

THEOLOGY NIGHT

“GOD’S existence, PERFECTION, AND PROVIDENCE”

A DISCUSSION OF THE BOOK, "PROVIDENCE"
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Le P. Garrigou, jeune dominicain.

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Chapter 1: God the Prime Mover of Corporeal and Spiritual Beings.

It will be well to point out one general proof that virtually contains them all. It may be summed up in this way: The greater does not come from the less, the more perfect does not come from the less perfect, since the latter is incapable of producing this effect.

There are in the world living, intelligent beings that come into existence and disappear again; they are therefore not self-existent. And what we say of the present applies equally to the past.

Consequently, they require a cause, one that is self-existent. Hence there must exist from all eternity a first Being who owes His being to none but Himself and is able to confer being on others: a first living being, a first intelligence, a first goodness and holiness (page 3).

All motion requires a mover.

First, in motion there is something new that requires explanation. Where does this new element come from, which previously had no existence? The question applies to past as well as to present forms of motion (p. 5).

Secondly, motion exists only in a movable object: it is this individual motion for the sole reason that it is the motion of the mobile object. ...But if there is no motion apart from a mobile object, is it possible for that object to move itself by its own power and without a cause of any kind? Can the stone of itself set itself in motion without someone to throw it into the air, or without some other body to attract it? Can the cold metal become hot of itself, without a source of heat? (5f)

We Christians hold it to be a fact known from revelation, that the world had a beginning: that it was created not from all eternity...but in time. This is an article of faith defined by the councils. But precisely because it is an article of faith and not merely one of the preambles to the faith, is why St. Thomas holds that reason alone can never demonstrate that the world had a beginning (Ia, q. 46, a. 2). And why does this truth transcend the natural powers of our intellect? Because that beginning depended on the free will of God. Had He so willed, He might have

created the world ten thousand years, a hundred thousand years, millions of years before, or at a time even more remote, without there having been a first day for the world, but simply a dependence of the world on its Creator, just as a footprint in the sand is due to the foot that makes it, so that, had the foot always been there the footprint would have had no beginning (8f).

Although revelation teaches that the world did in fact have a beginning, it does not seem impossible, says St. Thomas, for the world always to have existed in its dependence on God the Creator (9).

The characteristics of the supreme mover

Since the first mover is pure act with no admixture of the imperfection of potentiality, it follows that He is in no way perfectible. He is infinitely perfect, pure being, the pure and ever actual intellection of supreme truth, the pure and ever actual love of the fulness of being ever actually loved (14).

He is omnipresent, because to move all beings whether spiritual or corporeal, He must be present, since these beings do not move themselves, but are moved by Him.

He is eternal, for He has always by and of Himself all His being and all His action of thought and love. In one immobile instant transcending time, He possesses His life simultaneously in all its completeness. When the world was created, the creative act did not commence in God, for it is eternal; but it produced its effect in time at the desired moment fixed from all eternity (14f).

The first mover is unique: for pure act does not receive existence, it is existence; it is being itself, which cannot be multiplied. Were there two first movers, since one would not be the other, each would be limited and imperfect and would no longer be pure act and being itself.

Chapter 2: The Order in the Universe, and Providence

The fact is this, that in nature, in those things that lack intelligence, we have an admirable ordering of means to ends. "This is evident," says St. Thomas, "since those things which lack intelligence — the heavenly bodies, plants and animals — act always, or at least nearly always, in such a way as to produce what is best" (1a, q. 2, a. 3).

- the universal attraction of bodies - the rotation of the earth on its axis every twenty-four hours, which is the cause of day and night, and its revolution round the sun in three hundred and sixty-five days, which is the cause of the seasons.
- the plant organism - water, sap, growth, maturity, fruit, seed, etc.
- the animal organism - nourishment, respiration, reproduction. sight, sound, touch, taste, smell. wings, feet, tails. teeth, claws, hair.
- instinctive activity of animals - bees producing honey (cf. 19ff).

Chance is simply the accidental concurrence of two actions that are themselves not accidental but intentional, intentional at least in the sense that they have an unconscious natural tendency (22).

The fact, then, that constitutes the starting-point of our proof holds good: namely, there is order and finality in the world, that is, means ordered to certain ends; for being without intelligence, such as plants and animals, always or nearly always act so as to produce what is best. Universal attraction is for the cohesion of the universe, the seed of a grain of wheat for the production of the ear, a flower for the fruit, the foot of an animal for walking, the wings of a bird for flying, the lungs for breathing, the ear for hearing, the eye for seeing. The existence of finality is an undeniable fact...(23).

A means cannot be directed to an end except by an intelligent designer.

From the fact that there is order in the world, how are we to ascend to the certain truth of God's existence? By means of the principle that beings without intelligence can tend to an end only when directed to it by an intelligent cause, as the arrow is directed by the archer. More simply, a means cannot be directed to an end except by an intelligent designer (25).

Providence is the conception in the divine intellect of the order of all things to their end; and the divine governance, as St. Thomas observes...is the execution of that order (27).

...if there is such order in the physical world, much more must it be so in the moral world, in spite of all the wickedness human justice allows to go unpunished, as it also leaves unrewarded many a heroic act giving proof of God's intervention in the world (28).

Chapter 14: The Notion of Providence

What revelation has told us about God's wisdom and His love will give us a clearer insight into its teaching concerning the divine governance. This teaching far surpasses that of the philosophers, many of whom maintain that providence does not extend beyond the general laws governing the universe; that it does not reach down to individuals and the details of their existence, to future free actions and the secrets of the heart. On the other hand, certain heretics have held that since providence extends infallibly to the least of our actions, there can be no such thing as liberty. The revealed teaching is the golden mean between these two extreme positions and transcending them (157).

Providence, as we shall see, is a sort of extension of God's wisdom, which "reacheth from end to end mightily and ordereth all things sweetly" (Wis. 8:1; 14:3). "Since," says St. Thomas, "God is the cause of all things by His intellect (in conjunction with His will), it is necessary that the type of the order of things toward their end should pre-exist in the divine mind; and the type of things ordered toward an end is, properly speaking, providence" (1a, q. 22, a.1). As for the divine governance, though the expression is generally used as synonymous with providence, it is, strictly speaking, the execution of the providential plan (157f).

A prudent person will first desire the end and then, having decided on the means to be employed, will begin using them; thus the end, which held first place in his desire, is the last in actual attainment. So we look upon God as intending from all eternity first the end and purpose of the universe and then the means necessary for the realization or attainment of that end. This commonsense view is expressed by the philosophers when they say that the end is first in the order of intention but last in the order of execution (158).

From this general notion of providence we deduce its characteristics...

- 1) *The absolute universality of providence...* "the causality of God," says St. Thomas, "extends to all beings...not only to things incorruptible but also to those corruptible. Hence all things that exist in whatsoever manner are necessarily directed by God towards some end" (1a, q. 22, a. 2). ...That end, as we saw when speaking of the love of God, is the manifestation of His goodness, His infinite perfection, and His various attributes.

As we shall see, it is constantly asserted in the Old and New Testaments that the plan of providence has been fixed immediately by God Himself down to the last detail. His practical knowledge would be imperfect, were it not as far-reaching as His causality, and without that

causality nothing comes into existence. Obviously, therefore, as was stated above, any reality or goodness in creatures and their actions is caused by God. This means that with the exception of evil (that privation and disorder in which sin consists), all things have God as their first if not exclusive cause. As for physical evil and suffering, God wills them only in an accidental way, in view of a higher good. From the absolute universality of providence we deduce a second characteristic.

2) This universal and immediate sway exerted by providence, does not destroy, but safeguards the freedom of our actions. Not only does it safeguard liberty, but actuates it, for the precise reason that providence extends even to the free mode of our actions, which it produces in us with our co-operation; ...The slightest idiosyncrasy of temperament and character, the consequences of heredity, the influence exerted on our actions by the emotions — all are known to providence; it penetrates into the innermost recesses of conscience, and has at its disposal every sort of grace to enlighten, attract, and strengthen us.

3) Although providence, as the divine ordinance, extends immediately to all reality and goodness, to the last and least fiber of every being, nevertheless in the execution of the plan of providence, God governs the lower creation through the higher, to which He thus communicates the dignity of causality (1a, q. 22, a. 3).

Chapter 18: Providence and Prayer

When we reflect on the infallibility of God's foreknowledge and the unchangeableness of the decrees of providence, not infrequently a difficulty occurs to the mind. If this infallible providence embraces in its universality every period of time and has foreseen all things, what can be the use of prayer? How is it possible for us to enlighten God by our petitions to make Him alter His designs, who has said: "I am the Lord and I change not" ? (Mal. 3:6). Must we conclude that prayer is of no avail, that it comes too late, that whether we pray or not, what is to be will be? (204).

On the contrary, the Gospel tells us: "Ask, and it shall be given you" (Matt. 7:7). A commonplace with unbelievers and especially with the deists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this objection in reality arises from an erroneous view as to the primary source of efficacy in prayer and the purpose for which it is intended (204).

In point of fact, before ever we ourselves decided to have recourse to prayer, it was willed by God. From all eternity God willed it to be one of the fruitful factors in our spiritual life, a means

of obtaining the graces necessary to reach the goal of our life's journey. To conceive of God as not foreseeing and intending from all eternity the prayers we address to Him in time is just as childish as the notion of a God subjecting His will to ours and so altering His designs (205).

The answer to the objection we have mentioned is in the main quite simple in spite of the mystery of grace it involves. True prayer, prayer offered with the requisite conditions, is infallibly efficacious because God has decreed that it shall be so, and God cannot revoke what He has once decreed (206).

It is not only what comes to pass that has been foreseen and intended (or at any rate permitted) by a providential decree, but the manner also in which it comes to pass, the causes that bring about the event, the means by which the end is attained (206).

Sometimes God seems to turn a deaf ear to our prayer, especially when it is not sufficiently free from self-interest, seeking temporal blessings for their own sake rather than as useful for salvation. Then gradually grace invites us to pray better, reminding us of the Gospel words: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His justice: and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). ...Indeed, it seems that God repulses us as if to see whether we shall persevere in our prayer (209).

...the more prayer is in conformity with the divine intentions, the more closely does it co-operate in the divine governance. That there may be ever more of this conformity in our prayer, let us every day say the Our Father slowly and with great attention; let us meditate upon it, with love accompanying our faith. This loving meditation will become contemplation, which will ensure for us the hallowing and glorifying of God's name both in ourselves and in those about us, the coming of His kingdom and the fulfillment of His will here on earth as in heaven (210f).

Chapter 21: Providence and the Duty of the Present Moment

The duty at any given moment conveys, frequently under a modest exterior, the expression of God's will regarding ourselves and our individual lives. Thus it was our Lady lived her life of union with God, by accomplishing His will in the daily routine of duties of her simple life, a life outwardly commonplace like that of any other person in her lowly rank. Thus, too, did the saints live, doing the will of God as it was revealed to them from one moment to the other, without allowing themselves to be upset by unforeseen reverses. Their secret consisted in submitting constantly to the divine action in the shaping of their lives. In that action they

recognized all they had to do and suffer, duties to be accomplished, crosses to be borne. They were persuaded that what is happening at the moment is a sign that either God wills or permits it for the good of those seeking Him. Even the evil they experienced taught them something: by taxing their patience it showed them by contrast what must be done to avoid sin and its disastrous consequences. Thus the saints see in the sequence of events a sort of providential schooling. Moreover, they are convinced that behind the succession of external happenings runs a parallel series of actual graces which are continually being offered to enable us to draw great spiritual profit from these events, whether painful or pleasing. The sequence of events, if looked at in the right perspective, is an instructive course on the things of God, a sort of extension of revelation or application of the Gospel truths continuing down to the end of time (237f).

Act of Self-Abandonment

O my God, I leave myself entirely in Thy hands. Turn and turn again this mass of clay, as a vessel that is fashioned in the potter's hand (Jer. 18:6). Give it a shape; then break it if Thou wilt: it is Thine, it has nothing to say. Enough for me that it serves all Thy designs and that nothing resists Thy good pleasure for which I was made. Ask, command. What wouldst Thou have me to do? What wouldst Thou have me not to do? Lifted up, cast down, in persecution, in consolation, in suffering, intent upon Thy work, good for nothing, I can do no more than repeat with Thy holy Mother: "Be it done unto me according to Thy word."

Give me that love which is beyond all loves, the love of the cross - not those heroic crosses with a glory that might foster self-love, but those ordinary crosses which we bear with so much distaste — those daily crosses with which our life is strewn and which at every moment we encounter on our way through life: contradictions, neglect, failures, opposition, false judgments, the coldness or impulsiveness of some, the rebuffs or contempt of others, bodily infirmities, spiritual darkness, silence and interior dryness. Only then wilt Thou know that I love Thee, even though I neither know nor feel it myself; and that is enough for me.