

CHAPTER 2

PROVIDENCE AND CAUSALITY: ON DIVINE INNOCENCE

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I

I shall begin with Heidegger at his most, if not oracular, at least plangently ominous:

So kann, wo alles Anwesende sich im Lichte des Ursache-Wirkung-Zusammenhangs darstellt, sogar Gott für das Vorstellen alles Heilige und Hohe, das Geheimnisvolle seiner Ferne verlieren. Gott kann im Lichte der Kausalität zu einer Ursache, zur *causa efficiens*, herabsinken. Er wird dann sogar innerhalb der Theologie zum Gott der Philosophen, jener nämlich, die das Unverborgene und Verborgene nach der Kausalität des Machens bestimmen, ohne dabei jemals die Wesensherkunft dieser Kausalität zu bedenken.¹

There is a profound and disturbing truth in these lines, one in fact of almost inexhaustible relevance for the theologian, but one of which far too few theologians typically take heed. This is hardly surprising, really. Perhaps the most difficult discipline the Christian metaphysical tradition requires of its students is the preservation of a consistent and adequate sense of the difference between primary and secondary causality, or between the transcendent and the contingent, or even between – to use Heidegger's idiom in a setting to which he would think it inappropriate – the ontological and the ontic. It is a distinction so elementary to any metaphysics of creation that no philosophical theologian consciously ignores it; and yet its full implications often elude even the most scrupulous among us. This is no small matter; for the theological consequences of failing to observe the proper logic of divine transcendence are invariably unhappy, and in some cases even disastrous. Consider, for instance, that most cherished axiom of Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange: 'God determining or determined: there is no other alternative.'² This is a logical error whose gravity it would be difficult to exaggerate. It is a venerable error, admittedly, adumbrated or explicit in the arguments of even some of the greatest theologians of the Western Church (certain of Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings come troublingly to mind); but an error it remains. Applied to two terms within any shared frame of causal operation, between which some reciprocal real relation obtains, such a formula is perfectly cogent; but as soon as 'God' is introduced as one of its terms, it is immediately rendered

vacuous. If divine transcendence is an intelligible idea, it must be understood according to a rule enunciated by Maximus the Confessor: whereas the being of finite things has non-being as its opposite, God's being is entirely beyond any such opposition.³ God's being is necessary, that is, not simply because it is inextinguishable or eternally immune to nothingness, but because it transcends the dialectic of existence and non-existence altogether; it is simple and infinite actuality, utterly pure of ontic determination, the 'is' both of the 'it is' and of the 'it is not'. It transcends even the distinction between finite act and finite potency, since both exist by virtue of their participation in God's infinite actuality, in which all that might be always supereminently *is*. God is absolute, that is to say, in the most proper sense: he is eternally 'absolved' of finite causality, so much so that he need not – in any simple univocal sense – determine in order to avoid being determined. His transcendence is not something achieved by the negation of its 'opposite'.

It could, in fact, be argued that the great 'discovery' of the Christian metaphysical tradition was just this: the true nature of transcendence. When, in the fourth century, theology took its final leave of all subordinationist schemes of Trinitarian reflection, it thereby broke irrevocably with all those older metaphysical systems that had attempted to connect this world to its highest principle by populating the interval between them with various intermediate degrees of spiritual reality. In affirming that the Persons of the Trinity are coequal and of one essence, Christian thought was led also to the recognition that it is the transcendent God alone who gives being to creation; that he is able to be at once both *superior summo meo* and *interior intimo meo*; and that he is not merely the supreme being set atop the summit of beings, but is instead the one who is transcendentally present in all beings, the ever more inward act within each finite act. And it is precisely *because* God is not situated within any kind of ontic continuum with the creature that we can recognize him as the ontological cause of the creature, who freely gives being to beings. True divine transcendence, it turns out, is a transcendence of even the traditional metaphysical demarcations between the transcendent and the immanent. At the same time, the realization that the creature is not, simply by virtue of its finitude and mutability, alienated from God – at a tragic distance from God that the creature can traverse only to the degree that everything distinctively creaturely within it is negated – was also a realization of the true ontological liberty of created nature. If God himself is the immediate actuality of the creature's emergence from nothingness, and of both the essence and the existence of the creature, then it is precisely through becoming what it is – rather than through overcoming those finite

'*idiomata*' that distinguish it from God – that the creature truly reflects the goodness and transcendent power of God.

This logic should always be kept prominently, even obtrusively in mind whenever we attempt to speak intelligibly of divine providence (to arrive at last at my topic); for if providence is in any way a meaningful concept – if, that is, it means something more than simple determinism – it must concern a species of divine action towards creatures that truly remains a work of primary causality while also truly permitting secondary causality a real (if utterly contingent) autonomy. If in any measure this boundary is breached, however – if in any way the autonomy of contingent causes must be denied, qualified, evaded or mitigated, in order to avoid any 'conflict' with the infinite sufficiency or absolute sovereignty of the primary cause – then all talk of providence is rendered perfectly otiose. The minimal – if not yet sufficient – condition for any coherent account of God's providential activity in time must be something like Thomas's distinction between what God directly and of his nature wills, on the one hand, and what he does not will but nevertheless permits, on the other. Without such a distinction, one is forced to imagine the drama of divine grace and creaturely freedom as in some sense a competition or rivalry between divine and human wills – though, of course, a competition that, through the sheer mathematics of the infinite and the finite, God has always already won. Thus, for instance, one cannot grant that John Calvin had any authentic doctrine of divine providence, however often he may have spoken of it; for he quite explicitly and peremptorily denied the distinction between divine will and permission,⁴ and so cannot be said to have understood by 'providence' anything other than absolute divine determinism. It is therefore a matter of indifference, really, that Calvin and his Reformed colleagues were able and willing to draw some kind of distinction between primary and secondary causality; for apart from any proper doctrine of divine permission, secondary causality appears as nothing but a modality of primary causality, by which the sole determining cause of all events works out its *positive* decrees among creatures.

It would be far too easy, however, to hold up Calvin as a cautionary epitome here: in part because of the luminous clarity of his prose (which leaves little room for the cloudier kinds of ambiguity) and in part because of the guileless crudity of his understanding of divine sovereignty. He was hardly unique for his time, though; he was simply the most pitilessly consistent of the theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – a period when metaphysical subtlety seems to have been at its lowest ebb throughout the Christian world – and the one least susceptible to any tendency towards decent embarrassment at the rather ghastly implications

of his own thought. A more interesting example of the decline of any meaningful doctrine of providence in early modern theology, it seems to me, can be found in the Baroque 'commentary Thomism' of Domingo Bañez, Diego Alvarez, John of St Thomas, and others – a tradition that continued, principally among the Dominicans, into the twentieth century, in the writings of Garrigou-Lagrange and Jean-Hervé Nicolas, and that is currently enjoying a minor (if undoubtedly transient) revival in the thought of a small number of contemporary Thomists. The particular fascination this line of Catholic thought has for me lies in the irreconcilable tensions it comprised within itself. For the Dominicans, unlike the Calvinists, remained committed to maintaining a genuine qualitative distinction between primary and secondary causes, of a sort that would allow no conflict between the two; and their total failure in this regard, as well as their almost poignant inability to recognize that they had failed, reveals a very great deal about the state of Christian metaphysics at the dawn of modernity. It also demonstrates, moreover, just how difficult it is, even for those who adhere most fiercely to the traditional metaphysical *language* of divine transcendence, to master the metaphysical *logic* of divine transcendence. And nowhere was this 'traditional Thomist' failure more resplendently obvious than in the 'Bañezian' concept of the *praemotio physica*: an irresistible divine movement of the creature's will that in no way violates the creature's own freedom. I do not have any interest, I should say, in wandering through the labyrinth of the '*de auxiliis*' controversies, and I am perfectly indifferent to the question of whether there is any actual warrant for the idea of the *praemotio* in Thomas's writings.⁵ My interest in the matter is bloodlessly clinical. To me, the *praemotio* is a perfect specimen of a deformation of theological reason that seems especially characteristic of the modern age, both early and late: not necessarily a conscious denial of any of classical Christianity's claims regarding God's nature, but rather a far more general and destructive forgetfulness of the true meaning of those claims – one that renders either their denial or their affirmation largely irrelevant.

II

The concept of physical premotion is not terribly difficult to grasp.⁶ It is a device intended, in principle, to safeguard a proper understanding of divine transcendence and omnipotence (though, in fact, it accomplishes precisely the opposite). It is called 'physical' in order to make clear that it is not merely a moral premotion, which would act only as a final cause upon the