

Thomas Aquinas on God's Providence

Thomas Aquinas (1224/1226–1274) was a prolific philosopher and theologian. His exposition of Aristotle's philosophy and his views concerning matters central to the Christian faith had a huge impact upon the Church and later philosophers. Below you can find part of the discussion of God's providence from the *Summa Theologiae* (1a q. 22 a1–4). I have adapted the translation provided by the English Dominican Fathers.

Reading Aquinas: several of Aquinas's works, including the *Summa Theologiae* [ST], take the form of a *disputatio* — a question and answer form which was often used for teaching in medieval universities. In reading the ST keep in mind that Aquinas first describes objections to his view before giving his view (in the **Reply**) and (typically) responding to the objections.

Summa Theologiae 1a Q22: God's Providence

Having considered all those things which pertain to the will absolutely (*ad voluntatem absolute pertinent*), we must proceed to those things which concern both the intellect and the will. Of these, providence with respect to all created things; predestination and reprobation and all that is connected with these, especially with respect to man and his eternal salvation. For after the moral virtues themselves, in the knowledge of moral philosophy (*scientia moralis*), prudence is considered and providence seems to pertain to this. Concerning God's providence there are four things to look into: (1) Whether Providence is compatible with God (2) Whether everything is under divine providence (3) Whether divine providence is immediately concerned with all things? (4) Whether divine providence imposes any necessity upon things foreseen?

Article 1. Is Providence compatible with God?

Objection 1: It seems that providence is not compatible with God. For providence, according to Tully (*De Inv.* ii), is a part of prudence. But since prudence according to the Philosopher (*EN* vi, 5,9,18), gives good counsel, it cannot apply (*competere*) to God. He never has any doubt on account of which He should take counsel. Therefore providence cannot belong to God.

Objection 2: Further, whatever is in God, is eternal. But providence is not anything eternal, for it is concerned with existing things that are not eternal, according to Damascene (*De Fide Orth.* ii, 29). Therefore there is no providence in God.

Objection 3: Furthermore, there is nothing composite in God. But providence seems to be something composite, because it includes both the intellect and the will. Therefore providence is not in God.

On the contrary, It is said (Wisdom 14:3): “But Thou, Father, governs all things by providence.”

I answer that, It is necessary to attribute providence to God. For all the good that is in created things has been created by God, as was shown above (Q. 6 a. 4). In created things good is found not only as regards their substance (*substantia*), but also as regards their order towards an end and especially their last end, which, as was said above, is the divine goodness (Q. 21 a. 4). This good of order existing in things created, is itself created by God. Since, however, God is the cause of things by His intellect, and thus it is appropriate that the reason of every effect should pre-exist in Him (*et sic cuiuslibet sui effectus oportet rationem in ipso praeexistere*), as is clear from what has gone before (Q. 19 a. 4), it is necessary that the reason of the order of things towards their end should pre-exist in the divine mind (*ratio ordinis rerum in finem in mente divina praeexistat*): and the reason of things ordered towards an end is, properly speaking, providence. For it is the chief part of prudence, to which two other parts are directed---namely, remembrance of the past, and understanding of the present; inasmuch as from the remembrance of what is past and the understanding of what is present, we gather how to provide for the future. Now it belongs to prudence, according to the Philosopher (*EN* vi, 12), to direct other things towards an end whether in regard to oneself---as for instance, a man is said to be prudent, who orders well his acts towards the end of life--or in regard to others subject to him, in a family, city or kingdom; in which sense it is said (Matthew 24:45), “a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath appointed over his family.” In this way prudence or providence may suitably be attributed to God. For in God Himself there can be nothing ordered towards an end, since He is the last end. This reason of order in things towards an end is therefore in God called providence. On account of this, Boethius says (*Consolatio* iv, 6) that “Providence is the divine reason (*divina ratio*) itself, seated in the Supreme Ruler; which disposes all things”. This disposition (*dispositio*) may refer either to the reason of the order of things towards an end (*ratio ordinis rerum in finem*), or to the reason of the order of parts in a whole.

Reply to Objection 1: According to the Philosopher (*EN* vi, 9,10), “Prudence is what, strictly speaking, commands all that *eubulia* has rightly counselled and *synesis* rightly judged”. On account of this, although taking counsel may not be fitting of God, from the fact that counsel is an inquiry into matters that are doubtful, nevertheless to give a command as to the ordering of things towards an end, the right reason of which He possesses, does belong to God, according to Ps. 148:6: “He hath made a decree, and it shall not pass away.” In this manner both prudence and providence belong to God. Although at the same time it may be said that the very reason of things to be done is called counsel in God; not because of any inquiry necessitated, but from the certitude of

the knowledge, to which those who take counsel come by inquiry. Whence it is said: “Who worketh all things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11).

Reply to Objection 2: Two things pertain to the care of providence — namely, the reason of order (*ratio ordinis*) which is called providence and disposition; and the execution of order, which is termed government. Of these, the first is eternal, and the second is temporal.

Reply to Objection 3: Providence resides in the intellect; but presupposes the act of willing the end. Nobody gives a precept about things done for an end; unless he wills that end. Hence prudence presupposes the moral virtues, by means of which the appetitive faculty is directed towards good, as the Philosopher says. Even if Providence has to do with the divine will and intellect equally, this would not affect the divine simplicity, since in God both the will and intellect are one and the same thing, as we have said above.

Article 2. Is everything subject to God’s providence?

Objection 1: It seems that not all things are subject to divine providence. For nothing foreseen can happen by chance (*nullum enim provisum est fortuitum*). If then everything was foreseen by God, nothing would happen by chance. And thus hazard and luck would disappear; which is against common opinion.

Objection 2: Further, any wise foreseer (*provisor*) excludes defect or evil, as far as he can, from those he cares about. But we see many evils existing. Either, then, God cannot hinder these, and thus is not omnipotent; or else He does not care about all things.

Objection 3: Further, whatever happens of necessity does not require providence or prudence. Hence, according to the Philosopher (*EN* vi, 5,9, 10,11): “Prudence is the right reason concerning contingent things, about which there is counsel and choice.” Since, then, many things occur by necessity, not everything can be subject to providence.

Objection 4: Further, whatsoever is left to itself cannot be subject to the providence of a governor. But men are left to themselves by God in accordance with the words: “God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel” (Ecclesiastes 15:14). And particularly in reference to the wicked: “I let them go according to the desires of their heart” (Ps. 80:13). Everything, therefore, cannot be subject to divine providence.

Objection 5: Further, the Apostle says (1 Cor. 9:9): “God doth not care about oxen”: and we may say the same of other irrational creatures. Thus everything cannot be under the care of divine providence.

On the contrary, It is said of Divine Wisdom: “She reaches from end to end mightily, and orders all things sweetly” (Wisdom 8:1).

Reply Certain persons totally denied the existence of providence, e.g. Democritus and the Epicureans, maintaining that the world was made by chance. Others claimed that only incorruptible things were subject to providence and corruptible things were not in their individual selves, but only according to their species; for in this respect they are incorruptible. They are represented as saying (Job 22:14): “The clouds are His covert; and He doth not consider our things; and He walketh about the poles of heaven.” Rabbi Moses, however, excluded men from the generality of things corruptible, on account of the excellence of the intellect which they possess, but in reference to all else that suffers corruption he adhered to the opinion of the others.

We must say, however, that all things are subject to divine providence, not only in general, but even in their own individual selves. This is made evident thus. For since every agent acts for an end, the ordering of effects towards that end extends as far as the causality of the first agent extends. Whence it happens that in the effects of an agent something takes place which has no reference towards the end, because the effect comes from a cause other than, and outside the intention of the agent. But the causality of God, Who is the first agent, extends to all being, not only as to constituent principles of species, but also as to the individualizing principles; not only of things incorruptible, but also of things corruptible. Hence all things that exist in whatsoever manner are necessarily directed by God towards some end; as the Apostle says: “Those things that are of God are well ordered” (Romans 13:1). Since, therefore, as the providence of God is nothing less than the reason of the order of things towards an end (*ratio ordinis rerum in finem*), as we have said; it necessarily follows that all things, insofar as they participate in existence, must likewise be subject to divine providence (*inquantum participant esse, intantum subdi divinae providentiae*). It has also been shown (Q. 14 a. 6, 11) that God knows all things, both universal and particular. And since His knowledge (*cognitio*) may be compared to the things themselves, as the knowledge of art to the objects of art, all things must of necessity come under His ordering; as all artefacts are subject to the ordering of that art.

Reply to Objection 1: There is a difference between universal and particular causes. A thing can escape the order of a particular cause; but not the order of a universal cause. You see, nothing escapes the order of a particular cause, except through the intervention and hindrance of some other particular cause; for instance, wood may be prevented from burning by the action of water. Since then, all particular causes are included under the universal cause, it could not be that any effect should take place outside the range of that universal cause. So far then as an effect escapes the order of a particular cause, it is said to be casual or fortuitous in respect to that cause; but if we regard the universal cause, outside whose range no effect can happen, it is said to be foreseen. Thus, for instance, the meeting of two servants, although to them it appears a chance circumstance, has been fully foreseen by their master, who has purposely sent to meet at the one place, in such a way that the one knows not about the other.

Reply to Objection 2: It is otherwise with one who has care of a particular thing, and one whose providence is universal, because a particular foreseer (*provisor*) excludes all defects from what he cares about as far as he can; whereas, one who provides universally allows some little defect to remain, lest the good of the whole should be hindered (*sed provisor universalis permittit aliquem defectum in aliquo particulari accidere, ne impediatur bonum totius*). Hence, corruption and defects in natural things are said to be contrary to some

particular nature; yet they are in keeping with the plan of universal nature; inasmuch as the defect in one thing yields to the good of another, or even to the universal good: for the corruption of one is the generation of another, and through this a species is kept in existence. Since God, then, provides universally for all being, it belongs to His providence to permit certain defects in particular effects, that the perfect good of the universe may not be hindered (*Cum igitur Deus sit universalis provisor totius entis, ad ipsius providentiam pertinet ut permittat quosdam defectus esse in aliquibus particularibus rebus, ne impediatur bonum universi perfectum*). If all evils were prevented, much good would be absent from the universe. A lion would cease to live, if there were no slaying of animals; and there would be no patience of martyrs if there were no tyrannical persecution. Thus Augustine says (*Ench. 2*): “Almighty God would in no wise permit evil to exist in His works, unless He were so almighty and so good as to produce good even from evil.” It would appear that it was on account of these two arguments to which we have just replied, that some were persuaded to consider corruptible things — e.g. casual and evil things — as removed from the care of divine providence.

Reply to Objection 3: Man is not the creator of nature; but he uses natural things in applying art and virtue to his own use. Hence human providence does not extend to those things which takes place in nature from necessity; but divine providence does extends that far, since God is the author of nature. Apparently it was this argument that moved those who withdrew the course of nature from the care of divine providence, attributing it rather to the necessity of matter, as Democritus, and others of the ancients.

Reply to Objection 4: When it is said that God left man to himself, this does not mean that man is excluded from divine providence; but merely that he has not a prefixed operating force determined to only the one effect (*sed ostenditur quod non praefiguratur ei virtus operativa determinata ad unum*) as is the case of natural things, which are only acted upon as though directed towards an end by another and which do not act of themselves, as if they directed themselves towards an end, like rational creatures, through free choice, by means of which they make take counsel and choose (*sicut rebus naturalibus; quae aguntur tantum, quasi ab altero directae in finem, non autem seipsa agunt, quasi se dirigentia in finem, ut creaturae rationales per liberum arbitrium, quo consiliantur et eligunt*). Hence it is expressly said: “In the hand of his own counsel.” But since the very act of free choice is traced to God as to a cause, it is necessary that those things which come about from free choice are subject to divine providence. For human providence is included under the providence of God as a particular cause is contained under under a universal cause (*Sed quia ipse actus liberi arbitrii reducitur in Deum sicut in causam, necesse est ut ea quae ex libero arbitrio fiunt, divinae providentiae subdantur, providentia enim hominis continetur sub providentia Dei, sicut causa particularis sub causa universali*). God, however, extends His providence over the just in a 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” (Rm. 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 nothing, if they were not preserved in existence by His providence. This was the reason that had weight with Tully, who withdrew from the care of divine providence human affairs concerning which we take counsel.

Reply to Objection 5: Since a rational creature has, through its free choice, control (*dominium*) over its actions, as was said above (Q. 19 a. 10), it is subject to divine providence in an especial manner, so that something is imputed to it as a fault, or as a merit; and there is given it accordingly something by way of punishment or reward. In this way, the Apostle withdraws oxen from the care of God: not, however, that individual irrational creatures escape the care of divine providence; as was the opinion of the Rabbi Moses.

Article 3. Does God have immediate providence over everything?

Objection 1: It seems that God has not immediate providence over all things (*videtur quod Deus non immediate omnibus provideat*). For whatever is contained in the notion of dignity, must be attributed to God. But it belongs to the dignity of a king, that he should have ministers; through whose mediation he provides for his subjects. Therefore much less has God Himself immediate providence over all things.

Objection 2: Further, it is appropriate for providence to order all things to an end. Now, the end of everything is its perfection and its good. But it pertains to every cause to direct its effect to good; wherefore every active cause (*causa agens*) is a cause of the effect of providence (*Ad quamlibet autem causam pertinet effectum suum perducere ad bonum. Quaelibet igitur causa agens est causa effectus providentiae*). If therefore God were to have immediate providence over all things, all secondary causes would be withdrawn.

Objection 3: Further, Augustine says (*Ench.* 17) that, “It is better to be ignorant of some things than to know them, for example, vile things”: and the Philosopher says the same (*Metaph.* xii, 51). But whatever is better must be assigned to God. Therefore He has not immediate providence over bad and vile things.

On the contrary, It is said (Job 34:13): “What other has He appointed over the earth? Or who has He set over the world which He made?” On which passage Gregory says (*Moral.* xxiv, 20): “He Himself rules the world which He Himself hath made.”

Reply Two things belong to providence — namely, the reason of the order of things foreordained towards an end (*ratio ordinis rerum provisarum in finem*); and the execution of this order, which is called government. As regards the first of these, God has immediate providence over everything, because He has in His intellect the reason of everything, even the smallest things; and whatsoever causes He assigns to certain effects, He gives them the power to produce those effects (*et quascumque causas aliquibus effectibus praefecit, dedit eis virtutem ad illos effectus producendos*). Accordingly, it must be that He already has the order of those effects in His reason (*unde oportet quod ordinem illorum effectuum in sua ratione prae habuerit*). As to the second, there are certain intermediaries of God’s providence; for He governs things inferior by superior, not on account of any defect in His power, but by reason of the abundance of His goodness; so that the dignity of causality is imparted even to creatures (*ut dignitatem causalitatis etiam creaturis communicet*). In this way, Plato’s opinion that providence is threefold— which

Gregory of Nyssa (*De Provid.* viii, 3) explains — is ruled out. First, one belongs to the supreme Deity, Who first and foremost has provision over spiritual things, and thus over the whole world as regards genus, species, and universal causes. The second providence, which is over the individuals of all that can be generated and corrupted, he attributed to the divinities who circulate in the heavens; that is, certain separate substances, which move corporeal things in a circular direction. The third providence, over human affairs, he assigned to demons, whom the Platonic philosophers placed between us and the gods, as Augustine tells us (*De Civ. Dei* 1, 2: viii, 14).

Reply to Objection 1: It pertains to a king's dignity to have ministers who execute his providence. But the fact that he has not the plan of those things which are done by them arises from a deficiency in himself. For every operative science (*scientia operativa*) is the more perfect, the more it considers the particular things with which its action is concerned.

Reply to Objection 2: God's immediate provision over everything does not exclude the action of secondary causes; which are the executors of His order, as was said above (Q. 19 a. 5, 8).

Reply to Objection 3: It is better for us not to know low and vile things, because by them we are impeded in our knowledge of what is better and higher; for we cannot understand many things simultaneously; because the thought of evil sometimes perverts the will towards evil. This does not hold with God, Who sees everything simultaneously at one glance, and whose will cannot turn in the direction of evil.

Article 4. Does divine providence impose necessity upon things foreseen?

Objection 1: It seems that divine providence imposes necessity upon things foreseen (*Videtur quod divina providentia necessitatem rebus provisus imponat*). For every effect that has a *per se* cause, either present or past, which it necessarily follows, happens from necessity (*Omnis enim effectus qui habet aliquam causam per se, quae iam est vel fuit, ad quam de necessitate sequitur, provenit ex necessitate*); as the Philosopher proves (*Metaph.* vi, 7). But the providence of God, since it is eternal, pre-exists; and the effect flows from it of necessity, for divine providence cannot be frustrated. Therefore divine providence imposes a necessity upon things foreseen.

Objection 2: Further, every provider (*provisor*) makes his work as stable as he can, lest it should fail. But God is the most powerful thing. Therefore He assigns the stability of necessity to things provided.

Objection 3: Further, Boethius says (*Consolatio* iv, 6): "Fate from the immutable source of providence binds together human acts and fortunes by the indissoluble connection of causes." It seems therefore that providence imposes necessity upon things foreseen.

On the contrary, Dionysius says that (*Div. Nom.* iv, 23) “to corrupt nature is not the work of providence.” But it is in the nature of some things to be contingent. Divine providence does not therefore impose any necessity upon things so as to destroy their contingency.

Reply, Divine providence imposes necessity upon some things; not upon all, as some formerly believed. For ordering things towards an end is proper of providence. After the divine goodness, which is an extrinsic end to all things, the principal good in things themselves is the perfection of the universe; which would not be, were not all grades of being found in things (*Post bonitatem autem divinam, quae est finis a rebus separatus, principale bonum in ipsis rebus existens, est perfectio universi, quae quidem non esset, si non omnes gradus essendi invenirentur in rebus*). Accordingly, it pertains to divine providence to produce every grade of being (*Unde ad divinam providentiam pertinet omnes gradus entium producere*). And thus it has prepared for some things necessary causes, so that they happen of necessity; for others contingent causes, that they may happen by contingency, according to the nature of their proximate causes (*Et ideo quibusdam effectibus praeparavit causas necessarias, ut necessario evenirent; quibusdam vero causas contingentes, ut evenirent contingenter, secundum conditionem proximarum causarum*).

Reply to Objection 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.

Reply to Objection 2: The order of divine providence is unchangeable and certain, so far as all things foreseen happen as they have been foreseen, whether from necessity or from contingency.

Reply to Objection 3: That indissolubility and immutability of which Boethius speaks, pertain to the certainty of providence, which does not fail to produce its effect, or to produce it in the way foreseen; but it does not pertain to the necessity of the effects. We must remember that properly speaking what is necessary and contingent follows upon being, as such (*Et considerandum est quod necessarium et contingens proprie consequuntur ens, inquantum huiusmodi*). Hence the mode of necessity and the mode of contingency fall under the foresight of God, who provides universally for all being; not under the foresight of causes that provide only for some particular order of things (*Unde modus contingentiae et necessitatis cadit sub provisione Dei, qui est universalis provisor totius entis, non autem sub provisione aliquorum particularium provisorum*).