# Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Divine Providence
## *De Potentia Dei 3, 7* and *Super Librum de Causis Expositio**
## Tomás de Aquino y la metafísica de la Divina Provindencia
*De Potentia Dei 3, 7* **y** *Super Librum de Causis Expositio*

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**Abstract**. The main goal of this paper is to compare how Thomas Aquinas expressed his doctrine of providence through secondary causes, making use of both Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic principles, in the seventh article of the third question of his *Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia Dei* and his *Super Librum de Causis Expositio*, in which he intends to solve the problem of the metaphysical mechanism by which God providentially guides creation. I will first present his arguments as they appear in the disputed questions, followed by a presentation of his thought on the matter in his commentary of the *Liber de Causis*, and concluding with my comparative analysis of Aquinas' solution to the issue of God's providential activity in nature.

Key words: Thomas Aquinas, metaphysics of providence, *In Liber de Causis*, *QD De Potentia Dei*

**Resumen**. El objetivo principal del presente trabajo será comparar cómo Tomás de Aquino expresó su doctrina de la providencia a través de las causas segundas, utilizando principios metafísicos tanto aristotélicos como neo-platónicos, en el séptimo artículo de la tercera cuestión de sus *Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia Dei* y su *Super Librum de Causis Expositio*, en los que busca resolver el problema del mecanismo metafísico por el que Dios guía la creación providencialmente. Presentaré primero sus argumentos como aparecen en las cuestiones disputadas, seguido por una presentación de su pensamiento en el comentario al *Liber de Causis*, para concluir con un análisis comparativo de la solución al problema de la actividad providente de Dios en la naturaleza.

Palabras clave: Tomás de Aquino, metafísica de la providencia, *In Liber de Causis*, *QD De Potentia Dei*

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## 1. Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to compare how Thomas Aquinas expressed his doctrine of providence through secondary causes, making use of both Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic principles, in the seventh article of the third question of his *Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia Dei* and his *Super Librum de Causis Expositio*, in which he intends to solve the problem of the metaphysical mechanism by which God providentially guides creation. I will first present his arguments as they appear in the disputed questions, followed by a presentation of his thought on the matter in his commentary of the *Liber de Causis*, and concluding with my comparative analysis of Aquinas' solution to the issue of God's providential activity in nature.

Aquinas devoted much of his work to the theme of divine providence, and to explaining how God guides the created universe by acting through secondary created causes. This topic was crucial for thirteenth century European university scholars, and so it was for Aquinas. This importance was given via the rejection or acceptance of certain versions of divine action in nature that denied nature's works, which arrived to Europe through the treatises of Arabic and Jewish commentators from previous centuries, such as Al-Ghazali and the *Kalam* school, or the Jewish philosopher Ibn-Gabirol (known to Aquinas as Avicebron). These thinkers held that the only true cause in nature was God, given that creatures did not possess real causal powers.

Aquinas came to know this problem through the works of Maimonides and the Latin translations of Averroes' *Commentaries on Aristotle*, and one can find references to it throughout his works, starting from the *Commentary on the Sentences* (*In II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 4) to the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (III, 65 and 69), *Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate* (q. 5, a. 2, ad 6), *De Potentia Dei* (q. 3, a. 7), and the *Summa Theologiae* (I, q. 105, a. 5). Aquinas always discusses the way in which divine providence works in nature through a presentation of the relations between primary and secondary causes. Perhaps the most important treatises to study his thought on these relations between primary and secondary causes are the *Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia Dei*, disputed between 1265 and 1266 in Rome (just before starting his *Summa Theologiae*), and the *Super Librum de Causis Expositio*, probably written during the first half of 1272 in Paris, having already started writing the *Summa*.

The core of Aquinas' teaching on providence, a preliminary definition of which is *ordinare in finem* (SCG III, 73)[1], is that providence reaches the whole of the natural world, closely following his own doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, by which Aquinas explains the complete dependence in being and acting of those beings that are not the Creator. In explaining this doctrine, however, Thomas goes a step further and affirms that when creating, God does not do it only *universaliter*, but rather puts each being into existence particularly and individually: *effectus autem Dei sunt res singulares. Hoc enim modo Deus causat res, inquantum facit eas esse in actu* (SCG I, 65). God's causality extends not only to the general ways in which nature works[2], but also to the singular beings in particular. Aquinas concludes, thus, that God's providence shares the same features, not only guiding the totality of the universe as such, but also ruling each singular event in its own individuality: *necesse est dicere omnia divinae providentiae subiacere, non in universali tantum, sed etiam in singulari* (S.Th. I, q. 22, a. 2, co)[3]. Thus, God providentially directs everything that is created[4].

The question, however, remains: how does God act providentially for every singular being, given that it is neither evident nor apparent that this is so? In his treatment in the *QD De Potentia Dei* q. 3, a. 7, Aquinas affirms that God, as primary cause of every being's existence, is also the cause of the causal power of that being and of the action of that being. In what will come to be the Neo-Platonic turn of his argument, Aquinas also affirms that God, as primary cause, has more influence in the effect of the secondary cause than the secondary cause itself.

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[1] See also *S.Th.* I, q. 22, a. 1, co.: *Ipsa igitur ratio ordinis rerum in finem, providentia in Deo nominatur.*

[2] Here Aquinas is thinking on the natural species. He argues that God is not only the cause of the species as such, but also of the particular being of that species. In fact, God causes the existence of the species because He causes the particular to exist. Were there no individual of a particular species, God would no longer be causing the species to exist. I paraphrase him saying 'how nature works' because the nature of a being is that from which the ways that being's actions proceed.

[3] He repeats this idea in *De Pot.* q. 6., a. 6, co: *Deus non solum universalem providentiam de rebus corporalibus habeat, sed etiam ad res singulas eius providentia se extendat.*

[4] In *S.Th.* I, q. 22, a. 2. co, Aquinas uses the notion of participation to say this same thing: *necesse est omnia, inquantum participant esse, intantum subdi divinae providentiae*.

## 2. Divine Providential Action in *QD De Potentia Dei 3, 7*

The *QD De Potentia Dei*, disputed during 1266, are divided in three large sections. In the first place, Aquinas discusses God's power absolutely (q. 1), where he questions whether God has power at all, whether his power is infinite, whether there is anything impossible for God; and about God's generative power (q. 2), where he asks whether God can generate *ad intra* of the divine nature (the Son), and *ad extra* of the divine nature (creation). In the second section Aquinas focuses on how God generates created things questioning first the notion of creation (qq. 3-4), where, among other things, he asks about God's action in nature; the preservation of creation in existence (q. 5), and miracles (q. 6). In the final section Aquinas returns to the divine essence, asking about divine simplicity (q. 7), the divine names (q. 8), and the divine persons (qq. 9-10).

The third question, in particular, is about creation, and it is divided into nineteen articles, being the longest in these disputed questions. The seventh article of this question is devoted to the problem of whether God is active in the actions of nature in any sense, and it is the first article that changes the topic from creation itself, a theme that Aquinas deals with in the first six articles of this third question.

The *corpus* of the seventh article is divided into two large sections. In the first one Aquinas engages with two opinions that deny the activity of nature, first that of Al-Gazhali and the *Kalam* theologians, and later that of Avicebron, explaining their errors. In the second section Aquinas explains how he conceives God is active in the actions of nature. I will present the former in two separate subsections, and the latter in a third subsection.

### a. On *Kalam* Theologians

After having considered the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* in the first six articles of this question, Aquinas asks whether God acts in nature's operations. As mentioned earlier, Aquinas approaches this question rejecting first the views of those who say that nature does not have any proper operation and that it is only God who acts in every natural action, giving two examples, the Arabic school of *Kalam* theologians (though not mentioning them), and the Jewish philosopher Avicebron (Solomon Ibn Gabirol). I will devote this section to explaining Aquinas' arguments against *Kalam* theology.

In the twelfth century, Al-Gazhali, in his famous book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, tried to show that philosophers who adopted Greek views were unsuccessful in achieving a coherent theory of divine action. Before him, from the eighth to the twelfth centuries[5], there was a strong defence of the Islamic religious ideas held by the *Mutakallimun* theologians (of which Al-Gazhali was the greatest proponent), within which the *Kalam* theology was the main stream of thought[6]. Their basic idea was that the unchangeable nature of God's omnipotence and providence made it necessary to admit that there is no active power in nature, but that it is God who acts in every apparently natural event.

According to Islam the universe is created out of nothing and it had a beginning in time. *Kalam* theologians considered that God re-creates the universe at every instant, hence regarding creation as an atomic event, by which God puts the universe into existence at every single moment of time, and allowing it to be rational and intelligible by keeping the regularities of nature. *Kalam* theologians assumed that the properties of an existent being in the natural universe changed constantly, in a continual process of re-creation, as if in every moment the universe is in the process of becoming. In fact, for *Kalam* theologians, the universe is restless and is continuously developing; nothing in the universe would stay two moments in a stationary state. Together with this idea, following their atomistic perspective on nature, *Kalam* theologians believed that 'no being, in and of itself, by virtue of the inherent principles of its being, is oriented towards a becoming other than its; and that 'all things are no more than they are and their being is complete and fulfilled at any given moment of their existence'. Hence, 'no being has in itself any intrinsic "potentiality" to change or alteration'; and it becoming other is entirely dependent upon and resides in the potentiality of an exterior agent who is capable of effecting the change' (Frank, 2007b, p. 20).

In addition to these notions, *Kalam* theologians considered that the efficient cause whose effect is the real material existence of the thing must be

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[5] For a brief sketch of the development of *kalam* theology see (Frank, 2007a) and (Alusi, 1965).

[6] See (Altaie, 2008, p. 83). My goal in this brief exposition of the *Kalam* theology is neither to expound it in its complex diversity and nuances, nor to enter the copious debate around it, but to create an idea of the environment with which Thomas was dealing at his time. For a much longer and deeper analysis see (Frank, 2007b) and (Alusi, 1965) especially part II.

the cause of the totality of its being, in terms of being something existent and having the reality that it has. Hence, the act of causality at the moment of the realisation of the act is itself grounded in God's creative causality: the single act that produces the existence of the thing, is the cause of the totality of its reality (Frank, 2007a, p. 328). This, plus the atomistic and constantly evolving universe framework, revealed to *Kalam* theologians that all change involves a creation, since whatever change is affected represents the realisation of a new being entirely (Frank, 2007b, p. 22). 'They proposed this [the theory of constant re-creation] in order to preserve the involvement of God in the world and to perform his essential role, which they saw as necessary (but not always sufficient) to sustain the existence of the world' (Altaie, 2008, p. 87). Hence, in order to accept (we can say from religious premises[7]) the constant involvement of God in the universe, they needed to diminish the activities of nature to the point of denying them. From these statements, they admitted that there was no deterministic causality in nature; in fact, there was no causality at all in nature, which left a completely indeterminate world, though ordered by the will of God.

Divine sovereignty over worldly events was clearly at stake. Were nature to act by itself, there would be no place at all for God to act. Nevertheless, given the theological premises that stated that God is omnipotent and that He governs and guides the universe by acting within it, it was necessary for them to admit that nature had no powers to act at all. This idea led them to the conclusions about the atomistic and constant re-creation of the universe as the way in which God continuously acted within it. Hence, it was God who acted, creating every event constantly and directly without any intermediary agents (see Wolfson, 1976, p. 518). Created things had no causal power at all. It is only God and God alone, by his own command and power that is the direct cause of all events in the world.

It would be interesting to consider briefly the other side of the Islamic philosophical-theological discussion on divine action in nature: those whom *Kalam* theologians called the 'philosophers'. Amongst these, the main one Aquinas addressed was Averroes, the *commentator* of Aristotle (at least by the time Aquinas was writing these disputed questions). Averroes' main idea on this subject was that nature acted autonomously, which meant a diminishing of God's omnipotence, an assertion going directly against *Kalam*

[7] Walzer (1970, p. 648) summarised this idea saying that: "Mutakallimun followed a methodology taking the truth of Islam as their starting point".

theology. In fact, his position begins by rejecting the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, for the reason that if this were true anything could, he thinks, come from anything, and there would be no congruity between effects and causes. For Averroes, the doctrine of creation out of nothing contradicted the existence of a true natural causality in the universe, and hence, no science would be possible (see Baldner & Carroll, 1997, p. 18). Averroes rejects the denial of natural causes with several arguments[8]. First, for example, he says that if there were no natural causes, there would be no scientific knowledge and thus no wisdom, given that scientific knowledge is (according to his Aristotelian heritage) the knowledge of causes. Second, bearing in mind the argument for the existence of a cause which caused the existence of the universe, he replies that, if the existence of worldly causes is denied, it is impossible to prove the existence of the cause which caused the existence of the universe, given that it would be impossible to know the fact of causality at all. This argument assumes that the invisible is made visible to the intelligence in accordance with the visible of the world. However, if there is no causality in the world, then there is no possible way to reach the invisible agent, God, which works in every instant.

Aquinas summarises these arguments explaining that for these theologians, of whom he heard through Maimonides, natural forms are accidents, and given that accidents cannot pass into another thing, it is impossible for a natural thing to introduce a new form into another thing, i.e. to act, concluding that God created forms at each time. In arguing against *Kalam* theologians, Aquinas holds that their error is due to an incorrect understanding of the difference between primary and secondary causality. To show their misguidance, Aquinas makes use of three arguments. He affirms that to hold that it is only God who acts in nature goes against the senses, reason, and the goodness of God (see te Velde, 1995, p. 162). First, it goes against the nature of sensation because the senses do not perceive unless the sensible object acts upon them. If that object would not act, but were God to act, then it would follow that a man does not feel the fire's heat, if the action of the fire does not produce in the sensorial organ a likeness of the heat that is in the fire. In fact, if this heat-species would be produced in the organ by another agent, although the touch would sense the heat, it would not sense the heat of the fire, nor

[8] For a full list of these arguments see (Wolfson, 1976, pp. 553ss). For a whole account of the complete debate between the *Kalam* theologians and Averroes see (Davidson, 1987).

would it perceive that the fire is hot, and yet the sense judges this to be the case. Second, it goes against reason because things and their powers would seem to be purposeless; thus, if a knife does not actually cut, but it is God doing the cutting, its sharpness would be useless and pointless. Third, this position is opposed to God's goodness which is self-communicative, i.e., the very power to act, communicated to creatures, is a indication of God's goodness. Thus, in creation God does not communicate only existence to things but also the power to act, making things to His likeness. Finally, Aquinas explains that natural forms are not to be considered accidental, since if this was the case, there would be no things at all, simply because from substantial forms things obtain their substantiality. And even if forms were accidental, the powers of the accident in a natural thing can produce the same accident into another thing, though not numerically the same[9].

**b. Against Avicebron**

The second kind of argument that Aquinas finds wrong about God's activity in the created order comes from Avicebron, an eleventh century

[9] In *S.Th.* I, q. 105, a. 5, Aquinas gives two further reasons for rejecting this position: 1) it would deprive creation of its order in causes and effects, which, in the end, would go against God's power. God would not be able to create something that would act with its own power, but would need to create something that would not act. In the end, given that from natural things reason reaches the existence of God and His attributes, and that these natural things would not have any power, it would not be possible to admit that God has any power at all. In fact, the perfection of effect indicates the perfection of its cause. Now God is the most perfect agent. Therefore, things created by Him receive perfection from Him. Consequently, to detract from the creature's perfection is to detract from the perfection of the divine power. Thus, if no creature exercises an action for the production of an effect, much is detracted from the perfection of the creature; because it is due to the abundance of its perfection that a thing is able to communicate to another the perfection that it has. Hence, to affirm that natural things do not operate and it is only God acting diminishes the divine power. 2) If creatures would not have any power, their own existence would be meaningless, since creatures are perfected by acting. Since they would not act, they would not be perfected. Besides, if the effects were produced not by the act of creatures but only by the act of God, the power of a created cause cannot possibly be indicated by its effect: since the effect is no indication of the cause's power, except by reason of the action which proceeds from the power and terminates in the effect. Now the nature of a cause is not known from its effect except in so far as this is an indication of its power that results from its nature. Consequently, if creatures exercise no action in producing effects, it will follow that the nature of a creature can never be known from its effect: not only creatures would be meaningless, but also all knowledge of physical science would be vain.

Jewish Neo-Platonist philosopher from the Iberian Peninsula, known for his doctrine on universal hylo-morphism described in his *Fons Vitae*. Aquinas engages with this doctrine in many a place. In the article I am considering, however, he deals with a secondary doctrine, that of the passivity of any body, which leads to the affirmation of their inactivity and the subsequent affirmation of the ubiquitous divine action (see *Fons Vitae* II, 10).

Analysing Avicebron's arguments have the complication that contemporary scholarship shows that Aquinas was perhaps a bit too severe arguing against him on this particular matter (see Brunner, 1965, p. 81). Still, since the main goal of this paper is not to argue for or against Aquinas' position in his *QD De Potentia*, but to compare his positions, I will simply present Aquinas' understanding of Avicebron and his argument against him.

Aquinas affirms that for Avicebron no material substance acts, but that it is a spiritual force that penetrates through all material substances that acts in them. The argument adds that the purer and subtler the substance, the more it becomes penetrable by a spiritual force, and so the more active it appears. There are three arguments that Aquinas recognises in Avicebron for holding this position[10]. First, since every agent, apart from the first creative agent, requires a subject that is inferior to it, and since there is no substance inferior to the body, the body is not active at all. Second, since every form in the body is added to quantity, but quantity prevents action and movement –the cause being that the increase of the quantity of a body causes the increase of the weight of the body and the slowing down of its movement– so the body is not active, but passive only. Third, since the bodily substance is furthest away from the first agent, so active virtue does not reach the bodily substance. Just as God is the only agent, the bodily substance, which is the lowest in the genus of beings, is passive only. So, it follows according to Avicebron that the bodily substance is not active, but that the virtue of the spiritual substance, passing through the bodies, causes their actions.

Against these arguments Aquinas offers three counter-arguments (see Brunner, 1965, pp. 78-84). He begins explaining that Avicebron is wrong in considering the bodily substance as numerically one and the same, differing only accidentally and not substantially. Had he seen that bodies were multiple, he would have noticed that one is superior to the other and closer to the first agent, and so there would be bodies which are not the least, i.e. the

[10] Aquinas also deals with this matter in *SCG* III, 69, and *S.Th.*, I, q. 115, q. 1, corp. and ad 2.

furthest from the first agent, and so one could act on the other. In addition to this, Aquinas suggests that even at the lower extremity of beings, bodies do not fail to act, since they are still compounding of matter and form, and from their form they act. Aquinas also argues that quantity increases activity rather than diminishes it, giving the sensory experience example of a heavy body falling downwards: the greater a heavy material substance is, the swifter its downward motion. Finally, adding to this argument, Aquinas suggests that Avicebron confuses the relative limitation imposed on the action of form by quantity, with the pure and simple suppression of this action. He does not perceive that if individualising matter limits the form, the latter does not, however, lose the nature its power of action absolutely.

Aquinas concludes his engagement with these two opinions affirming that one must hold that God is active in every natural action, not as suppressing the action of the created thing, opening the path to showing how he understands this divine action in nature.

**c. How God is Active in the Actions of Nature**

After rejecting the positions of the *Kalam* theologians and of Avicebron, Aquinas explains his own understanding of God's operation in nature. Aquinas teaches in this second section of the *corpus*, that to be the cause of the action of something else can be understood in four different ways[11]. First, it can be understood as giving it the power to act: every operation consequent to a certain power is ascribed to the giver of that power as effect to cause. All power of any agent whatsoever is from God. In this way, God causes all the actions of nature, because He gives natural things the powers by which they are able to act, as from the first principle of all perfection. Second, God may be said to be the cause of an action by upholding the natural power in its being. Every action that cannot continue after the influence of a certain agent has ceased, is from that agent: the preserver of a power is said to cause the action; as a remedy that preserves the sight is said to make a man see. God not only gave existence to things when they first begin to

[11] These ways are also explained in (te Velde, 1995, pp. 165-166). For Fabro (1961, p. 399), the development of these four ways in which God causes within the natural world "doit montrer progressivement la compénétration de la causalité divine dans la causalité créée jusqu'à l'interiorité totale dans l'action de la créature tant par rapport à la cause que par rapport à l'effet dans son propre devenir et sa réalisation". Aquinas also offers a similar treatment in his *SCG* III, c. 67.

exist, but also causes existence in them as long as they exist, by preserving them in existence, as we have shown before. So, God is always causing as well those powers in them, together with their existence. Consequently, if the divine causality were to cease, all operation would come to an end. Therefore, every operation of a thing is reducible to God as its cause. I have called these two ways of giving the power to act and preserving that power the founding moments of God acting in and through natural agents, and the next two ways as the dynamic ways of God acting in and through natural agents (see Silva, 2014).

The third way is the following: a thing is said to cause another's action by moving it to act: here we do not mean that it causes or preserves the active power, but that it applies the power to action, as a man causes the knife's cutting by the very fact that he applies the sharpness of the knife to cutting by moving it to cut. And since the lower nature in acting does not act except through being moved, God causes the action of every natural thing by moving and applying its power to action. Finally, one thing causes the action of another, as a principal agent causes the action of its instrument that in a way participates in the causal power of the principal agent: and in this way God causes every action of natural things. Now in every natural thing we find that it is a being, and everything which acts in a certain way cause being. Being, however, is the most common first effect and more intimate than all other effects, wherefore it is an effect that belongs to God alone to produce by His own power. Therefore, in every action of natural beings, since they cause being somehow, God is the cause of that action; inasmuch as every agent is an instrument of the divine power causing being.

These last two ways of causing the action of another appear to be quite similar. If we recall the account Aquinas gives of instrumental causes, however, we will find the difference. An instrument, when acting as an instrument, has two different actions: one which pertains to it according to its own form; another which pertains to it insofar as it is moved by the primary agent and that transcends its own form. The first of these two ways of causing refers to the first action of an instrumental cause. Thus, every agent performs its action according to its own nature and powers, moved and applied by God. In the same manner, the second way of causing the action of the instrument refers to the causing of being, which is the effect that completely transcends the power of the natural being, though it is given to it as a participation in God's power (see te Velde, 1995, p. 173). We need here to bear in mind that no finite agent can be understood to produce a particular effect

into being. Thus, Thomas adds that this can happen only if it is made to do so by the immanence of a universal power which accounts for being as such (see te Velde, 1995, p. 170): the primary cause of being. If, then, the agent in itself is considered, it is immediate to its effect. The cause of an action, however, is the thing by whose power it is done, more even than that which does it: even as the principal agent, in comparison with the instrument, is more the cause. Thus, if we consider the power whereby the action is done, then the power of the higher cause is more immediate to the effect than the power of the lower cause; since the power of the lower cause is not coupled with its effect save by the power of the higher cause. Therefore, God is more the cause of every action than secondary active causes. Thus, in the effect of natural causes, being is said to be the result of God's action in so far as when every secondary cause gives being (i.e. specifies the mode of being) it does so acting by the power of the first creating cause: this is because being is the first effect and presupposes nothing else (see *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 7, ad 19).

Aquinas concludes that God works in everything inasmuch as everything needs His power in order to acting[12]. Therefore, God is the cause of

[12] In *S.Th.* I, q. 105, a. 5, Aquinas concludes similarly, though with a different perspective in the argumentation. He brings up his notion of the four natural causes, saying that of the four causes, matter is the only one that is not a principle of action, but only of passion or receiving an action. Hence God cannot act through this kind of causality. The other three, however, are principles of action, and indeed with a certain order: the final cause makes the agent to move and to produce the form. Accordingly, God acts in every single natural action in terms of these three sources of action. God acts as the end of every natural action, as the efficient cause, and formal cause, although not as an inherent formal cause, but as an exemplar formal cause (In assigning a kind of causality to God, Aquinas usually affirms that God is *causa formalis exemplaris*. The formal cause can be referred to things in a twofold manner: first, as the intrinsic formal cause. Second, a formal cause can be referred to as extrinsic to the thing, as that according to which things are made, and thus this is also called a formal cause. See *In V Met.*, l. 2, n. 2.). Aquinas argues that God causes as the final cause of every action of natural agents. According to what has been said, every action pursues a good (real or apparent). Nothing can be called a good except due to its likeness to the supreme goodness, which is God. This likeness is caused by the supreme good, and thus God causes as the end of the actions of every natural agent. Secondly, as in a sequence of many agents, the second agent depends on the action of the first agent, natural agents depend on God's action to be caused to act. Hence God is the cause of every action of natural agents, as causing their forms to act in the way in which a craftsman applies his axe to cutting the wood. Finally, God also gives things their forms and keeps them in existence. And since the form of anything is within it and God is properly intimate to things, given that he is the giver of being and existence, Thomas concludes that God acts intimately in all things by giving them their forms and preserving them in existence.

everything's action inasmuch as He gives everything the power to act, and preserves that power in being and applies it to action, and inasmuch as by His power every other power acts. And because God is His own power, and He is in all things as upholding them in their being, Aquinas adds that God acts in every agent immediately.

Nevertheless, these notions should be understood in the sense that the active and passive powers of a natural thing suffice for action in their own order, yet require the divine power (see *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 7, ad 1), since God and the natural agents act on two different levels. The same effect is ascribed to a natural cause and to God, not as though a part of the effect were performed by God and a part by the natural agent: the whole effect proceeds from each, yet in different ways: just as the whole of the one same effect is ascribed to the instrument, and again the whole is ascribed to the principal agent. It is in this respect, in the acting together of the two orders of primary and secondary causes, that Aquinas argues that the powers of nature do not suffice to produce their effects. That which is made by God in natural things, which makes them to operate, is a mere capacity or inclination to act, and as such is a kind of incomplete being (see *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 7, ad 7)[13]. Thus, natural things are given their powers to act as a form within them, though not the power to cause: as art can give the axe its sharpness as a permanent form, but not the power of the art as a permanent form. Therefore, it is necessary for them to receive that power from the first cause, which is God, to cause actually (see *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 7, ad 7), in the same way the axe, although it has the form to do it, could not chop a piece of wood unless it is moved by the craftsman. The craftsman gives the axe the power with which the axe actually chops the wood according to its form. In a similar manner, God gives natural things the power to perform their operations according to their own forms.

These statements would seem to imply, again, that it is not necessary to admit that nature works, because if a sufficient cause is acting then there is no longer the necessity of another cause, and God acts as a sufficient cause. Nevertheless, Thomas argues that God acts perfectly as first cause, but that the operation of nature as secondary cause is, in a sense, also necessary, because, even though God can produce the natural effect without nature, He wishes to act by means of nature in order to preserve the order of things (see *De Pot.*, q. 3, a. 7, *ad* 16). It is not that God does not have the

[13] See (te Velde, 1995, pp. 173-175).

sufficient power to cause what He causes through natural causes[14]. Were He willing to do so, He could. God, however, acts through natural causes because of the immensity of His goodness, by which He decides to communicate His similitude to things, not only in their existence, but also in their being causes of other things[15].

After having presented Aquinas' arguments against those who do hold that nature does not act and that it is only God's action what we perceive in nature, and his arguments for God's operation within the operations of nature in his *QD De Potentia Dei 3, 7*, I shall now analyse his position in the *Liber de Causis*.

## 3. **The Influence of the First Cause in Aquinas'** *Expositio in Liber de Causis*

The *Liber de Causis* was often considered to be a work of Aristotle's for much of the thirteenth century, and one might rightfully assume that Aquinas was of the same idea, as many of his references to the *philosophus* in his early works evidence. For example, in I Super Sent. d. 8 q. 1 a. 2 s.c. 1 (1252-56): "*Deus non unitur rebus, quod patetetiam per philosophum Lib. de causis*"; in Super De Trinitate, pars 3 q. 6 a. 1 arg. 22 (1252/58): "*et philosophus in libro de causis*"; in De Veritate, q. 21 a. 5 co. (1256-59): "*hanc videtur esse intention philosophi in Lib. de causis*"; in Quodlibet IX, q. 3 co. (1258): "*secundum philosophum in libro de causis*" and in De Potentia Dei, q. 7 a. 2 arg. 6 (1266): "*contra philosophum dicentem in Lib. de causis*". One might follow Guagliardo and Vansteenkiste, who argue that the use of the term '*philosophus*' has not been categorically shown to refer to Aristotle in the works of Aquinas, and that the use of this term to name the author of the *Liber* should be read as an ambiguous term used due to his doubts about the authorship of the book (see Guagliardo, 1996, p. x). Still, this is a rather historically audacious hypothesis to hold, and I prefer to stick with tradition on this point.

Either way, it was only by May 1268, two years after his *QD De Pontentia Dei*, when William of Moerbeke finished his translation into Latin of Proclus' *Elementa Theologica*, that medieval scholars realise that the *Liber* was

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[14] Fabro (1961, p. 490), explains that "Dieu pourrait faire tout par lui-même, saint Thomas l'admet, mais c'est un signe de puissance supérieure d'appeler d'autres à participer à sa propre puissance."

[15] See te Velde (1995, p. 175): "God does not want to produce the effects of nature without nature, but that he causes nature to operate and to make its own effect by mediating the natural power of each thing with the being of that effect."

actually a collection of Proclus' propositions from that book. It was Aquinas who first acknowledged the authorship of the *Liber* to an Arab scholar who brought together a set of propositions included in Proclus' *Elementa*, as he explicitly affirms in the *prooemium* of his exposition in 1272: "it seems that one of the Arab philosophers excerpted it from this book by Proclus, especially since everything in it is contained much more fully and ore diffusely in that of Proclus". Many scholars seemed to have continued holding the view that the *Liber* was Aristotle's own work (*pace* Guagliardo and Vansteenkiste) even after Aquinas' commentary. For example, in the very continuation of Aquinas' commentary to Aristotle's *Politics*, written by Petrus de Alvernia (see Hocedez, 1933, p. 23), his *fidelissimus discipulus* (see Hocedez, 1933, p. 9), after Aquinas' death in 1274 (see Perotto, 1966, p. 27), we read: *unde philosophus dicit in libro de causis* (*In Politic. continuatio*, lib. 7, l. 12, n. 13)[16], following Aquinas' use before his own commentary to the *Liber*.

I will present some of the main points in Aquinas' commentary to the text of the *Liber*, in particular those referring to the relation between primary and secondary causes, as to offer some keys to understand how his doctrines on providence and the activity of God in the operations of nature are a good example of how he combined Aristotelian thought with Neo-Platonism throughout his scholarly work.

Each *lectio* of Aquinas' *Expositio* comments on each of the 32 propositions of the *Liber*, including discussions, on the First Cause, Intelligences, and the Soul, and their relations to the governance of the natural world. For Aquinas, the first proposition of the *Liber* guides the development of the full doctrine on primary and secondary causes: "Every primary cause infuses its effect more powerfully than does a universal second cause," which he subdivides into three points: "(1) that the first cause infuses the effect more powerfully than does the second cause; (2) that the impression of the first cause recedes later from the effect; (3) that it reaches the effect first." Following the *Liber*, Aquinas affirms in his *lectio 1* that the primary cause has priority over secondary causes because its power extends to more things and so "its proper effect must be more common". In particular, Aquinas teaches that the power of the primary cause extends to the causality of secondary causes: "For the first cause itself produces and moves the cause acting secondarily and so becomes the cause of its acting" (all from *In Liber de Causis*, I).

[16] It remains an open question whether Petrus read Aquinas' commentary to the *Liber*.

He then describes the relation of these two kinds of causes, saying: "the activity by which the second cause causes an effect is caused by the first cause, *for the first cause aids the second cause*, making it to act. Therefore, the first cause is more a cause than the second cause of that activity in virtue of which an effect is produced by the second cause" (*In Liber de Causis*, I. My emphasis). Here Aquinas recurs to Proclus' explanation of this doctrine, explaining that the Neo-Platonic author suggests that since a "second cause has its own substance from the first cause", it also has its power from that very first cause. Then, given that this power produces the effect, the second cause is the cause of its effect due to the first cause, which is, therefore, "more the cause of the effect than the second cause" (*In Liber de Causis*, I).

It is by *lectio 9*, where Aquinas is particularly concerned with how an intelligence receives its power to know from the first cause, that he explains this doctrine. Aquinas does not doubt in using clear Neo-Platonic terminology, affirming that the creature participates in God's causality: "of the perfections coming to things from the first cause, there is something that reaches all things, even down to generable and corruptible things, namely, being. But there is something that does not reach effects insofar as they are effects but only causes insofar as they are causes, namely power. Hence the participation of power [*participatio virtutis*] reaches as far as nature, which has the character of a principle". Further into the *lectio*'s text he explains that "intelligence, soul, and nature have power participated from another, as the power of a second cause is participated from the power of the first cause, which is not participated from another, but *is* itself *the cause of power*" (*In Liber de Causis*, 9. My emphasis).

Aquinas continues his in-depth explanation on the relation between primary and secondary causes in *lectio* 23 (devoted to how intelligences know and rule lower beings), acknowledging that the action of the secondary created cause is a product of this participation: "whatever abundantly participates a characteristic proper to some thing becomes like it not only in form but also in action... Because form is the principle of action, everything that acquires its action from an abundant participation of the infusion of a higher agent [*ex abundanti participatione influxus superioris agentis*] must have two actions: one according to its proper form, another according to a form participated from the higher agent, as a heated knife cuts according to its proper form but burns insofar as it is heated". Participation in being and in action is, thus, the ultimate root of the action of an instrumental cause, and hence of every created cause. From these ideas Aquinas arrives to the

fact that God's providence extends to all things, since "what is essentially act and goodness, namely God, essentially and originally communicates his goodness to things. This belongs to his rule, for it is proper for a ruler to lead those that are ruled to their appropriate end, which is the good… And so, the rule of the first cause, which is according to the essence of goodness, extends to all things" (both quotations from *In Liber de Causis*, 23).

## 4. **Concluding Analysis**

Aquinas worked on the *Liber* since the beginning of his academic career, and so adopted many of its Neo-Platonic tones and doctrines, even if thinking they were Aristotelian, some of which include: "that the first being, God, is the 'cause of causes'; that being (*esse*) as the 'first of created things' is the most proper effect of God, and, in St. Thomas' metaphysics, is the perfection by which all other perfections are in the creature's real participation in what God essentially is; that God as the first cause is 'innermostly mostly' present in all things by His abiding power as cause…; that second causes, while real causes, do not act without the first cause, and whatever power they have is due to the power of the first cause; that God rules all things without being mixed with them" (Guagliardo, 1996, p. xxx).

In his *QD Potentia Dei* Aquinas explicitly quotes the *Liber de Causis* thirty times, twice of which appear in the article I analyse in this paper (Guagliardo, 1996, 172). In his *Expositio*, even if he does not make explicit reference to the *De Potentia* (he tends not to reference explicitly other works of his own), he does treat the issue of the relation between primary and secondary causes with great similarity to his treatment in the disputed questions.

The q. 3 a. 7 of *De Potentia* is a question about the works of God in nature, so it is the place where Aquinas, in this work, expands at length in his treatment of the relationship between primary and secondary causes, distinguishing the four different ways in which they relate, and that I have grouped in two sets: the founding moments and the dynamic moments. In his *Exposition super Librum de Causis*, on the contrary, being a commentary of the text, Aquinas follows the themes that appear in each of the propositions, adding those that he considers pertinent to clarify or expand the author's ideas. So, even if he offers a lengthy treatment of the relationship between primary and secondary causes, he does not do it all in one section. Still, it is noteworthy to remark that he does recur to the same distinctions in both works, recurring both to Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic notions and termi-

nology, emphasising one over the other according to the tone of the question and text on which he is commenting.

What I have called the founding moments of divine providence (creation and sustaining), Aquinas explains in his first two ways in the *De Potentia* and in *lectio* 1 of his *Expositio* with further comments in *lectio* 9. As the earlier text shows, Aquinas is discussing these two ways in a more Aristotelian way, even quoting Aristotle's *Physics* IV explaining that "[a] producer moves heavy and light things, inasmuch as it gives them the power by which such movements results", to show that God gives the power to act when creating and sustains that power in being. In the latter text, Aquinas explains this very doctrine intertwining the Aristotelian ideas with the Neo-Platonic notion of participation, evidencing the intimate relation both traditions reach in his mature thought. In *lectio* 1 he states the first two ways in which God is said to act through secondary causes in what could be seen as neutral tones, affirming that "the first cause itself produces and moves the cause acting secondarily and so becomes the cause of its acting". Still, by *lectio* 9, he affirms, in certainly Neo-Platonic terms, that "the participation of power [*participatio virtutis*] reaches as far as nature, which has the character of a principle".

The final two moments present a more direct relationship between the two works, since they have, as te Velde remarks (1995, p. 165), a clear Neo-Platonic character in *De Potentia*, given that the instrument acts insofar it 'participates' the power of the principal agent. In fact, Aquinas quotes the *Liber*'s propositions 1 and 9 in his *De Potentia* when explaining the fourth way, to express two key ideas of his thought. First to say that all being is created by God as the most universal of all effects, and second to affirm that, due to this metaphysical fact, God's causality is more intimate to the effects that the causality of secondary causes. Recurring to the metaphysical tools of instrumental causation and its two kinds of effects to explain how the divine cause is present in every action of created causes presents Aquinas with the opportunity to confer a dual Aristotelian/Neo-Platonic aspect to his doctrine of providence, utilising both thought traditions to develop a full and solid concept of how God is seen to act through secondary causes. Thus, in his *Expositio* of proposition 23, he delves deeply into the Neo-Platonic language to speak about these dynamic ways of God acting in the actions of created beings: "everything that acquires its action from an abundant participation of the infusion of a higher agent must have two actions: one according to its proper form, another according to a form partici-

pated from the higher agent", which is the Neo-Platonic explanation of the two dynamic ways. In his *De Potentia*, also, when explaining these two ways, Aquinas recurs to the notion of participation to explain these ideas, saying that the instrument "somewhat causes that effect inasmuch as it participates in the power of the first cause", adding in an Aristotelian fashion that this participation is done "by being moved by the first cause".

Many other parallels could be found between these two texts, the *QD De Poentia q. 3, a 7*, and the *Expositio super Librum de Causis*. Still, I believe these few are enough to show not only that Aquinas adopts this fourfold characterization of God's acting in a through secondary causes to explain his doctrine of providence in his mature thought, but also that he does so recurring to Aristotelian as well as Neo-Platonic metaphysical principles available to him via the philosopher's and Proclus' texts. As Norris Clarke puts it, after all, Aquinas' Neo-platonically inspired participation metaphysics is "a personal synthesis which he constructed by (1) taking over the general formal structure of Neoplatonic participation theory, (2) emptying it of its excessive Platonic realism of ideas, (3) filling it with the new wine of his own quite original insight into the act of existence as the ultimate positive core of all real perfections – an act which is multiplied and diversified by reception into various limiting modes of essence, and (4) expressing the whole structure in a transformed Aristotelian terminology of act and potency" (Clarke, 2007, p. 48)[17].

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[17] See also (Brock, 2007, p. 475).

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