal efficacy unless he entertained some goal for which he was moving his hand to move the stick to move the stone. The very causality of the primary efficient cause here would not be were it not for the causal efficacy of the end or goal (the final cause) motivating the primary efficient cause to undertake his causal activity.[7]

[5]For Aquinas's discussion of these causal series, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 46, art. 2, ad. 7, *De Veritate* (Turin: Marietti, 1927), qu. 2, art. 10.

[6]See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 104, art. 2: 'Cum enim sunt multae causae ordinatae, necesse est quod effectus dependeat primo quidem et principaliter a causa prima; secundario vero ab omnibus causis mediis'; *In Librum De Causis Expositio* (Turin: Marietti, 1955), Lect. 1, n. 23: '…[O]peratio, qua secunda causa causat effectum, causatur a causa prima; nam causa prima adiuvat causam secundam faciens eam operari …', and n. 28: 'Causa secunda non agit in causatum suum nisi virtute causae primae. Ergo et causatum non procedit a causa secunda nisi per virtutem causae primae'. For the same see, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 21, art. 4, qu. 65, art. 3, and *De Potentia Dei* (Turin: Marietti, 1927), qu. 3, art. 4; see also James Alberston, 'Instrumental causality in St Thomas', *The New Scholasticism*, 28 (1954), 409–43; Armand Maurer, 'Darwin, Thomists, and Secondary Causality', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 57 (2004), 491–514, Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), Chapter 4, James Dominic Rooney, 'The Metaphysics of Creation: Secondary Causality, Modern Science', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. by, Eleonore Stump and Thomas Joseph White (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 107–26.

[7]Aquinas, *In Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio* (Turin: Marietti, 1950), Lib. V, lect. 2, n. 775: '…Efficiens et finis sibi correspondent invicem, quia efficiens est principum motus, finis autem terminus'.

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Given the foregoing, we can argue that the primary efficient cause is itself located within a *per se* ordered series. Recall that a *per se* ordered series is one in which the members do not possess the causal efficacy of that series in virtue of what they are; and we have just noted that the primary efficient cause does not have *its* causal efficiency unless for the final cause. Hence the efficient cause itself is located in a *per se* ordered series the causal actuality of which is the finality of the members acting because of the final cause. And just like *per se* ordered series of the efficient variety, were there no primary final cause which originates the (final) causality of the series, there would be no (final) causality and hence no primary efficient causality and hence no causality in the series.[8]

So for instance, we can consider Dr Smith who goes to the golf course and moves his hands to swing the club to hit the ball. With respect to efficient causality, Dr Smith is the primary efficient cause. He is the mental agent who originates the motion of his hands, club, and ball. But if we look towards final causality, Dr Smith is not the primary cause. Dr Smith goes to the golf course for a reason; he is doing something and the something that he is doing, what he is striving after, is the final cause of his doing it. He may be on the golf course to improve his game which will impress his dean which will gain him a promotion which will allow him to buy a property and raise children for the glory of God. All these things are motivating factors (to a greater or lesser degree) which bring Dr Smith to the golf course to swing. Unless there is a primary final cause which is not 'in order for' anything further but for which all things are in order, there would be no finality and hence no primary efficient causality and hence no causality.[9]

Notice that in the Dr Smith case, every 'in order to', every 'that for the sake of which' he is on the course is for something good and choiceworthy. It is good to improve one's game (or whatever hobby one is engaged in), it is good to impress the dean, it is good to buy a property, etc. In other words, all finality is for the sake of something good, in which case the primary final cause will be *per se* good. Hence, the primary final cause is the good itself, and it is that 'for the sake of which' all primary efficient causality is exercised.[10]

When it comes to the proof of God's existence and in turn His primary causality, things start falling into place once we have understood the metaphysics of *per se*

[8]Aquinas, *In V Met*., lect. 2, n. 775: 'Efficiens est causa finis quantum ad esse quidem, quia movendo perducit efficiens ad hoc, quod sit finis. Finis autem est causa efficientis non quantum ad esse, sed quantum ad rationem causalitatis. Nam efficiens est causa inquantum agit: non agit nisi causa finis. Unde ex fine habet suam causalitatem efficiens'; *De Principiis Naturae* (Rome: Leonine, 1976), Cap. 4, p. 43:16–19: 'Efficiens enim dicitur causa respectu finis, cum finis non sit in actu nisi per operationem agentis: sed finis dicitur causa efficientis, cum non operetur nisi per intentionem finis'.

[9]Note Thomas's insistence that the final cause is the cause of causes, so without it there would be no causality, *De Principiis Naturae*, Cap. 4, p. 44:29–36: 'Unde finis est causa causalitatis efficientis, quia facit efficiens esse efficiens: similiter facit materiam esse materiam, et formam esse formam, cum materia non suscipiat formam nisi per finem, et forma non perficiat materiam nisi per finem. Unde dicitur quod finis est causa causarum, quia est causa causalitatis in omnibus causis'.

[10]*In I Sent*., dist. 38, qu.1, art. 1, ad. 4: '…Voluntas habet completam rationem causae, inquantum objectum ejus est finis secundum rationem boni, qui est causa causarum…'; *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 5, art. 2, ad. 1: 'Bonum autem, cum habeat rationem appetibilis, importat habitudinem causae finalis, cuius causalitas prima est, quia agens non agit nisi propter finem, et ab agente materia movetur ad formam, unde dicitur quod finis est causa causarum'.

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ordered series. As noted, in his proofs of God Aquinas isolates some kind of causal actuality without which there would be nothing, locates that actuality in a *per se* ordered series, and infers that there is a primary cause which has that actuality (without which there would be nothing) *per se*. The most straightforward example of this demonstration is the proof from *De Ente et Essentia*, Cap. 4, wherein Thomas focuses on the *esse* that things have distinct from their essences, and argues that there is a primary cause of *esse* that has *esse per se*. In other words, this primary cause of *esse* is *esse* itself.[11] Like the hand, stick, and stone, anything which has derived actuality participates in the actuality of the primary cause, i.e., God; and so, anything that is not pure actuality (anything that is not God), participates in the actuality granted to it by God.

Nevertheless, as noted with the hand, stick, and stone, all things that participate in God's actuality are real things with their own actuality. A tree has its own actuality, its own *esse*, as distinct from that of a dog, or a human, or a rock. All created things are real created things with their own actuality, not identical to that of any other created thing and not identical to God's actuality. Hence, whilst created things are secondary and participate in God's primary causality, they nevertheless specify that actuality given the kinds of things that they are, and so in turn can exercise their own causality given that they are such things.[12]

Furthermore, insofar as God is *per se* actual, He is *per se* good. We have already noted that the good has the nature of an end and is always involved in the finality that motivates any efficient causality. This is because the good is that which all desire, i.e. that towards which all causality is directed, and is perfective of desire. The good then is what fulfils that which the thing in question lacks; for it is the cause of causes. As such the good is a source of actuality. And if God is *per se* actual, then God is the source of all actuality, in which case He is the source of all goodness. So God is the good itself.[13]

[11] Aquinas of course has other proofs where he considers other kinds of causal actuality; I have argued that in all of these proofs Aquinas makes a move from metaphysical act to a primary cause that is pure actuality. See my article, 'Aquinas's Metaphysical Way to God'. For discussion and defence of many of these proofs, see my *Collected Articles on the Existence of God*, and for a discussion and defence of the way from *De Ente et Essentia*, see my *Aquinas's Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[12] A fuller treatment of this issue would incorporate the important principle in Thomas's metaphysical thought that act is limited by the potency that receives it. Accordingly, the actuality of *esse* is limited by the distinct potency (the essence) that receives it. So given the different individuals that exist, their *esse* is delimited to them, and so their causal actuality is a real individual albeit secondary causal actuality. See for instance Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Turin: Marietti, 1961), Lib. 2, Cap. 52: 'Esse autem, in quantum est esse, non potest esse diversum: potest autem diversificari per aliquid quod est praeter esse; sicut esse lapidis est aliud ab esse hominis'; *De Potentia Dei*, qu. 1, art. 2: 'Esse enim hominis terminatum est ad hominis speciem, quia est receptum in natura speciei humanae; et simile est de esse equi, vel cuiuslibet creaturae'. For discussion see William Norris Clarke, 'The Limitation of Act by Potency in St. Thomas: Aristotelianism or Neoplatonism?' in *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being-God-Person* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 65–88, John Wippel, 'Thomas Aquinas and the Axiom that Unreceived Act is Unlimited', in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), pp. 123–51.

[13] For an illustration of this form of reasoning, see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qq. 5–6. This reasoning occurs within the wider context of the convertibility of being and goodness, the doctrine of the transcendentals. For details, see Jan Aersten, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals: The Case of Thomas Aquinas*

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It follows from all of this that not only is God the primary source of actuality from which all things come, He is also the primary final cause, the good, to which all things seek to return.[14] God's primary causality then is not bifurcated into His primary efficiency and His primary finality. He is primary in respect of actuality, and so any actuality which creatures have, whether of efficient or final causality, is derived from Him in what can only be called His creative causality.[15]

God is both the primary cause and the final end after which everything strives. He exercises His causality in terms of actuality, so that any causal actuality involved in creation, whether efficient or final, is derived from God's creative causality through which He conveys actuality to creation. As both primary and final cause, God exercises His creative causality with respect to the good that He is. Accordingly, He does not act as creative cause except by considering the good of creatures. But insofar as no creature has actuality *per se*, but in a derived and participated thus secondary sense, no creature pre-existed creation in order to be its own good or merit the good from God. Yet God wills the good for creatures. Creation then is a non-necessary means for God to will the good that He essentially is and in doing so convey that good to creatures. Accordingly, God loves Himself as good and so in order to convey that goodness (His love) to others, He brings others into existence that they may enjoy the good. God's will for all creatures is that they may enjoy His goodness.[16]

We are thus led to a consideration of divine providence.

Providence is the ordering of things to an end. But we have seen that as both primary efficient and primary final cause, God orders all things to their ends, which is ultimately the good itself.

(Leiden-New York-Cologne: Brill, 1996) note in particular Chapter 7 which deals with good as a transcendental. See also my article 'Goodness and Being, Transcendentals, Participation', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, pp. 85–107.

[14]I have spelled this out in greater detail in *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*, Chapter 7.

[15]This is a central feature of Aquinas's metaphysics of creation viz that God is the cause of the entire substance whole and complete, so that whatever actuality a substance has is derived from God. See for instance, Aquinas, *In II Sent*., dist. 1, qu. 1, art. 2: 'Hoc autem creare dicimus, scilicet producere rem in esse secundum totam suam substantiam'. The same definition can be found in: *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Lib II, Cap. 17, *De Potentia Dei*, qu. 3, art. 1, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 45, art. 1, *Tractatus De Substantis Separatis*, Cap. 10, n. 56. For discussion and connection of this issue with creation *ex nihilo*, see *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*, Chapter 3.

[16]Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 19, art. 1, ad. 3: '…[V]oluntas cuius obiectum principale est bonum quod est extra voluntatem, oportet quod sit mota ab aliquo. Sed obiectum divinae voluntatis est bonitas sua, quae est eius essentia. Unde, cum voluntas Dei sit eius essentia, non movetur ab alio a se, sed a se tantum, eo modo loquendi quo intelligere et velle dicitur motus'; *ibid*., art. 3: 'Alia autem a se Deus vult, inquantum ordinantur ad suam bonitatem ut in finem. Ea autem quae sunt ad finem, non ex necessitate volumus volentes finem, nisi sint talia, sine quibus finis esse non potest, sicut volumus cibum, volentes conservationem vitae; et navem, volentes transfretare. Non sic autem ex necessitate volumus ea sine quibus finis esse potest, sicut equum ad ambulandum, quia sine hoc possumus ire; et eadem ratio est in aliis. Unde, cum bonitas Dei sit perfecta, et esse possit sine aliis, cum nihil ei perfectionis ex aliis accrescat; sequitur quod alia a se eum velle, non sit necessarium absolute. Et tamen necessarium est ex suppositione, supposito enim quod velit, non potest non velle, quia non potest voluntas eius mutari'; *De Divinis Nominibus*, Cap. 3, Lect. 1, n. 228: '…[Q]uidquid Deus facit creaturis, sive esse sive vivere et quodcumque aliud totum ex bonitate divina procedit et totum ad bonitatem pertinent creaturae', and also Cap. 4, Lect. 1, n. 261: '…[Q]uidquid in creaturas procedit, hoc creaturae suae propter suam bonitatem communicat'. For discussion see *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*, Chapter 2.

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Accordingly, in His granting of actuality to things, God providentially orders all things so that they may attain their ends, which is the good.[17] Let us return to Dr Smith and his goals on the golf course.

Dr Smith is the primary efficient cause of his going to the golf course. He does so out of some motivation, e.g., impressing the dean to gain a promotion. As primary efficient cause, he undertakes a series of causal activities which will lead to that goal. These activities include ordering what he does during the day so that he can get to the golf course, improve his game to impress the dean to land that promotion. The causal activities that are ordered to that end participate in the actuality of the motivating causality of gaining a promotion. God's creative causality is like this.

As primary efficient cause, God grants actuality to all things. But that does not exhaust God's creative causality. God exercises His creative causality with a view to the good that He essentially is. Accordingly, in granting actuality to all things, God does so with a view to their enjoying the good. But this means that God orders all of creation to the good, and so individual causal processes in which creatures engage are not free range and independent of God's providential ordering; insofar as creatures have actuality, they themselves are ordered to the good to which all created actuality is ordered. Just as Dr Smith orders his day so that he can get to the golf course to improve his game to impress the dean, etc., so too God orders all of creation so that it may come to rest in the good. God's providential ordering goes hand in hand with his primary creative causality involving as it does both His primary efficient causality and His primary final causality.

Now when it comes to the good that creatures can enjoy, not all creatures can enjoy the good equally because not all creatures are equal; some have a greater capacity for the good than others. When it comes to human beings, their being is so constituted that they enjoy both material and immaterial goods. As such, humanity is considered a horizon or bridge between the material and the immaterial. Humanity's being is the key link in the chain of being that unites material and immaterial things. The capacity of humanity's being then for enjoyment of the good surpasses that even of the angels, since the angels can only enjoy immaterial goods, but not material goods. Humanity's destiny then is to enjoy the good that is God's love as a material thing capable of immaterial goodness.[18]

Given all of this, it can be argued that human beings represent the high point of creation, since they enjoy a state of being that not even the angels can enjoy. Whilst of course the angels can enjoy immaterial goods, i.e., God Himself, they cannot enjoy material goods; so when it comes to the chain of being, there is something missing

[17] See *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 22, art. 1, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Lib. III, Cap. 95.

[18] *Summa Contrra Gentiles*, Lib. II, Cap. 68: 'Semper enim invenitur infimum supremi generis contingere supremum inferioris generis…Est igitur accipere aliquid supremum in genere corporum, scilicet corpus humanum aequaliter complexionatum, quod attingit ad infimum superioris generis, scilicet ad animam humanam, quae tenet ultimum gradum in genere intellectualium substantiarum, ut ex modo intelligendi percipi potest. Et inde est quod anima intellectualis dicitur esse quasi quidam horizon et confinium corporeorum et incorporeorum, inquantum est substantia incorporea, corporis tamen forma'. *In III Sent*., Proem: '…[H]omo enim est quasi orizon et confinium spiritualis et corporalis naturae, ut quasi medium inter utrasque, bonitates participet et corporales et spirituales…'. For a discussion of the notion of man as a horizon, see Gerard Verbeke, 'Man as a Frontier according to Aquinas', in *Aquinas and Problems of His Time*, ed. by G. Verbeke and D. Verhelst (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1976), pp. 195–223.

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even in the being of the angels.[19] Humanity then is the apex of creation such that with the creation of human beings, the fullness of God's creative causality is poured forth. That being the case, in creating human beings God exercises a special care for them; there is something significant about the being of human beings that there is not about the being of any other creature.[20] There is a special enjoyment of the good that God wills for human beings, such that if they cannot enjoy that good or some obstruction emerges that prevents them from enjoying that good, it would be unsurprising were it to turn out that God undertakes some measure to correct that impediment. And so we are brought to the consideration of scripture and the drama of salvation.

2. Scripture and the drama of salvation

As primary and final cause of all creation, God exercises providence over things, and as we have seen, such providence is exercised with a view to leading creatures to the good, human beings in particular. This means that anything which has actuality is subject to the primary causality of God and so can be an instrument God uses to achieve His ends. The instruments that God uses are genuine causes with their own participated causality, yet they are subject to God's primary causality and thus in their (secondary) causality they are ordered to achieving God's ends for them, which is the good. It follows from all this that God *can* providentially order things in creation so that certain individuals reveal in writing what He wants to reveal. And in this regard such human writers, whilst in a sense authors of the text, are not the primary authors but only secondary. The primary author in this case would be God Himself. And this is how Aquinas views scripture.[21]

Scripture for Thomas is authored by God insofar as He orders creation so that the human writers put to writing what God wants them to write. Insofar as God is the primary author of scripture, it follows that the primary reading of scripture is what the words of scripture literally mean. This is because the words of scripture themselves signify some reality that God has chosen to reveal through the instrumentality of the human writer, and it is that reality which is the primary significance of scripture. The secondary reading of scripture then is the spiritual sense of the realities revealed in the primary sense. The spiritual sense can only be determined once the literal sense of scripture has been determined. This stands to reason, for one cannot understand the spiritual significance of some reality revealed by scripture unless one understands that reality itself.[22] What is significant about this view is that for Thomas it is quite possible that the human writer is not aware of the significance of what he writes. This is

[19]This is affirmed with all due reverence, regard, and consideration of those angels revealed in scripture as the allies of humanity. The point is an ontological one pertaining to the being of things.

[20]Thomas even goes so far as to claim that the ultimate end of the universe is the beatitude of the saints, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 73, art. 1: 'Ultima autem perfectio, quae est finis totius universi, est perfecta beatitudo sanctorum; quae erit in ultima consummatione saeculi'.

[21]*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 1, art. 10.

[22]*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 1, art. 10: 'Illa ergo prima significatio, qua voces significant res, pertinet ad primum sensum, qui est sensus historicus vel litteralis. Illa vero significatio qua res significatae per voces, iterum res alias significant, dicitur sensus spiritualis; qui super litteralem fundatur, et eum supponit'. See also *Quodlibet VII* (Turin: Marietti, 1927), qu. 6, art. 2.

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consistent with what we have seen concerning the metaphysics of *per se* ordered series and the providential ordering therein.

Let us return to Dr Smith and his efforts on the golf course to gain that promotion.

As primary efficient cause, Dr Smith is motivated by some goal to go to the golf course. Dr Smith accordingly orders his day so that he can get to the golf course to achieve his goals. Such ordering can involve several secondary causes whose knowledge of Dr Smith's overall goal is non-existent. For instance, Dr Smith may cancel class, leave early from a committee meeting, skip a regular lunch date, etc. His students, committee members, and regular lunch date may not know that they are secondary instruments in his design to get to the golf course; they may be of the view that they are getting out of class early, that Dr Smith wants a quick and efficient committee meeting, or that something came up and he had to cancel lunch. But from Dr Smith's point of view, all these secondary causal factors are part of his ordering of his day to achieve his end, of which they are unaware.[23]

Return then to God's ordering of creation to reveal in scripture what He wants to reveal. The human writers act as secondary causes participating within God's primary causal design. As such they are real causes, for they do something, but they are not primary causes. Accordingly, what the secondary causes are doing is with a view to the end of God's design, but may not be within the purview of those causes. So the human writer of Exodus can state that God is He Who Is, yet may not have understood that such is a revelation of God as pure existence itself.[24]

With all of this in mind, let us turn to the issue with which we closed the previous section: the obstacle to our enjoyment of the good that God wills for us. This obstacle of course is sin. Recognition of the reality of sin and its obstacle to humanity's reaching the good is not unique to Judaism or Christianity. Plato and Aristotle were well aware of the reality of sin and how it prevents human beings from living the good life. For both, the virtuous life informed by philosophy was the means of overcoming sin. But what was unique to Judaism and, later, Christianity was the view that human beings cannot help themselves out of sin; they require God's help. This situation is revealed in scripture and Aquinas's reading thereof is quite telling.

In dealing with the question: would Christ have become incarnate had Adam not sinned?[25] Aquinas notes that those things which are of the will of God can only be known by God Himself and not by creatures. Thus, they require a special revelation from God to be made known. Thomas goes on to state explicitly that everywhere in scripture the sin of Adam is assigned as the reason for the incarnation, in which case

[23]Of course, they could also be well aware of Dr Smith's intentions.

[24]Thomas takes the revelation of Exodus as a revelation that God is existence itself, see *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 13 art. 11, and in light of this Thomas go so far as to say that this divine name is even more appropriate than the name 'God', not only because it signifies existence, but also therein he sees a note of divine simplicity through the incommunicability and singularity signified by the divine name; see ad. 1: '…Hoc nomen qui est est magis proprium nomen Dei quam hoc nomen Deus, quantum ad id a quo imponitur, scilicet ab esse, et quantum ad modum significandi et consignificandi, ut dictum est. Sed quantum ad id ad quod imponitur nomen ad significandum, est magis proprium hoc nomen Deus, quod imponitur ad significandum naturam divinam. Et adhuc magis proprium nomen est tetragrammaton, quod est impositum ad significandam ipsam Dei substantiam incommunicabilem, et, ut sic liceat loqui, singularem'.

[25]*Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, qu. 1, art. 3.

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the incarnation occurred in response to sin so that had Adam had not sinned, there would have been no incarnation.[26]

Given that on Thomas's account, God orders creation to reveal what He wants to reveal, it follows that in this instance God orders creation to reveal to human beings that He is aware of the reality of sin and that He Himself will undertake to remove this very obstacle preventing them from attaining the good; for this is the motivation for the incarnation on Thomas's reading. Accordingly, within the providence of God's primary causality, He arranges things to re-assure human beings that sin will be overcome.

Now, when it comes to Thomas's wider thought on sin and the incarnation, he holds that it was not necessary that God become incarnate to remove sin; given His omnipotence God could have removed sin in many other ways.[27] So not only was the incarnation not necessary in itself, since it was a response to Adam's sin, but it was not even necessary to deal with sin itself. God's response then goes over and beyond what is necessary and is entirely gratuitous. Thomas then argues that the incarnation is the best and most fitting way to save humanity from sin. This is because the incarnation does not just remove sin and leave us to ourselves, it furthers us in the good and enables us to withdraw from evil.[28]

The foregoing is not only consistent with what we know from the metaphysics of God's primary causality, but also with what we know about the metaphysics of creation. Humanity is the key link in the creative chain, encapsulating in its being both the material and the immaterial orders of creation. As noted, God has paid a special attention to the creation of human beings. Hence, whilst not necessary, it is fitting with God's nature and the status He gives to human beings that He rescue them from sin; though of course the fact that He does and the manner in which He does is something that can be known only through being revealed. The point here is that what has been revealed is consistent with what we know from the metaphysics of creation independently of scripture.[29]

Putting all of this together we notice that Thomas adopts a highly systematic approach to the reading of scripture, which draws upon his thought on the metaphysics of causality, God's existence, and the metaphysics of creation. We know that God orders all of creation to the good, so in His providence God can reveal certain realities in scripture that the human writers may not themselves have understood. When it

[26] *Ibid*, note in particular: '…Cum in sacra Scriptura ubique incarnationis ratio ex peccato primi hominis assignetur, convenientius dicitur incarnationis opus ordinatum esse a Deo in remedium peccati, ita quod, peccato non existente, incarnatio non fuisset'.

[27] *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, qu. 1, art. 2.

[28] *Ibid*, here Thomas lists a number of ways in which the incarnation does indeed achieve these aims.

[29] A lingering question would then arise as to why it needs to be revealed that God saves us from sin. Aside from the fact that even on the metaphysics of creation outlined above it is not necessary that God save human beings from sin, should this be known by means of natural reason, it would be known only by a few, after many years of study, and with a number of errors, see *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 1, art. 1: 'Ad ea etiam quae de Deo ratione humana investigari possunt, necessarium fuit hominem instrui revelatione divina. Quia veritas de Deo, per rationem investigata, a paucis, et per longum tempus, et cum admixtione multorum errorum, homini proveniret, a cuius tamen veritatis cognitione dependet tota hominis salus, quae in Deo est. Ut igitur salus hominibus et convenientius et certius proveniat, necessarium fuit quod de divinis per divinam revelationem instruantur'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2024.54 Published online by Cambridge University Press

comes to the reality of sin, God reveals that He is attentively aware of the fallen human condition, that He intends to do something about it, and that He has done something about it.

With respect to the theme of this volume, the foregoing should make us pause to reflect. The primary cause of all of creation, from which all things derive actuality, is so concerned about fallen humanity that He orders creation so that He may reveal to human beings that He will do something about their fallen condition. To push things a little further, Plato and Aristotle sought the remedy for sin in the cultivation of virtue and the living of the good life. In other words, they sought the remedy for sin in the powers and the capacities of fallen human nature. What scripture reveals is that good as it is to strive to live the good life, it is not sufficient; human beings cannot save themselves from sin. It is God as primary cause Who takes the initiative, and like the good shepherd makes things right so that human beings may return to Him.

Cite this article: Gaven Kerr, 'Primary Causality, Providence, and Scripture', *New Blackfriars* (2024), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2024.54