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Book Reviews

Unlocking Divine Action: Contemporary Science and Thomas Aquinas by Michael J. Dodds, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), xii + 311 pp.

AT THE BEGINNING of his book, Dodds observes that discussions about God's action, either in creating the world or in any divine action in the world, require an adequate language of causality. For as long as there has been reflection on the relationship between God and the world, when God is viewed as a transcendent source, yet an ever-present agent in the world, such reflection employs some sense or senses of what it means to be a cause. The extraordinary developments in modern and contemporary science have seemed to present new challenges for any attempt to speak of divine action. The more one views developments in cosmology and evolutionary biology, for example, as offering exhaustive accounts of nature and of the processes within nature, the more it may seem that any appeal to God, to explain either the origin of nature or its operations, is unnecessary. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Heinrich Caro, a German chemist, noted that "science has conducted God to its frontiers, thanking him for his provisional services."

Rather than eliminating appeals to a God now seen as superfluous, some theologians and philosophers have argued for a radically revised view of God, so as to find a God and divine action that would be compatible with contemporary science. As John Haught has noted, after the life and work of Charles Darwin, "any thoughts we may have about God can hardly remain the same as before." One concern for some scholars is to make sure that we understand divine action in such a way that it does not interfere with natural process, what Robert Russell of Berkeley's Centre for Theology and Science calls NIODA (non-interfering objective, divine action).

Dodds thinks that natural philosophy and metaphysics in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas offer fruitful ways to “unlock divine action”—that is, to see how one can accept the insights of contemporary science without rejecting God or altering the traditional sense of God as Creator and continual agent in the universe. In particular, he thinks that a retrieval of Thomas’s notion of cause offers the key necessary for affirming a robust understanding of divine action while also embracing what the natural sciences tell us about the world.

An understanding of causality is a complex endeavor. Following Thomas, Dodds emphasizes the analogical sense of the term. In fact, a good deal of the confusion in discussions about divine causality and the causality the natural sciences discover is the result of a failure to recognize that “cause” has many senses when applied not only to natural phenomena, but also to God. Often, when modern and contemporary thinkers speak of cause, they employ a more limited notion of the term than that found in Thomas. As “cause” came to be identified almost exclusively in terms of agent cause, traditional categories of final and formal causality were ignored or dismissed as irrelevant. Under the influence of David Hume, causality became simply a temporal sequence between events, a regularity that the observer designates as cause and effect. For Thomas, the root sense of causality concerns some kind of real dependence, and hence explanations of causality are ultimately resolved in metaphysics. On the contrary, a Humean analysis considers causality as a category in epistemology.

How we think of causal relations in nature affects how we think of God as cause. Dodds’s claim is that Thomas’s analysis of cause can overcome obstacles to thinking clearly about divine agency in a world described by contemporary science.

After initial chapters in which he gives a brief account of the Thomistic understanding of causality and how that understanding “was contracted” in the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries (and the consequent effect of such contraction on discussions of divine agency), Dodds turns to developments in contemporary science (especially relativity theory, quantum mechanics, and evolutionary biology). He thinks that recent scientific discoveries and their philosophical interpretations offer not only a challenge to what had become a narrow, orthodox interpretation of causality, but are also an opportunity for engaging a Thomistic account of cause.

Dodds thinks, for example, that the controversies associated with explanations in evolutionary biology can contribute to “unlocking

the idea of causality inherited from modern science.” Among other topics in this regard, Dodds points to the relationship between theories of emergence and traditional notions of formal causality. As quantum mechanics points to a world of neither pure chance nor complete determinism, it opens possibilities for discussions of potentiality that were crucial for the natural philosophy of Thomas and Aristotle. The indeterminism featured in quantum mechanics might be seen as an analogue for Aristotle’s notion of the pure potentiality of prime matter.

New theories in contemporary science have had effects on the way theologians speak of divine causality. To speak of indeterminism at the level of genetic mutations has encouraged some theologians to find a kind of metaphysical space in which God can act in nature without interfering with natural processes—since there would be, in principle, no natural causes with which divine action would compete. Another conception of God’s action, panentheism, seeks to avoid the claim of divine action’s interfering with natural causes by arguing that God’s being “includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in him, but that his being is more than and is not exhausted by the universe.”

Dodds is critical of the various approaches to divine action that directly employ interpretations of the theories of contemporary science. His fundamental criticism is that these accounts of divine causality, popular in many circles today, suffer from a univocal sense of cause, such that God is one cause among all other causes, different only in degree. As Dodds points out: “Implicit in the concern that God’s action not violate the laws of nature is the conviction that God could violate those laws—that the action of the Creator might somehow contradict the very creation which exists from moment to moment only through his sustaining influence” (155). Thomas’s understanding of God as cause and creatures as causes—a distinction traditionally seen in terms of primary and secondary causality—allows for a robust understanding both of the causes discovered in nature and their dependency upon the on-going causality of a transcendent primary cause.

He thinks that contemporary science encourages a new reflection on the analogous notions of causality. To speak of efficient, final, and formal causes, *per se* and *per accidens* causes, primary and secondary cause, and principal and instrumental causes, all in the tradition of Thomas, allows for a better understanding not only of our accounts of nature, but also of how to speak about divine agency, of God as Creator and continuing agent in the world. This approach is especially

valuable in discussing the “secondary causality” central to explanations in evolutionary biology. An effect, such as the coming into existence of a new species, can be greater than its immediate cause, “if that cause is also an instrument of some higher cause” (202).

Natural effects are attributed both to God and to causes in nature. The natural agent is completely the cause of its effect and so is God the complete cause. It is not a matter of partial causes. It is not that God somehow makes room for natural causes. Rather, God causes them to be the causes that they are. It is crucial to recognize that “cause” is being attributed to natural causes and to God in radically different ways, but not in ways that, finally, are unintelligible. We must remember that God as transcendent cause is of a different order from any created cause. In fact, this is so to such a degree that it is not really accurate to say that God’s causality is of a different order, since this might suggest a common ground of comparison.

Furthermore, whatever role chance and indeterminism play in nature, God is the cause of chance and indeterminism precisely as chance and indeterminism. As Dodds puts it: God acts “through the indeterminism of nature in its very indeterminism.” Or again, in referring to chance in nature, we might say that “God’s causality acts precisely through the ‘non-causality’ of chance” (219–220).

In the final chapters of his book, Dodds takes up difficult questions concerning whether it is correct to say that anything happens “by chance” from God’s point of view, how we should understand the role of miracles and petitionary prayer, and what it means for God to be providential (e.g., whether any effect falls outside God’s providence).

Throughout his analysis, Dodds emphasizes the importance of grasping what it means for God to be Creator and how we should understand the non-reciprocal relationship of creatures to the Creator. As Josef Pieper observed, the doctrine of creation is the key to Thomas’s entire intellectual project, and Dodds notes that the failure to understand causality as exercised by the Creator—the transcendent primary cause of all that exists in whatever way or ways things exist—results in most, if not all, of the difficulties in achieving an adequate sense of divine agency.

The emphasis Dodds urges on thinking clearly about cause, especially about the language of analogy, is an important corrective to much of the confusion in contemporary analyses of divine agency. To approach the question of divine action by examining what contemporary science invites us to consider about what causes there are is a good example of beginning with the philosophy of nature in order

to understand metaphysics and theology. The book is very well-documented with extensive quotations and footnotes, thus allowing the reader to turn to these sources should he or she wish.

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A Service of Love: Papal Primacy, the Eucharist and Church Unity by Paul McPartlan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), vii + 100 pp.

THE SENSATIONALIZING ATTENTION given by popular media to Pope Francis has certainly brought the papal office into the world spotlight in a new and unprecedented way. Many of us may wonder how long the enthusiasm will last before it descends again into boredom, scorn, and attack. Yet, the dramatic and obvious differences in “style,” for want of a better word, between the three most recent popes invite us to consider afresh the foundations and characteristics of the papal office and to reread the Church’s recent declarations about the papacy against the background of the broad sweep of doctrinal history.

McPartlan’s little book on the topic is a handy place to start. Not much longer than an extended essay, it is an immediately accessible, if unsystematic, study. The content outline suggests a historical treatment, but going in reverse: the second millennium is handled before the first. But the movement makes sense, since the entire essay appears prompted by the 2007 publication of the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue statement, *Ecclesial and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church*, otherwise known as the Ravenna document. The key thrust of the Ravenna document, echoing an emphatic shift since the Second Vatican Council, is upon the mutual interdependence of primacy and conciliarity, itself a corollary of the relation between ecclesial governance and Eucharistic communion.

As McPartlan develops it, this inter-relation profoundly qualifies the legal terminology of “jurisdiction” that, to his mind, overly dominated the ecclesiological landscape for most of the second millennium. In contrast, it is now “urgent for Catholics and Orthodox to discern once again the true characteristics of universal primacy aside from administrative and juridical considerations” (26). To this end, it is above all the Eucharist itself—its practice and theology—that can guide us. When interpreted Eucharistically and liturgically, episcopacy has less to do