

## Aquinas on God's Causal Knowledge: A Reply to Stump and Kretzmann

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Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann read Aquinas differently than I do when it comes to the question of God's eternal knowledge of the temporal.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, we disagree on the role that God's efficient causality plays in accounting for such knowledge; I argue that it is the principal explanatory factor, they disagree. In the course of replying to my earlier paper they do two things: first, they assert that I misrepresent their reading of Aquinas, thereby obviating the need to defend it; second, they identify three critical issues raised by my reading of Aquinas. I agree that Stump and Kretzmann raise genuine problems for my position and I am grateful for their probing questions and the chance to respond to them in the first part of what follows. Once I have defended my reading of Aquinas, I will revisit the Stump-Kretzmann interpretation in the second part.

### I.

*How does God know evil?* If God's knowledge of the world is co-extensive with and dependent upon divine causality, and if God does not cause evil or sin<sup>2</sup>, then it seems that God must be ignorant of evil and sin.

<sup>1</sup>*American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1998): 439-45.

<sup>2</sup>In a question in the *Summa theologiae* (ST) devoted to whether God is the cause of evil (Ia.49,2), Aquinas explains that God is not the cause of the evil that arises from a defective agent or from a defective action (e.g. moral evil). God is the ultimate cause why there is corruption in the world, however, and God is the author of penal or punitive evil (*malum poenae*); on the latter as the punitive deprivation of some perfection, see Ia. 48,5 and 6. Aquinas makes it quite clear that God is neither the direct nor indirect cause of

If we deny the consequent for the sake of divine omniscience and maintain a causal theory of divine knowledge, then we seem forced to make God the ultimate agent of sin. As Stump and Kretzmann put it, my reading thus seems to land me on the horns of a dilemma: "So, for Shanley, Aquinas has to hold either that God causes human evil, or that he has no knowledge of it and is, therefore, not omniscient." Another way of putting the problem would be to see it as arising out of the apparent incompatibility of the following three claims:

(1) God's knowledge of any temporal state of affairs is causal.

(2) God's omniscience includes a knowledge of all temporal states of affairs, including human evil.

(3) God's goodness requires that God is not the cause of human evil. Stump and Kretzmann would solve the problem by jettisoning (1) and they imply that so too would Aquinas. I disagree about Aquinas.

Aquinas squarely faced this problem many times and never concluded that it required a rejection of his causal theory of divine knowledge.<sup>3</sup> What it rather called for was an appreciation of the peculiar character of evil as a privation that is only indirectly intelligible by reference to some good. Aquinas adopts the Neoplatonic line that evil is not some kind of pure non-being or negativity, but rather the absence or privation of a goodness that ought to be present in some subject. Everything that exists *ipso facto* has some goodness or perfection, since goodness is a transcendental property of being.<sup>4</sup> Evil is parasitic upon that good: it is the lack of some further perfection or actuality that ought to characterize an existing subject.<sup>5</sup> Thus evil is not a thing or a force, but rather some kind of absence, lack, deprivation, or failure in something. To call something evil or bad is to say that it does not measure up to the standards of its kind.

As a kind of non-being, evil is unintelligible *per se*; what has no being thereby has no intelligibility. Not even God can have proper or direct knowledge of evil. Evil is known by God indirectly through proper knowledge of the good reality that lacks some further perfection that it ought to have. This knowledge of evil *per aliud* does not connote any

sin—"Deus nullo modo est causa peccati"—in ST Ia-IIae. 79,1. See also *De malo* (DM) 3,1 and 3,2.

<sup>3</sup>Aquinas treats the question of how God knows evil in *I Sent.* 36,1,2; *De veritate* 2,15; *Summa contra gentiles* I,71; *Quodlibet* XI,2; and ST Ia. 14,10.

<sup>4</sup>See ST Ia. 5 on the nature of goodness.

<sup>5</sup>See ST Ia. 48,3.

imperfection in God because per se knowledge of evil is impossible.<sup>6</sup> God has direct, proper knowledge of each individual existent in all its concrete particularity. God also knows what is expected, optimal, or due with respect to every existent and every action. God non-discursively knows what evils afflict a particular being by knowing what is absent, lacking, or failing in that being. God directly causes and knows what is real, actual, and good and thereby indirectly knows without causing what is privative or defective therein.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of a morally evil action (*malum culpae* or *peccatum*<sup>8</sup>), wherein the privation is a disorder in the will whereby it does not act in accord with its proper measure or rule, the positive being of the action comes from God the First Cause while the privation originates in the human will. All that is real and active causally derives from God: God is the cause of the sinner's being and the sinner's activity. The disorder or privation in the sinful act is not caused by God, however, but rather by the human will. God is the ultimate cause of the actor and the activity, but not the sin itself.<sup>9</sup> In causally knowing the sinner and his activity, God also

<sup>6</sup> "Dicendum quod cognoscere aliquid per aliud tantum, est imperfectae cognitionis, si illud sit cognoscibile per se. Sed malum non est per se cognoscibile, quia de ratione mali est, quod sit privatio boni. Et sic neque definiri, neque cognosci potest nisi per bonum." ST Ia. 14,10 ad4. In *Quodlibet* XI,2, Aquinas draws a distinction between (1) what can be known absolutely by a proper ratio and (2) what can only be known in dependence upon another to which it is necessarily ordered or related. Evil can only be known in the latter fashion as dependent upon good. According to this logic there can be no divine idea of evil: "Dicendum quod malum cognoscitur a Deo non per propriam rationem, sed per rationem boni. Et ideo malum non habet in Deo ideam, neque secundum quod idea est exemplar, neque secundum quod est ratio." ST Ia. 15,3 ad1. On this last point, see John F. Wippel, *Thomas Aquinas on the Divine Ideas*, Etienne Gilson Series 16 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1993), 44-46.

<sup>7</sup> "Ad secundum dicendum quod scientia Dei nullo modo a re causata est; nec tamen est causa omnium quae cognoscit, sed horum tantum quorum est per se cognitio, scilicet bonorum. Mala autem cognoscit per bona, ut dictum est." I Sent. 36,1,2. "Dicendum quod scientia Dei non est causa mali, sed est causa boni, per quod cognoscitur malum." ST Ia. 14,10.

<sup>8</sup> "Malum autem quod consistet in subtractatione debitae operationis in rebus voluntariis habet rationem culpae." ST Ia. 48,5. "Peccatum non est pura privatio, sed est actus debito ordine privatus." ST Ia.-IIae. 72,1 ad2.

<sup>9</sup> "Dicendum quod actus peccati et est ens, et est actus; et ex utroque habet quod sit a Deo.... Sed peccatum nominat ens et actionem cum quodam defectu. Defectus autem ille est ex causa creata, scilicet libero arbitrio, in quantum deficit ab ordine primi agentis, scilicet Dei. Unde defectus iste non reducit in Deum sicut in causam, sed in liberum arbitrium;

indirectly knows the disorder of sin by knowing what is *debitum* but lacking. God does not directly cause or will moral evil, but rather permits it.<sup>10</sup> Although God is not the cause of evil, Aquinas nonetheless says that God's knowledge of evil belongs to his practical knowledge whereby God knows and orders all things.<sup>11</sup> Hence once the privative character of evil is understood, resulting in its rather peculiar epistemic status as intelligible even to God only indirectly or *per aliud*, then it poses no threat to Aquinas's doctrine of divine causal knowing. Indeed, it should be clear by now that you cannot begin to explain how God knows evil without a foundational appeal to his causal knowing.

*The role of eternity in God's causal knowledge of the future.* Stump and Kretzmann's claim that a causal view of divine knowledge renders the appeal to eternity otiose recalls a long-standing debate regarding the interrelationship and relative importance of divine eternity and divine causality in Aquinas's account of how God knows future contingents. According to Friedrich Schmitt's survey of the classical Thomistic tradition,<sup>12</sup> pre-Bañez commentators (e.g. Cajetan, Capreolus, and Ferrariensis) considered the presence of future contingents to eternity as absolutely necessary to explain God's knowledge because only as somehow present (*quasi praesens*) could future contingents have the actual determination necessary to be an object of knowledge. In the altered polemical climate of the *De Auxilliis* controversy and its aftermath, however, Bañez inaugurated a new tradition of interpretation (followed by John of St. Thomas and the Salmanticenses) that emphasized the absolute primacy of divine causality such that certainty regarding future contingents

sicut defectus claudicationis reducitur in tibiam curvam sicut in causam, non autem in virtutem motivam, a qua tamen causatur quidquid est motionis in claudicatione. Et secundum hoc Deus est causa actus peccati, non tamen est causa peccati, quid non est causa huius, quod actus sit cum defectu." ST Ia.-IIae. 79,1. See also Ia. 49,2 and DM 3,1 and 3,2.

<sup>10</sup>I cannot tackle here the thorny question of God's "permission" of evil. For starters, see Jacques Maritain, *God and the Permission of Evil*, trans. Joseph V. Evans (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1966).

<sup>11</sup>"Malo vero licet ab eo [i.e. Deo] non sint operabilia, tamen sub cognitione practica ipsius cadunt, sicut et bona, in quantum permittit vel impedit vel ordinat ea; sicut et aegritudines cadunt sub practica scientia medici, in quantum per artem suam curat eas." ST Ia. 14,16.

<sup>12</sup>Friedrich Schmitt, *Die Lehre des h. Thomas von Aquin vom göttlichen Wissen des zukünftig Kontingenten bei seinen grossen Kommentatoren* (Nijmegen, 1950). See especially the conclusion on 196-202.

was grounded squarely in the decrees of the divine will and eternity was relegated to the secondary role of accounting for the intuitive character of God's knowledge. As reflected in the influential writings of Garrigou-Lagrange, this latter tradition remained the dominant Dominican interpretation into the earlier part of this century.<sup>13</sup>

While my sympathies (like Schmitt's) lie more with the older pre-Bañezian tradition, it is not my intention here to adjudicate neo-scholastic disputes or interpret the interpreters. What is more important is that this dispute among commentators forcefully highlights the central hermeneutical problem that has perennially dogged the Thomistic tradition: how to reconcile two apparently independent lines of approach to the question of how God knows the future. The first is based on divine eternity and accounts for God's knowledge of the future in terms of the presence of all of time to God's eternal vision; this is the line followed in all of Aquinas's *ex professo* treatments. The second is based on a causal account of God's knowledge: God's knowledge of future existents must be causal and so connected with the divine will (this is the truth underlying the Bañezian position). Why then does Aquinas seem to ignore the causal character of God's knowledge in his explicit treatments of how God knows the future? Why doesn't Aquinas say what the Bañezians want him to say: that God knows the future by knowing what He wills to cause?

My argument is that Aquinas's approach to how God knows future contingents requires *both* that God be eternal and that God be the cause of what he knows: God knows future contingents precisely as their eternal cause. When Aquinas asserts that the eternal God has an epistemic access to all temporal events analogous to the kind of cognitive access that we have in ideal conditions to events temporally present to us, the ground of this epistemic presence is God's creative causality. God knows all temporal events in their real existence because God is the cause of that existence; temporal events are present to God's eternal knowledge as the object or terminus of God's eternal creative causality. My central claim is that God's creative-causal relationship to the world is the ultimate metaphysical foundation for all that Aquinas says about God's knowledge of future contingents. God knows the future *because* God is its eternal

<sup>13</sup>See *De Deo Uno: Commentarium in primum partem S. Thomae* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et CIE, 1938), 353-370.

creator. This unarticulated but presupposed metaphysical background is the key to understanding Aquinas's position.<sup>14</sup>

The main reason for hermeneutical confusion here is a failure to recognize the abstractive and formal character of Aquinas's *ex professo* approach to the question of how God knows future contingents.<sup>15</sup> In his earliest treatment in *I Sent.* 38,1,5, he notes that there are two distinct reasons to wonder about the compatibility of God's knowledge with contingency. The first problem is *propter ordinem causae ad causatum*: God's causal knowledge seems to impose a necessity upon its effects. The second problem is *propter ordinem scientiae ad scitum*: how can God have certain cognition of future contingents since by definition they are indeterminate and uncertain?<sup>16</sup> While Aquinas devotes attention to both problems in the *Sentences*, his later treatments (e.g. *Summa theologiae* Ia. 14,13) usually abstract from the causal-volitional side of God's knowledge in order to focus attention almost exclusively on divine *scientia qua scientia*. Under this formality of divine *scientia qua scientia* (not *qua voluntate adjuncta*) the crucial question regarding future contingents is how there can be certain knowledge of what appears to be intrinsically unknowable because indeterminate.<sup>17</sup> It is in answer to this specific problem of the apparent incompatibility of divine *scientia* with the indeterminacy of future contingents that divine eternity is crucial: what is future, indeterminate, and unknowable to a temporal knower is quasi-present, determinate, and knowable to the God who transcends time. Here

<sup>14</sup>The position that I am taking was tentatively proposed by Joseph Groblicki in *De scientia Dei futurorum contingentium secundum S. Thomam eiusque primos sequaces* (Krakow, 1938), 38-39. Among contemporary interpreters, Christopher Hughes is perhaps closest to the truth about Aquinas when he remarks that God's epistemic access to events as quasi-present presupposes that all events "depend causally on Him in a way analogous to the way present effects depend on their present causes." *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 115.

<sup>15</sup>This point is nicely made by M. Matthijs in "De ratione certitudinis divinae scientiae circa futura contingentia," *Angelicum* XIII (1936): 493-497.

<sup>16</sup>"Contingentia enim videtur duplici ratione effugere divinam cognitionem. Primo propter ordinem causae ad causatum. Quia causae necessariae et immutabilis videtur esse effectus necessarius; unde cum scientia Dei sit causa rerum, et si immutabilis, non videtur quod possit esse contingentium. Secundo propter ordinem scientiae ad scitum; quia cum scientia sit certa cognitio, ex ipsa ratione certitudinis etiam exclusa causalitate, requirit certitudinem et determinationem in scito, quam contingentia excludit."

<sup>17</sup>A clear statement of the intrinsic unknowability of the future qua future because of its ontological indeterminacy is found in DM 16,7.

the relevant difference between God's knowledge and human knowledge is eternity rather than causality.

In my reading of Aquinas, eternity is not at all otiose to an account of how God knows the future; indeed, it is absolutely necessary. An appeal to divine eternity by itself is not enough, however, because it leaves unanswered the causal question of how the temporal becomes epistemically present to the eternal. Hence it is also necessary that God's eternity be that of the creator of time. God's knows the future as the eternal cause of its existence.

*Is God effected somehow by what He knows?* The third problem that Stump and Kretzmann raise for my position concerns God's knowledge of non-temporal realities like mathematical truths and truths about God's own being. Stump and Kretzmann are obviously correct when they say that God's knowing of these things is not based on efficient causation. Stump and Kretzmann think, however, that such a concession entails that I land myself in yet another dilemma: either I am wrong to reject a perceptual model of divine knowledge because God's knowledge is effected by and dependent on what is known or I impute to Aquinas an incoherent account of God's knowledge because a coherent account requires a recognition of some dependency in God's knowledge of non-temporal truths.

I do not see myself caught in a genuine dilemma so long as I restrict my claims about the role of efficient causality in divine knowledge to temporal realities, which has been my aim all along. I did not purport to give an exhaustive account of divine knowing in my previous article and I do not intend to explain here how God knows mathematical truths or his own being. Were I to do so, I would deny that it is by being "effected by and dependent on what is known," as Stump and Kretzmann seem to imply, at least until they give me a better explanation of what they mean. What is at issue here, however, is how God knows the temporal. Do Stump and Kretzmann want to say that God's knowledge of that is "effected by and dependent on what is known?" It would seem that, in some qualified fashion, they do. Let us now turn to their position.

## II.

Stump and Kretzmann claim that my characterization of their interpretation of Aquinas is a misrepresentation, but they do not specify how and I am genuinely puzzled on this point. In "God's Knowledge and its Causal Efficacy," they say:

So when Aquinas says that God's knowledge is causative, he does not mean that God's act of cognition efficiently causes the events and states of affairs God knows. He means that the divine ideas are formal rather than efficient causes, and what they are causes of is not events or states of affairs in creation but rather just created things themselves.<sup>18</sup>

This is the basic thesis that I contest and I do not see how what I say about it, albeit based on an earlier version of their paper that was all that I knew when I submitted my paper to the *ACPQ* in June of 1995, misrepresents this position. If somehow it is a misrepresentation, it is at least innocent of that intent. That is why I am grateful for the chance here to spell out in greater length what my differences with Stump and Kretzmann about Aquinas really are and where I see grave problems in their position.

Stump and Kretzmann's account of divine causal knowledge identifies it exclusively with formal-exemplar causality through the divine ideas and asserts that what is thus known are created things but not events and states of affairs (presumably events and states of affairs are somehow known non-causally). They specifically deny that God's knowledge is based on efficient causality. This leads to a major and unaddressed problem in their position. Surely they do not want to deny that God is the efficient cause of all created being in Aquinas. Yet if God is the efficient cause of created being, must not that causing be the object of divine knowledge? Must not God know what He is doing when he efficiently causes being? To deny God epistemic access to his own activity would be a strange reading of Aquinas indeed. To put the same point in another way, how can Stump and Kretzmann account for God's knowledge of the *esse* of created beings? If *esse* is distinct from essence in every created being, then how can formal-exemplar causality be enough to explain the divine knowledge of that *esse*? Does not every temporal state of affairs or event have to have its *esse* caused by God?

A central claim by Stump and Kretzmann is that Aquinas's treatment of divine knowing is best read "as an account of the nature of God's representations and the way divine representations render intelligible everything with which God is in epistemic contact, rather than as a theory

<sup>18</sup>In Thomas D. Senior, ed., *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 117.



about how God is in epistemic contact with creatures or how the one divine representation is applied to objects of God's cognition."<sup>19</sup> What they seem to mean by this is that most of Aquinas's account is meant to explain how God's mind internally originates the right kind of formal-mental state to represent what God knows rather than how it is that that formal-mental state latches onto the real. The problem of how God's mind makes epistemic contact with the real is supposedly left largely unexplained by Aquinas. I argue that the question of epistemic contact is explained by God's causality of being. Stump and Kretzmann repudiate that option. So how does the divine mind make epistemic contact with events and states of affairs? Before I consider their proposed solution to this question, let me note that their problem arises not only from their denial to God of knowledge based on efficient causality, but also from their posing of the problem in terms of a representationalist view of knowledge. As I argued in my original paper, it is a mistake to take Aquinas as offering a representationalist view of divine knowing. Stump and Kretzmann's representationalist language leave them with the old problem: how is it possible to explain how the mental representations make reliable contact with the real?

One way out of the problem, of course, is to say that the representations are caused by their objects (but how do we know that?). This way out is not available to Stump and Kretzmann in the case of God, however, because, as they acknowledge, it would violate divine impassivity. So they get squeezed into a tight corner: God cannot know temporal events and states of affairs by causing them and he cannot know them by being causally effected by them. So how does God know them? I do not believe that Stump and Kretzmann ever give a satisfactory answer to this question. They appeal to divine eternity and its Boethian metaphor of God "seeing" all temporal events atemporally. They argue that this "seeing" is also a kind of receiving: "God's intellect wouldn't *be perfect* if it weren't somehow timelessly in receipt of what its 'seeing' discloses, aware of information without first having been without it."<sup>20</sup> Stump and Kretzmann attribute to Aquinas and seem to endorse themselves the further claim that "any cognition that could count as cognition of contingents must

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 111.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 121.

also involve some reception.”<sup>21</sup> They assert that Aquinas considers this to be an a priori truth. They offer no text from Aquinas to support their imputation, but rather only some references to texts in Aristotle’s *De anima* describing human perception. I think that Stump and Kretzmann are begging the question here. I cannot imagine Aquinas making receptivity a necessary condition for any cognition of contingents for two reasons (in addition to the lack of textual warrant). First and most obviously, this general claim would be incompatible with divine impassivity. Second, because receptivity does not even seem to be necessary for all human knowledge of contingents. While it may be true that I can only cognize the contingent action of another through reception or perception, surely I do not “receive” knowledge of my own contingent intentional actions; in cases of intentional action, the agent knows in knowing what he is doing. There is good reason then to reject the alleged necessary receptivity in the cognition of contingents. Moreover, it is hard to make much sense of how God “receives” or “sees” anything without more of a causal explanation of how it works than Stump and Kretzmann provide. It seems that Stump and Kretzmann’s final answer to the problem of epistemic contact is an appeal to divine eternity. But how does eternity alone as the mode of divine knowing explain epistemic contact? Do we not also need to bring in divine causality in order to explain God’s epistemic contact?

Stump and Kretzmann identify as a final problem how God “applies” his representations to what he is in epistemic contact with. They acknowledge that Aquinas has very little to say about this topic and produce only a single text where, within the context of explaining how angels apply their species to particulars, Aquinas makes a reference to God also “applying” his ideas to particulars.<sup>22</sup> I hold that the reason why Aquinas provides no account of how God “applies” the divine ideas is precisely because it is a genuine problem for angelic cognition rather than divine cognition. Stump and Kretzmann devote a large part of their paper to an analysis of angelic cognition and one of their stated reasons for this procedure is the belief that it illumines a problem common to both divine and angelic knowing: How can cognition through immanent forms take place when the form is not taken from the object of cognition?<sup>23</sup> Stump

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 120.

<sup>22</sup>The reference is to *Quodlibet* 7.1.3 ad3 on p. 122.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 101.

and Kretzmann go too far, however, in assimilating divine and angelic cognition in this way. There is a category difference between the two: God's knowledge is knowledge of the creator, while angelic knowledge is knowledge of a creature. In the corpus of the text referred to as supporting the claim that God has to "apply" his ideas (*Quodlibet* 7.1.3), Aquinas is careful to distinguish divine ideas from infused angelic species in two ways: (1) divine ideas are principles of knowledge precisely as *formae activae rerum*, unlike angelic species; and (2) divine ideas do not signify any real multiplicity of knowing principles within God, whereas angelic species are truly multiple. The problem of application only arises for a knower that is not in causal contact with what is known and has available within it plural principles of knowing. It is not a problem for God.

Space limitations require that I now bring my reply to some kind of conclusion. At the end of the day, the difference between my reading of Aquinas on God's knowledge of the temporal and that proffered by Stump and Kretzmann is my insistence that divine knowing must be read within the context of creation. God's knowledge of the temporal is as the eternal creator. Stump and Kretzmann abstract from creation and efficient causation in their account of divine knowledge. In adjudicating between our readings, it is important to keep two questions distinct: "What is the proper reading of Aquinas?" and "Is Aquinas still defensible in the contemporary arena?" I disagree with Stump and Kretzmann on both questions. If I am right, then Stump and Kretzmann are really offering a modified version of Aquinas designed to make him more palatable to those who fear that the kind of causal knowing that I endorse raises an insoluble problem with respect to human freedom. I prefer the original version and have been arguing all along that when it is properly understood within the context of creation, it is still defensible and indeed superior to alternative views and adapted versions.

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