



Providence, Divine Causality, and the Gratuitousness of Love: A Thomist Perspective

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Abstract

Broadly drawing on the writings of Thomas Aquinas, this article is a systematic-theological (rather than historical-theological) engagement with the theme of providence and divine causality. It aims to dispel some modern misunderstandings of these topics by highlighting how pre-modern approaches differ from today's perspective. It does so by arguing, firstly, that Thomas, given his teleological focus, construes divine causality not so much as efficient causality but rather in terms of final causality. I will also make the point that Thomas's calling God a 'universal cause' should not be construed in terms of omni-causality, as if God predetermines every event (be it necessarily or contingently). In the final part of this contribution, I make some observations on the arbitrariness of afflictions and the connection with the gratuitousness of charity within the providential ordering.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, providence, divine causality, charity, afflictions

1. Introduction

Considering dramatic historical events of the previous century, it is perhaps not surprising that theology of the twentieth century engaged extensively with questions of providence, suffering, and evil.¹ These questions, of course, had already been discussed throughout the

¹ Thus shifting the focus of soteriology from 'sin' to 'suffering' as in the writings of J. Moltmann, especially in his once popular (but problematic) book *The Crucified God*. For a classic critique of the theology of a suffering God, see Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

tradition from different perspectives.² Even though the term ‘providence’ only rarely occurs in the Bible, the notion that God accompanies and extends care over creation and his chosen people permeates the entire Scriptures. Similarly, questions of divine governance and how to square it with the existence of evil preoccupied philosophers of Antiquity, including Plato, the Stoa, and Neoplatonists. The Biblical and philosophical traditions, in all their variety, were absorbed and transformed in the patristic age by thinkers such as St John Chrysostom and St Augustine.

Those questions were also of concern to high-medieval thinkers, including Thomas Aquinas, who dealt with the topic most extensively in the third book of his *Summa contra Gentiles*. He also considered it a key theme in the Book of Job, on which he wrote an important *Commentary*. In accordance with the thought of Antiquity, as crystallised in Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy*, scholastic authors (such as in the *Summa Halensis* and Duns Scotus), when discussing providence, usually considered both theological and philosophical aspects, such as the relation between God’s eternal will and foreknowledge, on the one hand, and creaturely freedom and contingency, on the other. Both perspectives can be found in Thomas’s writings as well.³ Aside from addressing those philosophical issues in a sophisticated manner he explicitly raises the more theological question: if there is a good God, why then evil (both moral and natural)? How does the seeming arbitrariness of the way suffering strikes both virtuous and profoundly sinful people square with the belief in the divine ordering of creation?⁴ Thomas considered inadequate answers to these questions profoundly perilous to the Christian faith.⁵

In the *Summa Theologiae* Thomas explicitly treats of providence in I, q. 22 and divine governance in I, q. 103–104 (and following). If,

² For helpful general overviews of the topic of providence, see Mark W. Elliott, *Providence. A Biblical, Historical and Theological Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020); Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip Ziegler (eds), *The Providence of God. Deus habet consilium* (London: T&T Clark, 2009); David Fergusson, *The Providence of God. A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

³ For a more philosophical consideration of Thomas’s views on these matters, see Harm Goris, *Free Creatures of an Eternal God. Thomas Aquinas on God’s infallible Knowledge and irresistible Will* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996).

⁴ As an imaginary objector had already put it in St Augustine’s *Sermon 29*: ‘If God really took care of the life of human beings, he certainly wouldn’t allow the wicked and the impious to live?’ (St Augustine, *Sermon 29* (Dolbeau) from *Sermons. The Works of St Augustine*. III/11 (NY: New City Press, 2013), p. 55).

⁵ As he puts it in his ‘Prologue’ to his *Commentary on the Book of Job*: ‘This idea [=an inadequate understanding, or even outright denial, of providence] causes a great deal of harm to mankind. For if divine providence is denied, no reverence or true fear of God will remain among men’. Translation by Brian Mullady from Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Job*. Vo. 32 of Latin/English Edition of the Works of St Thomas Aquinas (Wyoming: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2016).

however, we want to get a handle on Thomas's views on providence, it would be a mistake to consider only those passages where Thomas explicitly deals with the topic. His entire theology (incl. theology of creation, Christology and soteriology, pneumatology, sacramentology, and eschatology) is an attempt to penetrate deeper into the mystery of divine care and ordering of the world. Obviously, I will not be able to do justice to all these facets in this contribution.

While it may appear that Thomas at times raises similar questions to ours, we should remember that his perspective is fundamentally different from our own, which is why his views can both challenge and enrich ours. More specifically, a worldview, like our (post-)modern one, that is decidedly more immanent or *diesseitig* in orientation than the premodern one will construe the manifestation of divine providence and the operation of divine governance in the world differently. As I will explain, Thomas's perspective is more eschatological than today's one.⁶ I should like to signal from the outset that alerting the reader to Thomas's eschatological perspective should not be construed as a justification for present sufferings by appealing to the delights of the after-life that would allegedly compensate for them. Theologians should not adopt this line of argument when confronted with the victims of major suffering – and I am not aware, incidentally, that Thomas ever takes such a compensatory line in his major theological syntheses.⁷ I am, however, interested in exploring how providence involves a movement, here and now, toward our future fulfilment in God.

To grasp how Thomas conceives of divine providence we need to unpack how he understands divine causality. One of the major obstacles to providing a plausible account of divine providence is our modern concept of causality, which reduces divine operation and causality to an all-embracing, efficient causality. If we understand divine providence and causality in those terms, then, in light of the immense afflictions that befall humans, the belief in God becomes more difficult to sustain. To give a concrete example, much-discussed by Enlightenment thinkers: Was the earthquake that struck Lisbon on All Saints in 1755 (killing tens of thousands of people) caused by God and/or part of the divine plan? If so, did it not render belief in divine providence untenable?

In what follows I will argue that Thomas construes divine causality in much richer terms than efficient causality (and even when he uses the term 'efficient causality' it does not have the mechanistic connotations our concept has); nor does his calling God 'a universal cause' imply

⁶ It is also more sensitive to the continuing presence of grace in effecting our salvation throughout our lives; but this important aspect will also remain largely undiscussed in this contribution.

⁷ To do so may strike victims as irreverent and renders the Christian story vulnerable to legitimate criticism (the Marxist 'opium of the people' as it is popularly interpreted).

that God predetermines every event (be it necessarily or contingently). Once we have clarified these points, we can begin to make sense (again) of divine providence.⁸ To explain and demonstrate these claims, I will proceed as follows. First, I will remind the reader of Thomas's teleological perspective, which is of immediate significance for the notion of providence. Secondly, I will consider in more detail how he construes divine causality. Thirdly, I will examine the scope of divine providence and governance. I will finish this contribution by making some observations on afflictions and the gratuitousness of charity.

2. Providence as Prudence: A Teleological Perspective

Thomas's metaphysical and ethical thought is deeply teleological ('saturated with finality', as Stephen J. Pope puts it).⁹ All things – not just human beings – have their *telos* or goal, which constitutes a participation in the divine good. A text from the *ScG* III, 24 [6] illustrates this:

Even things which lack knowledge can be made to work for an end, and to seek the good by a natural appetite, and to seek the divine likeness and their own perfection. And there is no difference between saying one of these things or the other. By the very fact (...) that they seek their good, they tend toward resemblance to the divine: every being resembles God in the measure of its goodness. And this or that particular good becomes an object of desire according as it is a likeness of the first good. So too, for this reason it tends to its own good, because it tends to the divine likeness, and not conversely. Hence, it is evident that all beings seek divine likeness as their ultimate end.

All things desire the good, and in pursuing and actualising their own specific good they are pursuing and participating in, no matter how imperfectly, the pure actuality that is God, and grow in divine likeness. In a remarkably strong statement, Thomas identifies these two aspects: 'there is no difference between saying one of these things or the other'.

The fact that all things desire and pursue goodness has at least two important implications. First, on its own terms (without reference to the good) the pursuit of evil is utterly unintelligible. Even when we sin we are pursuing something good.¹⁰ The same applies, a

⁸ The main aim of this paper is to make sense of divine providence from a Thomist perspective. It is not primarily a historical-theological interpretation of Thomas's views on providence and divine causality per se, and how they evolved throughout his career (which they did).

⁹ Stephen J. Pope, 'Overview ...', p. 32 in Stephen J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ To use Thomas's stock example: the adulterer pursues pleasure (a good) but he does so without paying heed to the broader context in which sexual activity should legitimately

fortiori, to God who is goodness itself: God cannot possibly want evil as such. Secondly, the teleological perspective has important implications as to how we should conceive of divine providence and its scope, that is, in terms of final rather than merely efficient causality. I will return to this in section 3 of this article.

The teleological dimension of Thomas's entire outlook also finds expression in the fact that Thomas understands providence primarily in terms of the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom.¹¹ It is the proper function of prudence to arrange things to an *end*.¹² This indicates that interpreting providence mainly in terms of efficient causality is misguided. Characterizing providence as prudence does not mean, however, that God's providence is merely theoretical or contemplative. Prudence, while an intellectual¹³ (as distinct from a moral) virtue, is concerned with right reason about things to be done.¹⁴ It is therefore a virtue of the practical, not the theoretical, intellect. Moreover, the plan that exists in the mind of God finds concrete expression in divine governance (*gubernatio*), and one cannot separate Thomas's discussion of providence from that of governance. In short, Thomas's God is not a mere spectator of the world and its history. The key question is then: how exactly are we to understand God's involvement?

3. The Relation Between God as Primary Cause and Secondary Causes

We cannot make sense of divine providence and governance as Thomas conceives of it—indeed we cannot begin to grasp the Thomist outlook in general—without an outline as to how he construes the relation between divine and creaturely causality. As I mentioned, one of the key problems that besets today's popular (mis)understandings of providence is the fact that we reduce causality by and large to efficient

take place (i.e., within marriage, so as to protect the interests of the spouse and present or future off-spring—see *ScG* III, 123). Thomas uses this example because the sin of adultery is paradigmatic in Biblical terms: the faithlessness of Israel toward the covenant with Yahweh is usually construed in terms of adultery.

¹¹ *ST* I, q. 22, a. 1; and again, the term prudent (*prudens*) is said to be etymologically derived from *porro videns* (looking ahead), as Thomas claims in *ST* II-II, q. 47, a. 1, which is cognate to *providentia*. On the theme of providence as prudence, see the important recent study by Simon Maria Kopf, *Reframing Providence: New Perspectives from Aquinas on the Divine Action Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). All translations from *ST* are mine, but I have consulted both the Shapcote and Blackfriars editions.

¹² *ST* I, q. 22, a. 1; *ST* I-II, q. 57, a. 5; and II-II, q. 47, a. 10: 'it belongs to prudence rightly to counsel, judge and command concerning the means of obtaining a due end'.

¹³ *ST* I-II, q. 57, a. 5.

¹⁴ *ST* I-II, q. 57, a. 4.

causality only. This reflects a mechanistic worldview that became prevalent in the modern era.

Following Aristotle, Thomas's notion of causality is more multi-faceted than the modern one. As is well-known, he operates with a notion of four-fold causality. He does include *efficient* causality: the bricklayer is the efficient or agent cause in the building of a house, or Anton Bruckner in composing his Ninth Symphony. Thomas further identifies a *material* cause: as the word indicates, this may refer to matter (e.g., bricks and mortar) but should not be restricted to just 'stuff': rather, it extends to everything that can receive a form. *Formal* causality, in turn, refers to the presence of the form. If you build a house, you do so according to a plan, perhaps designed by an architect. That plan is the formal cause. *Final* causality, which is, as we have seen, of primary importance in Thomas's teleological worldview, refers to the goal or end as to why we act. We build a house to live in, to give us shelter from the elements.¹⁵ This is its function or end.¹⁶

Let us now examine the relation between divine causality and the operation of creatures. Thomas deals with this question in *ST I*, q. 105, a. 5, entitled whether God is active in every agent. Thomas first rejects the view that no created power effects anything in the world and that God does everything without intermediaries—a view he attributes to some Islamic scholars. Such a view leaves unexplained why creaturely causes have powers to act in the first place; more importantly, it abrogates from God as a cause so powerful that it is willing to share its power with creaturely causes.¹⁷ He then explains, by recalling the four causes, his central claim that God's acting in creatures must be understood in such a way that they themselves still exercise their own operations. Although God has created everything out of nothing he cannot be called a material cause – for matter implies receptivity (to form) and God is not passive or receptive. He continues by outlining the three other forms of causality by which God works in every cause,

¹⁵ It is not necessary that an agent is consciously aware of its final goal. A chameleon changes the colour of its skin in order to avoid detection by predators. Or plants turn to light to facilitate photosynthesis – but we may assume they do not knowingly do so.

¹⁶ These different causes cannot always be strictly distinguished from one another. For instance, formal and final causality tend to converge in meaning. Thomas gives the example of fire: a consuming fire is the cause of fire in both final, efficient, and formal terms. Also, not everything can be captured in terms of the four causes. Coincidences, for instance, do not have a final cause; they just happen for no reason.

¹⁷ In *ST I*, q. 105, a. 5 he outlines why he rejects this view: 'First, because the order of cause and effect would be taken away from created things: and this would imply lack of power in the Creator: for it is due to the power of the cause, that it bestows active power on its effect. Secondly, because the active powers which are seen to exist in things, would be bestowed on things to no purpose, if these wrought nothing through them. Indeed, all things created would seem, in a way, to be purposeless, if they lacked an operation proper to them; since the purpose of everything is its operation. (...) We must therefore understand that God works in things in such a manner that things have their proper operation'.

namely, final, efficient, and formal, and reminds us that final causality is the most important one.¹⁸ Given his teleological outlook, Thomas argues that God is directly or indirectly the *final* cause of every operation whatsoever: 'For since every operation is for the sake of some good, real or apparent; and nothing is good either really or apparently, except in as far as it participates in a likeness to the supreme Good, which is God; it follows that God himself is the cause of every operation as its end'.¹⁹ Reiterating an insight he had already expressed in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Thomas argues that in actualising their own potential, creatures begin to share in God's own actuality or perfection, each in their own way, even when they do so unconsciously or without deliberation.²⁰ Human beings (and angels), unlike other creatures, are conscious of their goal. Insofar as we actualise our potential – by knowing and loving God – we too imitate the divine perfection.²¹

In terms of *efficient* causality Thomas (following Aristotle) explains that every mover is moved by another mover. All agents, therefore, act in dependence on God as the unmoved mover, who is pure actuality: 'where there are several agents in order, the second always acts in virtue of the first; for the first agent moves the second to act. And thus all agents act in virtue of God himself: and therefore He is the cause of action in every agent'. This quotation illustrates that it would be wrong to interpret agent causality in mechanistic terms (the way one billiard ball moves another). Thomas means to convey that our power to act or change depends on other powers and that there is ultimately one power that makes this possible. Unlike in a mechanistic pattern, this higher power does not *determine* the outcome of the action as such (the way one billiard ball will determine the direction and the speed of another one) but it *enables* the action. This is a crucial difference. Thomas's God is not a (mildly incompetent) micro-manager of Universe Inc. God, as creator and providential carer, enables creatures to act but does not predetermine their actions. Finally, in terms of *formal* causality, God bestows forms upon things, making (or rather: 'creating') them into whatever they are.²²

¹⁸ *Ibid.* : 'In order to make this clear, we must observe that as there are four kinds of causes; matter is not a principle of action, but is the subject that receives the effect of action. On the other hand, the end, the agent, and the form are principles of action, but in a certain order. For the first principle of action is the end which moves the agent; the second is the agent; the third is the form of that which the agent applies to action (although the agent also acts through its own form); as may be clearly seen in things made by art. For the craftsman is moved to action by the end, which is the thing wrought, for instance a chest or a bed; and applies to action the axe which cuts through its being sharp'.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *ScG* III, 21 [2]: 'a created thing tends toward the divine likeness through its operation'.

²¹ See also *ST* I, q. 44, a. 4.

²² *ST* I, q. 105, a. 5: 'Thirdly, we must observe that God not only moves things to operated, as it were applying their forms and powers to operation, just as the workman applies the axe to

In short, God's causality – efficient, formal and final – sustains all beings in their operation, bestows their form upon them and is the end of their operation. He imparts forms to things, upholds them in existence, applies them to their actions, and is the end of all actions.²³ God is therefore intimately present in everything we do and are. Thomas concludes:

And since the form of a thing is within the thing, and all the more, as it approaches nearer to the First and Universal Cause; and because in all things God himself is properly the cause of universal being which is innermost in all things; it follows that in all things God works intimately (*sequitur quod Deus in omnibus intime operetur*).

In short, God bestows being upon things but he allows creatures to perform their secondary causality. I cannot do anything without the creative act of God who continually bestows being or existence upon me and who sustains every move I make –but it remains my move. Creaturely and divine causality are not in competition with one another; it is not a zero-sum game because divine causality is the condition of possibility of creaturely causality. Divine causality is effectively operating at a transcendental level, which is why creaturely and divine actions are not in competition with one another, but divine causality supports creaturely operation. We should not claim (as objection 2 of the same article does) that if an action of a creature issues from God working in the creature (*in creatura operante*), as Thomas believes it does, it cannot at the same time issue from the creature itself, as if it does not act in its own right. Thomas clarifies that ‘the one action does not issue from two agents of the same level (*una actio non procedit a duobus agentibus unius ordinis*); there is, however, nothing against one and the same action's issuing from a primary and a secondary agent (*a primo et secundo agente*)’.²⁴ Thus, Thomas's account of the relation between divine and creaturely causality explicitly rules out a notion in which primary and secondary causality are competing with one another

cut, who nevertheless at times does not give the axe its form; but he also gives created agents their forms and preserves them in being. Therefore he is the cause of action not only by giving the form which is the principle of action, as the generator is said to be the cause of movement in things heavy and light; but also as preserving the forms and powers of things; just as the sun is said to be the cause of the manifestation of colours, inasmuch as it gives and preserves the light by which colours are made manifest'. The analogy with the axe merely wants to convey that the operation of the axe is made possible by the movement of the workman, and not that the operation of the workman determines the action of the axe (which is how one would normally be inclined to interpret such an instrumental analogy).

²³ *ST I*, q. 105, a. 5 ad 3: *Deus non solum dat formas rebus, sed etiam conservat eas in esse et applicat eas ad agendum et est finis omnium actionum.*

²⁴ *ST I*, q. 105, a. 5 ad 2.

in a mutually exclusive manner. This is an important observation for the way we conceive of divine providence and governance.²⁵

4. The Scope of Divine Providence and the ‘Universality’ of Divine Causality

Aside from our ‘mechanistic’ leanings, a second and closely related issue that renders it difficult to make sense of providence is the popular assumption that God is the cause of everything that happens. True, Thomas explicitly calls God a ‘universal cause’ (as in *ST I*, q. 19, a. 6; and *I*, q. 22, a. 2 ad 1), which may appear to suggest that all events are both immediately caused and willed by God.²⁶ Or again, Thomas repeatedly says that everything that happens is subject to divine providence, as in *ST I*, q. 22, a. 3. This raises an immediate question: Can God therefore be said to want evil (be it moral or natural)? To return to our previous example: Did God cause the Lisbon earthquake and the ensuing loss of life?

One strategy would be to say that bad things, like earthquakes and even sinful acts, ‘just happen’. In a kind of kenotic move, God is said to make space for created things (such as tectonic plates or human beings), allowing them to exert their own activity.²⁷ Indeed, as we alluded to earlier, Thomas is known for affirming throughout his works that God’s majesty is enhanced by his allowing creatures to have their own operation and causality.²⁸ Extending this line of reasoning, one could argue that divine providence restricts itself, so to speak, even if this implies the possibility of the occurrence of suffering and evil.²⁹

²⁵ I will not discuss Thomas’s well-known claim that divine causality can realize its goal either through necessary or contingent secondary causes. This follows from the way he conceives of divine causality as transcendental. See, for instance, *ST I*, q. 22, a. 4 ad 1: ‘The effect of divine providence is not only that things should happen somehow; but that they should happen either by necessity or by contingency. Therefore whatsoever divine providence ordains to happen infallibly and of necessity happens infallibly and of necessity; and that happens from contingency, which the plan of divine providence conceives to happen from contingency’.

²⁶ Question 19, article 6 affirms that the will of God is always fulfilled. His conclusion runs as follows: ‘Since, then, the will of God is the universal cause of all things, it is impossible that the divine will should not produce its effect. Hence that which seems to depart from the divine will in one order, returns into it in another order: as does the sinner, who by sin falls away from the divine will as much as lies in him, yet falls back into the order of that will, when by its justice he is punished’.

²⁷ This approach has also proved popular, in diverse ways, amongst adherents of ‘open theism’. See Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1994) or John Sanders, *The God who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1998).

²⁸ *ST I*, q. 103, a. 6.

²⁹ This is occasionally construed in terms of a notion from kabbalah, namely *zimzum* (as in Moltmann) and even located (in a Hegelian manner) at the heart of the Trinity, that is, in

Again, admittedly, Thomas is happy to affirm that created beings have their own nature and given the mutually incompatible ends of creatures it is to be expected that corruption and evil ensue: the lion feeds at the expense of the deer. It would be contrary to the rational character of the divine regime to refuse permission for created things to act according to the mode of their nature. The created world, consisting of material and finite things that have an inherent orientation toward their own perfection, has its own integrity, which God respects and does not interfere with. Thomas gives the example of fire which, by its very nature, consumes things, and this may at times result in evil consequences (i.e., a house burns down).³⁰ Thomas drily concludes: 'Therefore, it is not part of divine providence to exclude evil altogether from things'.

While Thomas does indeed affirm the integrity of creaturely causality, I suspect he would nonetheless be less than impressed with the kenotic aspect that is popular in modern theology. The reason for this has already been hinted at in the previous section: the kenotic approach presupposes that divine and creaturely activity are effectively in competition with one another (the zero-sum game). That is why, supposedly, God has 'to make space' for creaturely activity. But this is exactly what Thomas denies.³¹ Divine causality operates on a transcendental level and can achieve its goal through secondary, creaturely causes but it is not in competition with them. We therefore need a different approach. Let me make the following points.

4.1 Universal Causality is Not Omni-causality

First, while I have reservations about the kenotic approach, the claim that God is a universal cause should not be interpreted in terms of omni-causality (as if God *directly* brings about everything that happens in an

the distance between the Father and his Word. We find this kind of speculation, for instance, in the writings of Simone Weil and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

³⁰ *ScG* III, 71 [5]: 'It does not belong to the providence of one who is the cause of all good to exclude from creatures all intention of any particular good, for thus many goods would be banished from the universe. Thus if fire were deprived of the intention of producing its like (a consequence of which is the evil of burning combustible things), the good consisting in fire being generated and preserved in its species would be done away'. In *ScG* III, 71 [2] Thomas also appeals to the distinction between God as primary cause and secondary causes to explain the occurrence of evil: 'it is possible for a defect to happen in an effect, because of a defect in the secondary agent cause, without there being a defect in the primary agent'. We do not blame the piano player for a false note if a faulty key distorts the music. I am not sure the argument, on its own terms, is all that convincing when it concerns God as creator of all things.

³¹ *ST* I, q. 22, a. 3 ad 2.

irresistible manner).³² Admittedly, as we saw in the previous section, God bestows being upon all things and is the condition of possibility of their very existence and operation; and he can effect whatever he wills to happen either contingently or necessarily. But from these claims it does not follow that God either directly causes, or wills, every event or condition. This applies especially and most obviously to evil. While Thomas characterizes divine causality as ‘universal’ he emphatically states that God does not cause moral evil (sin). He makes it quite clear that moral evil is opposed to the fulfilment of the divine will and love.³³ In no way, therefore, can God (who wills his own goodness) be said to cause or will sin.³⁴ Moral evil (genocide, rape, murder,...) is neither caused nor wanted by God. It does, however, resort under divine providence, in the sense that the sinner will be subjected to divine justice.³⁵

The observation that not everything that happens (e.g., sin) is either wanted or caused by God is of pastoral significance. Most readers pondering the nature of providence will, however, probably consider natural evil to be the more pressing theological issue in our understanding of providence. After all, we normally attribute responsibility for sin to the choices we make as human beings and do not assign blame to God. We are, however, more inclined to attribute natural evil to God. I cannot deal here with the relation between divine causality and natural evil (disease, death,...) in any detail but will make some brief points.³⁶ First, natural evil, like any evil, is a privation or absence of goodness and can therefore as such not be directly willed by God. On the other hand (and readers may initially find this disturbing), Thomas does affirm that God is the indirect or accidental cause of natural evil, namely insofar as it serves a greater good.³⁷ I will return later to the nature of this ‘greater good’. For now, I would like to observe that

³² See also *ST I*, q. 23, a. 7 where we learn that divine providence determines that there be different species (canine, bovine,...) but God does not determine, for instance, the number of puppies Lady and the Tramp (from Hollywood fame) will produce.

³³ *ST I*, q. 48, a.6. This does not imply that God is not the cause of the act of sin: he is, insofar as he is the cause of every action. But sin denotes ‘a being and an action with a defect; and this defect is from a created cause, viz. the free-will, as falling away from the order of the First Agent, viz. God. Consequently, this defect is not reduced to God as its cause’. (*ST I-II*, q. 79, a. 2).

³⁴ *ST I*, q. 19, a. 9: God ‘in no way wills the evil of sin, which is the privation of right order towards the divine good. The evil of natural defect, or of *poena*, he does will, by willing the good to which such evils are attached’.

³⁵ The fact that something (i.e., sin) is not caused by God and yet subject to divine providence is further illustration of the fact that we should not construe providence in terms of efficient causality.

³⁶ For some excellent literature on Thomas and evil, see Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2006); *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil* (Oxford: OUP, 2011); Laurent Sentis, *Saint Thomas d’Aquin et le Mal* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1992).

³⁷ *ST I*, q. 49, a. 1 and 2.

the affirmation that God is the cause of (natural) evil is an immediate consequence of Thomas's metaphysical monism (and his rejection, as a Dominican, of Cathar dualism): evil does not find its origin in a second principle (i.e., an evil Demiurge) allegedly on the same level as the true God. It therefore has to find its origin in God himself— an arresting thought. Before we jump to hasty conclusions that this derogates from the goodness of God, we should remember, firstly, that, as I just mentioned, God does not directly will the privation that is natural evil but he wills it only accidentally or indirectly. As Thomas writes in *ST I*, q. 19, a. 9 ad 3: God neither wills evils to be nor wills evils not to be; he wills to allow them to happen (*vult permittere mala fieri*). Permitting evil (which is a privation) to occur, is different from causing something good or positive to occur. God is a force for the good, in which all things can share. The evil that occurs is negativity, which is not caused by God (in the case of sin), or only indirectly (natural evil). 'Permitting evil' in this context effectively means that God does not prevent an absence.³⁸ In other words: it means that God does not actively interfere in the operation of secondary causes (such as the friction of tectonic plates that lead to earthquakes). Secondly, Thomas's claim that natural evil finds its ultimate origin in the goodness of God is, paradoxically, a positive claim that implies an affirmation of the primacy of goodness. It suggests that evil is not on the same metaphysical level as goodness, but the former is always parasitic, so to speak, upon the latter. Indeed, because everything that God has made is good, evil (as the privation of goodness) can itself be a pointer towards goodness – the goodness that should be there but is absent, at least partly, in some instances. When Thomas therefore discusses the popular objection that the existence of evil precludes belief in a good, omnipotent God ('If God exists whence comes evil?') he writes: 'But it could be argued to the contrary: "If evil exists, God exists." For there would be no evil if the order of good were taken away, since its privation is evil. But this order would not exist if there were no God'.³⁹ Given that our philosophical diet is more phenomenological than metaphysical we can perhaps, as Kathleen McManus suggested, translate Thomas's provoking statement in terms of what Edward Schillebeeckx called 'negative contrast experiences'.⁴⁰ Whenever we cry out, in the face of suffering, 'This is not how it should be!' our very revolt implicitly affirms the overall goodness of the world. Our revolt and indignation only make sense in light of an implicit affirmation of the thesis that goodness has generally

³⁸ See Sentis, *Saint Thomas d'Aquin et le Mal*, 128.

³⁹ *ScG III*, 71 [10].

⁴⁰ Kathleen McManus, 'Suffering in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx', *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 476-91.

overall primacy over evil in this world (even if not in every instance)—a thesis for which Thomas provides the metaphysical foundations.⁴¹

If it is correct that we should not entertain a notion of divine omnicausality (as if every event or condition in the world is predetermined and immediately caused by God) it follows that there are at least particular instances, such as sinful acts, in which the order of divine government can be resisted. I write ‘particular’ because even when we act against the divine order and will, we still fall under the scope of divine providence in a general sense: in sinning we still pursue a good (implicit orientation toward the universal good) and our sinful act remains, of course, dependent on God’s sustaining power, which is part of providence. Moreover, sinful acts fall under divine providence generally insofar as they will elicit retribution for the sake of justice.⁴²

4.2 *The Scope of Divine Providence*

So far, I have argued that characterizing God as universal cause does not imply that God directly causes or wills every event or condition. Secondly, I should mention that Thomas considers evil to be less extensive than we generally do, and this has obviously implications for how we should construe the scope of divine providence.⁴³ If he had been familiar with the findings of evolutionary biology, Thomas would be less concerned – less sentimental perhaps – than most of us when confronted with the fact that its story is written in blood. In a finite, corporeal world it is inevitable and even desirable that things decay and die ‘for the good of the order of the universe’.⁴⁴ Tellingly, even in prelapsarian paradise, Thomas claims, there would have been death and decay in the animal kingdom (excluding humans).⁴⁵

⁴¹ See Rik Van Nieuwenhove, ‘Protest Theism, Aquinas and Suffering’ in Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (eds), *Suffering and the Christian Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 71–86.

⁴² *ST I*, q. 103, a. 8 and ad 1 & 3.

⁴³ It is correct, as Brian Davies reminds us in *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae. A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 114, that *malum* (which Thomas understands as ‘badness’ of any kind) is much broader than what we popularly call evil in terms of ‘really horrendous things’. But it is also correct, as I explain here, that a lot of things that we may find disturbing in the natural realm (such as a young bison being devoured by a pack of wolves) Thomas would not label as ‘evil’ (unless one were to take the perspective of the bison) but a mere instance of natural death and corruption (*defectus*), and not a *malum*.

⁴⁴ *ST I*, q. 49, a. 2.

⁴⁵ *ST I*, q. 96, a. 1 ad 2: ‘In the opinion of some, those animals which now are fierce and kill others, would, in that state, have been tame, not only in regard to us, but also in regard to other animals. But this is quite unreasonable. For the nature of animals was not changed by our sin, as if those whose nature now it is to devour the flesh of others, would then have lived

Thomas calls death and natural corruption *defectus*⁴⁶ and does not, strictly speaking, consider them evil. Evil is not a mere absence of goodness as such but rather a privation, that is, an absence of goodness that should be there. It is, for instance, not an evil that pigs cannot fly. Similarly, it cannot be considered a privation that living things decay and die. Natural corruption of living things cannot be reasonably called either penalty (*malum poena*) or sin (*malum culpae*). In short, in Thomas's view, (the defects of) decay and death in creatures are natural and cannot therefore be considered an evil in the strict sense.⁴⁷ In light of the overall good of the world they are actually good, not evil.

4.3 Final Causality and the Eschatological Perspective

Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, we need to remember that providence and governance are primarily concerned with final causality. When Thomas calls God a universal cause it is essential, in order to avoid misinterpreting this in terms of omni-causality, that we keep in mind the nature of this end or goal of divine causality. This is decidedly not primarily the temporal well-being of human beings, or even of all creatures but, rather, the dwelling of rational creatures in the presence of God for all eternity. The fact that this eschatological perspective has faded from the popular imagination is, in my view, one of the reasons why people today find it difficult to make sense of the doctrine of divine providence.⁴⁸ Providence and governance are concerned with how God extends his care and governance to every one of us while guiding us *toward salvation*.⁴⁹ It is in this sense, I believe, that we need to construe the universal causality of God in relation to us: God makes sure that all things work for our *ultimate* good (which is to dwell in his presence for all eternity), rather than for any *temporal* goods per se.

on herbs, as the lion and the falcon (...). Thus, there would have been a natural antipathy between some animals'.

⁴⁶ *ST I*, q. 49, a5 ad 2: '*Poena* and fault do not divide evil absolutely considered, but evil that is found in voluntary things'.

⁴⁷ *ST I*, q. 48, a. 5 ad 1: 'it is against the nature of a creature to be preserved in existence by itself, because existence and conservation come from one and the same source. Hence this kind of defect is not an evil as regards a creature'.

⁴⁸ The significance of the eschatological dimension has been highlighted by John Thiel, *Icons of Hope. 'The Last Things' in Catholic Imagination* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013) and Karen Kilby's constructive engagement with this book in her contribution 'Eschatology, Suffering, and the Limits of Theology' in Christophe Chalamet, Andreas Dettwiler, Mariel Mazzocco, and Ghislain Waterlot (eds.), *Game over? Eschatology Reconsidered* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 283-95.

⁴⁹ It is no coincidence that the question on providence is immediately followed by the one on predestination, reprobation, 'and all that is connected with these acts in respect of man as regards his eternal salvation' ('Prologue', I, q. 22).

This ultimate good (God) is a good outside of this world.⁵⁰ This connection between the universality of providence and its eschatological orientation is explicated in his reply to an objection in question 22, a. 2 ('Whether everything is subject to the providence of God?'). Objection 4 claims that God's providence is limited, for the Bible states that we are sometimes left to ourselves by God (quoting Ecclus. 15:14 and Ps 53:13). Thomas first explains that when it is said that God leaves us to ourselves, this does not mean that we are exempt from divine providence; but merely that we, as self-determining agents endowed with free will, are not subject to a prefixed operating force determined to only the one effect. He then continues:

But since the very act of free will is traced to God as to a cause, it necessarily follows that everything happening from the exercise of free will must be subject to divine providence. For human providence is included under the providence of God, as a particular under a universal cause. God, however, extends his providence over the just in a certain more excellent way than over the wicked; inasmuch as He prevents anything happening which would impede their final salvation. For 'to them that love God, all things work together unto good' (Romans 8:28). But from the fact that He does not restrain the wicked from the evil of sin, He is said to abandon them: not that He altogether withdraws his providence from them; otherwise they would return to nothingness, if they were not preserved in existence by his providence.

Providence extends to all (non-rational creatures, sinners, and the elect) in different degrees: from maintaining them into existence (within a framework of a good and orderly creation) to securing that, no matter what happens, the elect will attain their final salvation. Thomas's notion of providence is therefore hierarchical: parts of the universe are for the sake of the universe as such; but the good of the universe is, in turn, in function of its noblest parts, and these are the saints, whom God loves for their own sake and whom he draws into his own presence. As Thomas says when commenting on Rom. 8:28:

whatever happens to the noblest parts is ordained only to their good, because his [God's] care for them is for their sake, whereas his care for the others is for the sake of the noblest: as a physician allows a malady in the foot that he might cure the head. But the most excellent parts of the universe are God's saints (...) whatever happens to them or to other things, it all accrues to the benefit of the former.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *ST I*, q. 103, a. 2: 'it is manifest that in the whole created universe there is nothing is good unless by participation; that good, then, that is the end of the whole universe must be a good transcending the whole universe' (*extrinsecum a toto universo*).

⁵¹ Translation by Fabian Larcher from Saint Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*. Vol. 37 Latin/English Edition of the Works of St Thomas Aquinas (Wyoming: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012) no. 697.

In short, we misunderstand ‘providence’ if we conceive it primarily in terms of the care that God is supposed to extend to things temporal in a pre-determinative manner. Again, this is not to deny that God creates and upholds all things in existence, bestows their form, grounds their operation, and draws them to him through the pursuit of their own perfection. But the aim of divine providence is not the temporal well-being of creatures, not even of humans. (Enlisting or, even worse, trying to manipulate God into supporting our own worldly plans, concerns and designs is a pagan exercise). The end of providence is, ultimately, God himself and our participation in him.⁵² This is why Thomas likes quoting Prov. 16:4 when discussing providence.⁵³

Thomas’s views on prayer confirm the theocentric (and therefore eschatological) nature of providence. Prayer is an interesting topic for a number of reasons. First, philosophically, it raises the issue whether or not petitions by creatures can somehow impact God’s eternal and immutable providence. Or again, does it make sense to pray if God has an eternal foreknowledge and immutable will about what will happen throughout the course of history? These are philosophical questions, and Thomas has dealt with them in a convincing manner.⁵⁴ For our purposes, the theological perspective is more relevant: can prayer (and what we should pray for) throw light on how Thomas conceives of divine providence?⁵⁵ Is it meaningful, for instance, to pray that the Irish team may win the Rugby World Cup? Or that one’s business venture will prove successful? Or, less frivolously and more poignantly, that a loved one may be healed from terminal cancer? If the answer is an unequivocal ‘yes’ to these questions, the conclusion will follow that divine causality extends to all these matters, moving us toward an understanding of divine omni-causality. But I do not think this is Thomas’s view.⁵⁶ While prayer is emphatically petitionary for

⁵² See the beautiful text in *ST I*, q. 65, a. 2 on the hierarchy of the universe existing for the sake of our fruition of God, who himself is the end of the entire universe. He concludes: ‘the entire universe, with all its parts, is ordained towards God as its end, inasmuch as it imitates, as it were, and shows forth the divine goodness, to the glory of God. Reasonable creatures, however, have in some special and higher manner God as their end, since they can attain to him by their own operations, by knowing and loving him. Thus it is plain that the divine goodness is the end of all corporeal things’.

⁵³ Prov. 16:4: ‘God has made all things for himself (*Universa propter semetipsum operatus est Deus*)’. Thomas quotes this text in *ScG III*, 17 [10] and in the *sed contra* of *ST I*, q. 44, a. 4 and q. 65, a. 2, amongst ca. twenty other places throughout his oeuvre.

⁵⁴ For a brief but helpful account, see Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 178–84.

⁵⁵ See Emmanuel Durand, ‘The Gospel of Prayer and Theories of Providence: A Theological Discernment Following Thomas Aquinas’ *The Thomist* 78 (2014): 519–36.

⁵⁶ This probably needs some unpacking in light of the texts mentioned in the following footnote. The outcome of sporting events is pretty irrelevant for salvation, and we should not pray for them. Praying for success in business may be legitimate if it can contribute to establishing God’s realm on earth (e.g., by charitable use of profits or creating a working

Thomas, he explicitly states that temporal goods should only be sought for the sake of what we truly want, and that is God as our final goal.⁵⁷ Hence, what we should ask for in prayer is a life of blessedness (*beata vita*) and everything else we ask for should be desired in view of this (*ordinantur*). This other-worldly dimension of what we should pray for mirrors the eschatological nature of Thomas's understanding of providence.

Before I conclude this section, I want to make two further observations. Nothing I outlined so far should be interpreted as a justification of evil. The point is often made that you cannot always justify evil by appealing to the good that comes from it, and even less so, a sceptic might drily add, if this good is transcendent or otherworldly, as I argued it ultimately is for Thomas. In David Fergusson's words: 'a resolution of evils does not necessarily constitute a justification for their origin'.⁵⁸ But we should note that Thomas is not engaged in the business of justifying evil (or God, for that matter). His main concern, as in the *ScG* III, 71, is the question whether evil is compatible with the affirmation of divine providence. He is not trying to argue that evil as such can be justified but rather that the occurrence of evil does not rule out a solid belief in providence. Clearly, the two issues are related but they are not identical. Thomas would regard a legitimization of evil a dubious project, if only because, without reference to goodness, evil is inherently unintelligible anyhow, for the philosophical reasons I outlined earlier.

Secondly, even if we grant that divine providence and causality should not be understood as predetermining every event (as mechanistic or efficient omni-causality); that God allows secondary causes to fail; and that he lets death and corruption occur, without directly causing them, for the sake of a greater good; one could still wonder: Could God not have created a world with less suffering and evil? Thomas addresses this question in *ST* I, q. 25, a. 6, where he effectively raises the question whether God could do a better job than he does. Could God have made our world better than it is? He initially responds by saying that this is impossible, for it then would no longer be our world (but a different one). When pushed on the issue, however, he does concede that 'God could make other things or add something to the present

environment in which employees can lead flourishing lives). If a loved one is diagnosed with terminal cancer we can legitimately pray that God works a miracle – but there cannot be an expectation that God will routinely do so, for frequently recurrent instances of miracles [which Thomas defines as a work done by God surpassing any known causes (*ST* I, q. 105, a. 8), or outside the normal course of things and therefore beyond the expectation (*spes*) of nature (q. 105, a. 8 ad 2)] would render the world less predictable and orderly.

⁵⁷ *IV Sent.* d. 15, q. 4, a. 4, qc. 2 ad 1; *ST* II-II, q. 83, a. 6: 'it is lawful to desire temporal things, not indeed principally, by placing our goal therein, but as helps whereby we are assisted in tending toward beatitude'. See also II-II, q. 83, a. 9.

⁵⁸ Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 204.

creation; and then there would be another and better universe'.⁵⁹ Clearly, according to Thomas, we do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Significantly, he offers us no explanation as to why this is the case. This is both sobering and sound. It suggests that questions of suffering and evil ultimately point to the mystery of God himself and his gratuitous love. This brings me to the final section of this article.

5. Providence and the Gratuitousness of Suffering and Charity

So far, I have argued that divine causality, in Thomas's understanding, should not be primarily interpreted in terms of efficient causality, and even when he mentions efficient causality as one of the causes, he does not understand it in mechanistic terms. Similarly, the claim that God is a 'universal cause' does not mean that all events and conditions are caused by God. God does not want sin and even though he sustains the sinner in his sinful act God does not cause sin. Natural evil God is said to 'permit' (with the qualifications mentioned earlier) or even to cause, not directly, but for the sake of a greater good. This 'greater good', however, is ultimately eschatological and can never be equated with, or reduced to, this-worldly temporal affairs, no matter how much the former impacts (through the all-pervasive operation of grace in the world) on the latter. While divine providence extends to all things in this world, in varying degrees, its ultimate end is not of this world. That end is the salvation of the saints, called to dwell in the presence of God. They are the primary focus of God's gratuitous love: other things have been created and are loved by God for the sake of the elect who themselves are called to the fruition of God.⁶⁰

Even if we accept all of this, one might object that there still appears to remain an excessive arbitrariness in the way afflictions strike both good and bad. To mitigate this sheer randomness, one could argue that afflictions are in reality not undeserved or arbitrary, for all human beings share in (original) sin. The Augustinian distinction between *malum poenae* (natural evil, or evil suffered) and *malum culpae* (moral evil or evil done), insofar as it aims to capture exhaustively all instances of evil, implies that all afflictions are effectively penal, and therefore not arbitrary.

In my reading, Thomas qualifies this view considerably, not only by introducing the category of *defectus*, as we saw earlier, but also by proposing an alternative approach, which is partly at odds with it.⁶¹ For

⁵⁹ *ST* I, q. 25, a. 6 ad 3.

⁶⁰ *ST* I, q. 65, a. 2.

⁶¹ *ST* II-II, q. 108, a. 4: 'We can consider *poena* in a different way, namely as medicinal (*Alio modo potest considerari poena, inquantum est medicina*)'. For a refutation of a penal reading of Thomas's soteriology (and the term *poena* in particular), see Rik Van Nieuwen-

starters, Thomas suggests we should consider *poenae* or afflictions not so much as penal but rather as medicinal in character: not just to heal past sins but also to prevent future ones, or even as an inducement to some good. Thomas adds: ‘In this way a person is sometimes afflicted without any fault of his own, yet not without cause (*punitur sine culpa, non tamen sine causa*)’. These are charged words. Presumably, Thomas has the book of Job in mind, where the protagonist is being subjected to immeasurable suffering, even though he has led a righteous life.⁶² It should be clear that the claim that in some instances God inflicts *poenae* (afflictions or ‘punishments’) on those who are free from guilt effectively contradicts the first, more traditional view, which had proposed the exact opposite, namely that all suffering is because of sin. It suggests that Thomas was less than comfortable with the view that afflictions (suffering, death, ...) are necessarily penal.⁶³ While stating that God may inflict afflictions either for medicinal reasons (i.e., to heal the effects of past sins or prevent future ones) or even as an inducement to some good, Thomas adds an important qualification:

It must, however, be observed that a medicine never removes a greater good in order to promote a lesser; thus the medicine of the body never blinds the eye, in order to heal a blister: yet sometimes it is harmful in lesser things that it may be helpful in things of greater consequence. And since spiritual goods are of the greatest consequence, while temporal goods are the least important, sometimes a person who is sinless at times suffers the loss of earthly goods (*ideo quandoque punitur aliquis in temporalibus bonis absque culpa*); this is the meaning of many of the hardships of life inflicted by God to humble and test us. But no one who has not sinned personally is ever punished by being deprived of spiritual goods, either in this life or the next, where punishments are not medicinal but the consequence of spiritual damnation.⁶⁴

hove, ‘St Thomas Aquinas on salvation, making satisfaction, and restoration of friendship with God’ *The Thomist* 83 (2019): 521-545. See also *ST* I, q. 19, a. 11 ad 2: ‘punishment (*punitio*) is not a sign that indicates real anger in God’.

⁶² For a helpful discussion, see Roger Nutt, ‘Providence, Wisdom, and the Justice of Job’s Afflictions: Considerations from Aquinas’ *Literal Exposition on Job* in *The Heythrop Journal* 56 (2015): 44-66.

⁶³ In a reply to an objection in the previous article (q. 108, a. 3 ad 2) Thomas had explicitly stated that in this life afflictions have more of a medicinal purpose (rather than a penal one): *poenae praesentis vitae sunt magis medicinales*. Similarly, Thomas’s refusal to attribute any trace of vindictiveness to God also shows in his remarkable comment (q. 108, a. 4, ad 1) on how to interpret the text ‘I am a jealous God... visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation’ (Ex. 20:5): he considers this an indication of mercy rather than of severity, in the sense that God does not immediately exact vengeance but postpones it in order that the descendants may be corrected. In relation to Thomas’s qualification of death as punishment for original sin, see also *ScG* IV, 52: after outlining the traditional view (death is punishment) in [1] he considers the possibility in [2] that death and other afflictions are merely ‘natural defects necessarily consequent upon matter’.

⁶⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 108, a. 4.

This last sentence illustrates that Thomas considers afflictions, at least in this life, to be more medicinal than penal. Secondly, the quotation indicates that in God's providential care good people may at times suffer hardships and afflictions of a 'temporal' nature independently of sin (*absque culpa*); but they will never be deprived of spiritual goods. This confirms the eschatological nature of divine providence outlined earlier and the special care God extends to the elect.⁶⁵

In order to address the earlier objection that pointed to the seeming randomness built in the state of temporal affairs, in which God sends rain on the just and the unjust alike (Mt 5:45), and afflictions do not appear to be necessarily bound up with any sins we may have committed, we need to return to the earlier quotation from *ST* II-II, q. 108, a. 4. Thomas does not elaborate on the 'cause' for which innocent people might be afflicted with suffering, aside from suggesting in general terms that it may be to test us, or for the glory of God to be manifested. Following hints in Thomas's oeuvre elsewhere, we can say more specifically that afflictions can be a means of growing in conformity with Christ's Passion and may assist us in attaining the fruition of God. This is an important theme in Thomas's soteriology.⁶⁶ But even this idea, pastorally important as it undoubtedly is, should not be adduced as a proper 'cause' for random afflictions, lest we are in danger of legitimising suffering. The challenge is therefore: Can we *both* affirm the utter absurdity and arbitrariness of afflictions (and therefore avoid the trap of easy and irreverent legitimation of suffering of innocent people) and *yet* claim that they are somehow encompassed in the providence of God?⁶⁷

I believe Thomas's thought gives us sufficient resources to do so. In the Prologue of the Book of Job, Satan claims that Job's fear of the Lord is 'not for nothing' or in vain (*numquid frustra* in the Vulgate, Jb. 1:9). In other words, Satan alleges that Job's adherence to God is calculating and instrumentalist, that is, Job loves God because of the temporal goods he has gained from him.⁶⁸ Thomas obviously rejects this, commenting that Satan unjustly deprecates the deeds of Job as though he did them for the sake of earthly goods. He continues:

⁶⁵ In *ST* I, q. 22, a. 2 ad 4 Thomas similarly says that God will never allow temporal afflictions to imperil the soul of his elect. 'God (...) extends his providence over the just in a certain more excellent way than over the wicked; inasmuch as he prevents anything happening that would impede their final salvation'.

⁶⁶ See Rik Van Nieuwenhove, "'Bearing the marks of Christ's Passion"—Aquinas's Soteriology' in Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (eds), *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 277-302 (with references to *ScG* IV, 55 [28] and *ST* III, q. 56 a. 1, ad 1).

⁶⁷ Some of what follows is partly inspired by bringing Simone Weil's insights in dialogue with Thomas Aquinas.

⁶⁸ *Commentary on Job*, ch. 1, lect. 2 (tr. p. 19-20).

So it is clear that the good things which we do are not referred to earthly prosperity as a reward; otherwise, it would not be a perverse intention if someone were to serve God because of temporal prosperity. *The contrary is likewise true. Temporal adversity is not the proper punishment of sins,* and this question will be the theme dealt with in the entire book.⁶⁹

Thomas strongly resists the view that the randomness of temporal afflictions constitutes a sufficient refutation of the belief in providence.⁷⁰ On the contrary, we can argue *ad mentem Thomae* (although Thomas does not say this explicitly) that the seeming arbitrariness itself may be part of providence. The reason it is present may be that, in a material, finite world, it can safeguard a gratuitous, non-calculative response to God's love.⁷¹ This needs some unpacking.

God's love itself is totally gratuitous and not subject to any external considerations. Indeed, God's object of love is God himself.⁷² God loves created things, not in a responsive way but in a creative manner: things are good, beautiful and truthful because God loves them, and not the other way around.⁷³ God's love is, however, not undifferentiated. Considering what was said earlier about the special providential care God exerts for the sake of intelligent beings and the elect in particular, it will not surprise the reader to learn that God loves rational creatures (angels and humans) with a love of friendship (*amor amicitiae*) but other creatures only with a love of desire (*amor concupiscentiae*).⁷⁴ In love of friendship we love others for their sakes, in a gratuitous, non-calculating manner. In love of desire, in contrast, we love something

⁶⁹ *Commentary on Job*, ch. 1, lect. 2 (tr. p. 20) My italics.

⁷⁰ See his 'Prologue' to the *Commentary on the Book of Job* (tr. p. 7).

⁷¹ Timothy Jackson has developed a similar line of argument in 'Must Job live forever? A Reply to Aquinas on Providence' in *The Thomist* 62 (1999): 1-39. In ScG IV, 55 [28] Thomas asks why the afflictions the theological tradition associates with original sin were not taken away immediately (suffering, death). One of the reasons he adduces is the following: 'if people coming to Jesus were forthwith to achieve immortality and impassibility, many would approach Christ more for these bodily benefits than for spiritual goods. And this is against the intention of Christ who came into the world to change is from love of bodily things to love of spiritual things'. Also: 'if those who come to Christ were forthwith rendered incapable of suffering and death, this would somehow compel them to accept faith in Christ'. These arguments allude to our theme of the non-instrumentalist, gratuitous character of the relationship between God and his faithful.

⁷² *ST I*, q.20, a.1 ad 3.

⁷³ *ST I*, q.20, a.2: 'God loves everything that exists. Yet not as we love. Because since our will is not the cause of the goodness of things, but is moved by it as by its object, our love, whereby we will good to anything, is not the cause of its goodness; but conversely its goodness, whether real or imaginary, evokes our love, which cherishes the dearness it possesses and wishes it to gain that which it is yet to have; and to this end we direct our actions: whereas the love of God infuses and creates goodness in things'.

⁷⁴ *ST I*, q.20, a.2 ad 3: 'Friendship cannot exist except toward rational creatures, who are capable of returning love, and communicating one with another in the various works of life. (...) God does not love irrational creatures with the love of friendship; but as it were with the love of desire, insofar as He orders them to rational creatures, and even to himself'.

(or someone) for the sake of a person (and that person can be somebody else or myself). Thus, Peter loves John for his own sake (love of friendship) but he loves wine with a love of desire, i.e., because it contributes to the happiness of either himself or another.⁷⁵

As is well-known, Thomas characterizes our love for God, or charity, in terms of friendship.⁷⁶ It, too, is therefore utterly gratuitous or non-instrumentalist: we are friends with God, not for the sake of any benefits that may accrue to us but simply because we love God in his own right – for himself.⁷⁷ In contrast to the other two theological virtues, namely faith and hope, by which we still aim to obtain something from God (namely, truth and assistance in obtaining happiness, respectively), only charity is utterly for its own sake: ‘Charity makes us adhere to God for his own sake (*propter seipsum*), binding the soul to God in the affection of love. Faith and hope make us adhere to God as the source whence other good things come our way’.⁷⁸

It should be clear, as the Book of Job illustrates, that the afflictions that befall us and that cannot be challenged or remedied,⁷⁹ in their very meaninglessness and arbitrariness, provide us with an opportunity to become schooled in a love for God that is non-calculating or disinterested, and utterly gratuitous – not unlike God’s own love for his creation. Paradoxically as it may seem, arbitrary suffering, in its very randomness, is part of God’s all-embracing providential care.

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⁷⁵ On this distinction, see David Gallagher, ‘The Will and its Acts’ in Stephen J. Pope (ed.), *The Ethics of Aquinas*, 84.

⁷⁶ *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 1.

⁷⁷ The *sed contra* of *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 2 states that charity is ‘the movement of the soul towards the enjoyment of God for its own sake’. That enjoyment, as we learn from *ST* I, q. 65, a. 2, is also the end of providence. See also the *sed contra* in *ST* II-II, q. 27, a. 3.

⁷⁸ *ST* II-II, q. 17, a. 6.

⁷⁹ Nothing of what has been said in this article should be interpreted as an invitation to acquiesce in afflictions caused by human injustice, power and greed.