



BOOK REVIEW

Simon Maria Kopf, *Reframing Divine Providence: New Perspectives from Aquinas on the Divine Action Debate*

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Reframing Divine Providence proposes Thomas Aquinas' account of what we might call God's 'involvement' with creatures as an alternative to what has been a dominant approach to reconciling modern scientific worldviews with the claim that God acts in the world in some objective sense. At the heart of Kopf's proposal is the claim that this attempted reconciliation, associated with the Divine Action Project and characterised as 'Non-Interventionist Objective Divine Action' (NIODA), produces a version of the God-of-the-gaps that is neither scientifically nor theologically compelling, and that Aquinas offers a 'prudential ordinative' approach, rooted in an account of divine transcendence, that better accords both with scientific knowledge and traditional theological notions of God.

Part 1 outlines the genesis and chief features of the NIODA model of divine involvement. This model is rooted in a conviction that the scriptural narratives require that God's action in the world be something objective, and not merely a subjective interpretation that we give to events. It likewise recognises that modern scientific worldviews exclude divine intervention in causally determined natural events. Seeking to honour both perspectives, it posits 'room' for divine action in natural contingencies, which are causally undetermined. As Kopf outlines it, opponents of divine involvement argue (1) causally determined systems exclude divine action, (2) nature is a causally determined system and (3) nature excludes divine action. The NIODA model attacks the second premise, claiming that nature contains genuine contingencies that allow God to act without intervening in necessary natural processes. Its advocates argue that this is not the old God-of-the-gaps model because it does not appeal to merely apparent indeterminacies, produced by our current lack of scientific knowledge, but from genuine indeterminacies, 'ontological gaps' that science reveals, such as quantum phenomena, in which God is free to act within rather than in contravention of natural processes, and from which radiate God's effects. Kopf notes several objections to this approach, including the question of whether quantum phenomena result in significant macroscopic effects that would satisfy a theological demand for divine involvement in the world, as well as the question of whether divinely determined contingencies would then be only apparent contingencies, thus eliminating contingency from the world.

Part 2 develops Kopf's alternative to NIODA that, in essence, seeks to answer the opponents of divine involvement not by rejecting the second premise in their argument, but the first. That is to say, an account of divine transcendence such as one finds in Aquinas allows God to be at work not only in causal contingencies, but causal

necessities as well. The problem with both NIODA and those who reject divine involvement is that they conceive of divine action as univocal with human action, such that God can only act where there is sufficient 'room'. A properly analogical account of divine involvement understands necessity and contingency as modes of worldly events that are equally the effect of the God, who operates as primary cause of the network of secondary causes that science investigates. Aquinas' approach allows divine involvement to be seen as more akin to the exercise of prudence in ordering things to their end than the manipulation of phenomena from within causal gaps. This ordering is carried out immanently by God's making things be the kind of things that they are, possessing the kind of orientation to an end that they have. The question of whether or not there are ontological gaps can be left aside, since God does not need gaps in order to govern the world.

Part 3 applies the prudential-ordinative model to debates over the contingency of the evolutionary process. Kopf examines the debate between Gould and Morris over whether the emergence of human beings is a contingent outcome, such that 'replaying life's tape' might lead to a quite different outcome (Gould), or a necessary outcome that would have inevitably occurred, though perhaps by different means (Morris). Implicit in this debate is the idea that only if the emergence of humanity were necessary and not contingent could one see it as God's providential work. Kopf makes the point that a consequence might necessarily follow from something else (e.g. if Socrates is running, then necessarily Socrates runs), while the consequent itself is something contingent and not necessary (e.g. Socrates does not run necessarily). This suggests that the contingency of the outcome of the evolutionary process is compatible with God willing a particular outcome: if God wills the emergence of human beings then human beings necessarily emerge, even though human emergence is contingent and not necessary. Once again, Kopf shows how a properly transcendent understanding of God and the analogical nature of divine action allows us to maintain genuine contingency alongside a robust account of divine providence and governance.

Kopf writes with admirable clarity, though the book, which began life as a dissertation, still bears the marks of the extensive (even excessive) signposting and summarising that characterises that genre, which can make for somewhat slow going, particularly for readers who are already familiar with some of the views and debates discussed. One wishes publishers provided more editorial assistance to authors making the transition from dissertation to book. It might also have been interesting to see Kopf engage the occasionalism of Ash'arite Islam, which offers an account of divine providence (against which Aquinas developed his own account) that is like NIODA in accepting the premise that causally determined natural systems exclude divine action, but unlike it in rejecting any causal determination apart from God's (and thus denying that any event is natural). Such engagement might have brought out the distinctiveness of Aquinas' approach even more. But these are minor quibbles and should not diminish the book's achievement. With considerable acumen, Kopf analyses the weaknesses of current debates over divine action and shows the contribution that Aquinas' account of divine involvement can make to those debates.

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