

QUESTION 104

The Specific Effects of Divine Governance

Next we have to consider the specific effects of God's governance. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Do creatures need to be conserved in being (*in esse*) by God? (2) Are creatures conserved by God directly (*immediate*)? (3) Is God able to reduce a thing to nothingness? (4) Is anything in fact reduced to nothingness?

Article 1

Do creatures need to be conserved in being by God?

It seems that creatures do not need to be conserved in being (*conserventur in esse*) by God:

Objection 1: What is not able not to exist does not need to be conserved in being, just as what is not able to disappear does not need to be kept from disappearing. But there are some creatures that are by their nature not able not to exist. Therefore, not all creatures need to be conserved in being by God.

Proof of the second premise (*probatio mediae*): What exists in something *per se* is such that (a) it exists in it necessarily and (b) it is impossible for its opposite to exist in it; for instance, it is necessary for the number two to be even, and it is impossible for it to be odd. Now *esse* follows *per se* upon a form, since each entity has being in actuality because it has a form. But there are some creatures that are subsistent forms, as has been explained for the case of the angels (q. 50, a. 2), and so *esse* is in them *per se*. And the same line of reasoning holds for those creatures whose matter is in potentiality to only a single [substantial] form, as was explained above for the case of the celestial bodies (q. 66, a. 2). Therefore, creatures of this sort exist by necessity in accord with their nature, and they are not able not to exist; for a potentiality for non-existence cannot be grounded either (a) in their form, which *esse* follows upon *per se*, or (b) in their matter, which exists as the subject of a form that it cannot lose, since it is not in potentiality to any other form.

Objection 2: God is more powerful than any created agent. But there are created agents that can bring it about that their effects are conserved in being even after the agent's own action ceases. For instance, the house remains after the builder's action ceases, and the water remains hot for a time after the fire's action ceases. Therefore, *a fortiori*, God can bring it about that His creatures are conserved in being when His own operation ceases.

Objection 3: Nothing violent can occur in the absence of an agent cause. But to tend toward non-being is unnatural and violent for any creature, since every creature naturally tends toward existing (*naturaliter appetit esse*). Therefore, a creature can tend toward non-being only because of some corrupting agent (*nisi aliquo agente ad corruptionem*). But some entities, e.g., spiritual substances and celestial bodies, are such that it is impossible to do anything to corrupt them. Therefore, creatures of this sort cannot tend toward non-being, even if God's action ceases.

Objection 4: If God conserves things in being, then this will be through some action. But any action of an agent is such that, if it is efficacious, something comes to exist in the effect. Therefore, something would have to come to exist in the creature through God's action in conserving it. But this does not seem to be the case. For it is not the case that the very *esse* of the creature is effected by an action of this sort, since what already exists does not come to exist. Nor, again, is there anything else added to the creature, since if there were, then either (a) God would not be continuously conserving the creature in being or else (b) it would continually be the case that something is being added to the creature—which is absurd. Therefore, creatures are not conserved in being by God.

But contrary to this: Hebrews 1:3 says, "Upholding all things by the word of His power."

I respond: One must claim, in accord with both faith and reason, that creatures are conserved in being by God.

To make this clear, notice that there are two ways in which one thing is conserved by another:

First, *indirectly and per accidens*, in the sense in which someone is said to conserve a thing when he removes a corrupting agent. For instance, if someone keeps a child from falling into a fire, he is said to conserve the child. And God is likewise said to conserve some things in this sense—though not all things, since some things do not have corrupting agents that must be removed in order for them to be conserved.

In the second way, something is said to conserve a thing *per se and directly*, viz., insofar as that which is conserved depends on the conserving agent in such a way that it could not exist without it. And in this sense all creatures need God's conserving action (*indigent divina conservatione*). For the *esse* of each creature depends on God in such a way that the creature could not subsist for even a moment—but would instead, as Gregory says, fall into nothingness—if it were not conserved in *esse* by the action of God's power.

This can be looked at as follows. Every effect depends on its cause to the extent that it is its cause. But notice that in some cases an agent is a cause of its effect only with respect to effect's being-made (*secundum fieri tantum*) and not directly with respect to its *esse* (*non directe secundum esse eius*). This happens both in the case of artifacts and in the case of natural beings.

For instance, a builder is a cause of a house as far as its being-made is concerned, but not directly as far as its *esse* is concerned. For it is clear that the house's *esse* follows upon its form, and that the house's form is its composition and order, and that this form follows upon the natural powers of certain things. For just as a cook cooks the food by making use of a certain active natural power, viz., that of the fire, so too a builder makes a house by using cement, stones, and wood, which are capable of receiving and conserving the relevant composition and order. Hence, the house's *esse* depends on the natures of these things, just as the house's being-made depends on the builder's action.

And we have to think about natural things in like manner. For if an agent is not a cause of a form insofar as it is a form of a given sort, then that agent will not be a *per se* cause of the *esse* that follows upon that form, but will instead be a cause of the effect only with respect to its being-made.

Now it is clear that if two things belong to the same species, then the one cannot be a *per se* cause of the form of the other insofar as it is a form of that sort, since otherwise it would be a cause of its own form, given that the same line of reasoning holds in both cases. However, it can be a cause of the form's existing in matter, i.e., it can be a cause of *this* matter's acquiring *this* form. And this is what it is for it to be a cause with respect to the thing's being-made, as when a man generates a man or a fire generates a fire. And so whenever a natural effect is apt to receive an agent's action (*impressio*) with respect to the same nature that exists in the agent, then that effect depends on the agent for its being-made, but not for its *esse*.

However, in some cases the effect is not apt to receive the agent's action with respect to the same nature that exists in the agent. This is clear in the case of all agents that do not effect what is similar in species to themselves; for instance, the celestial bodies are a cause of generation for lower bodies, which are dissimilar to the celestial bodies in species. An agent of this sort can be a cause of a form with respect to the nature of that sort of form and not just a cause of such a form's being acquired in *this* matter—and in such a case it is a cause not only of the form's being-made but also of its *esse*. Therefore, just as a thing's being-made is not able to remain after the cessation of the action of an agent that is a cause of the effect with respect to its being-made, so too a thing's *esse* cannot remain after the cessation of the action of an agent that is a cause of the effect not only with respect to its being-made, but also with respect to its *esse*.

This is the reason why heated water retains heat after the fire's action ceases, whereas air does not

remain illuminated even for a moment once the sun's action ceases. For the water's matter is receptive to the fire's heat with respect to the same nature by which heat exists in the fire; hence, if the water attained completely to the form of fire, then it would retain heat forever, whereas if it participates incompletely in the form of fire in a sort of incipient way (*secundum quandam inchoationem*), then heat will remain in it only temporarily and not forever—and this because of its weak participation in the source of heat. By contrast, air is not in any way receptive to light with respect to the same nature with which light exists in the sun—that is, in such a way as to receive the sun's form, which is the principle of light—and so, since light is not rooted in the air (*non habet radicem in aere*), it immediately ceases when the sun's action ceases.

Now every creature is related to God in the way that air is related to the sun as an illuminator. For just as the sun illuminates by its nature, whereas the air becomes luminous by participating in light from the sun but not by participating in the sun's nature, so too God alone is a being through His essence, since His essence is His *esse*, whereas every creature is a being by participation (*est ens participative*) and not such that its essence is its *esse*. This is why, as Augustine puts it in *Super Genesim ad Litteram* 4, “If God's power ever ceased to rule the things that have been created, their kind would simultaneously cease, and all of nature would perish.” And in book 8 of the same book he says, “Just as the air is luminous when light is present, so man is illuminated when God is present to him and continuously darkened when God is absent.”

Reply to objection 1: *Esse* follows *per se* upon the form of a creature, but only if God's influence is presupposed—just as light follows upon air's transparency (*diaphanum aeris*), but only if the sun's influence is presupposed. Hence, the potentiality for non-being in spiritual creatures and celestial bodies lies in God, who is able to withdraw His influence, rather than in the form or the matter of such creatures.

Reply to objection 2: God is unable to bring it about that a creature is conserved in being when His own operation has ceased, in just the same way that He is unable to bring it about that He is not a cause of the creature's *esse*. For a creature needs to be conserved by God in the way that an effect's *esse* depends on the cause of its *esse*. Hence, there is no parallel to a case involving an agent that is only a cause of being-made and not a cause of *esse*.

Reply to objection 3: This argument goes through for the sort of conservation that occurs through the removal of a corrupting agent—a type of conservation that, as has been explained, not all creatures need.

Reply to objection 4: The conservation of a thing by God does not occur through any new action; instead, it occurs through the continuation of the action by which God confers *esse*—an action that exists without motion or time. It is like the conservation of light in the air by the sun's continuous influence.

Article 2

Does God directly conserve every creature?

It seems that God directly (*immediate*) conserves every creature:

Objection 1: As has been explained (a. 1), God is the conserver of things by the same action by which He is also the creator of things. But God is directly the creator of all things. Therefore, He is likewise directly the conserver of all things.

Objection 2: Each thing is closer to itself than it is to another thing. But it cannot be imparted to any creature that it should conserve itself. Therefore, *a fortiori*, it cannot be imparted to any creature that it should conserve another. Therefore, God conserves all things without any mediating conserving cause.

Objection 3: An effect is conserved in being by a cause that is a cause of *esse* and not just a cause of being-made. But, it seems, every created cause is a cause of its effects only with respect to their being-made, since, as was established above (q. 45, a. 3), a created cause acts as a cause only by effecting change (*movendo*). Therefore, created causes are not causes that conserve their effects in being.

But contrary to this: A thing is conserved in the same way that it has *esse*. But God grants *esse* to things by means of certain mediating causes. Therefore, He likewise conserves things in being by means of certain mediating causes.

I respond: As has been explained (a. 1), there are two ways in which something conserves a thing in being: (a) indirectly and *per accidens*, by removing or impeding the action of a corrupting agent, and (b) directly and *per se*, in the sense that the other thing's *esse* depends on it in the way that an effect's *esse* depends on its cause. Now it is in both of these ways that some created things conserve others.

For it is clear that even among corporeal things there are many that impede the actions of corrupting agents and for this reason are said to conserve things. For instance, salt keeps meat from putrefying, and something similar holds in many other cases.

Again, one finds that some effects depend on a creature with respect to their *esse*. For when many causes are ordered to one another, the effect depends primarily and principally on the first cause and secondarily on all the intermediate causes. And so the first cause principally conserves the effect, whereas the mediating causes conserve it secondarily; and the higher and closer to the first cause a given mediating cause is, the more it conserves the thing in question. Hence, even among corporeal entities the conservation and permanence of things is attributed to higher causes. As the Philosopher says in *Metaphysics* 12, the first motion, viz., the diurnal motion, is a cause of the continuity of generation, whereas the second motion, which is motion through the zodiac, is a cause of the diversity that occurs in generation and corruption. Similarly, astronomers (*astrologi*) attribute the fixed and permanent entities to Saturn, which is the highest planet.

So, then, one should claim that God conserves some things in being by means of certain mediating causes.

Reply to objection 1: God created all things directly, but in the very creation of things He instituted an order, so that some would depend on others through which they would be secondarily conserved in being—yet presupposing the principal conservation, which is from Him.

Reply to objection 2: Since a proper cause conserves an effect that depends on it, it follows that just as one cannot arrive at any effect that is a cause of itself, even though one can arrive at an effect that is a cause of another, so too one cannot arrive at any effect that conserves itself, even though one can arrive at a cause that conserves another.

Reply to objection 3: It is only by means of some change (*nisi per modum alicuius mutationis*) that a creature can be a cause of another with respect to its acquiring a new form or disposition; for a creature always acts on a presupposed subject. However, after it has induced the form or disposition in the effect, it conserves this form or disposition without any other change in the effect. For instance, in the case of air, a certain change is understood to occur when the air is illuminated *de novo*, but the conservation of the light stems from the presence of the illuminating agent alone, without any change in the air.

Article 3

Is God able reduce a thing to nothingness?

It seems that God is not able to reduce a thing to nothingness (*aliquid redigere in nihilum*):

Objection 1: In 83 *Quaestiones* Augustine says, “God is not a cause of anything’s tending toward non-being.” But this would be the case if He reduced some creature to nothingness. Therefore, God is not able to reduce anything to nothingness.

Objection 2: God is a cause of the existence of things because of His goodness, since, as Augustine says in *De Doctrina Christiana*, “We exist insofar as God is good.” But God is not able not to be good. Therefore, He is not able to bring it about that things do not exist. But He would do this if He reduced them to nothingness.

Objection 3: If God were to reduce certain things to nothingness, this would have to be effected through some action. But this is impossible, since every action terminates in some entity; thus, even the action of a corrupting agent terminates in something that is generated, since the generation of one thing is the corruption of another. Therefore, God is not able to reduce anything to nothingness.

But contrary to this: Jeremiah 10:24 says, “Correct me, O Lord, but yet with judgment: and not in your fury, lest you bring me to nothing.”

I respond: Some have claimed that God brought things into being by acting out of a necessity of nature. If that were true, then God would not be able to reduce anything to nothingness, just as He is not able to change His own nature.

However, as was established above (q. 19, a. 4), this position is false and completely alien to the Catholic Faith, which confesses that God brought things into being by His free will—this according to Psalm 134:6 (“All the things the Lord willed, He did”). Therefore, the fact that God communicates *esse* to things depends on God’s will.

Moreover, as has been explained (a. 1), He does not conserve things in being in any way other than by continuously giving them *esse* (*nisi in quantum eis continue influit esse*). Therefore, just as before things existed, He was able not to communicate *esse* to them and so able not to make them, so too after they have already been made, He is able not to give them *esse*, in which case they would cease to exist. And this is what it is to reduce them to nothingness.

Reply to objection 1: Non-being does not have a *per se* cause, since nothing can be a cause except insofar as it is a being, and a being, speaking *per se*, is a cause of being. So, then, God is not able to be a cause of a tendency toward non-being. Rather, a creature has this tendency from itself, insofar as it comes from nothing. However, God can be a *per accidens* cause of a thing’s being reduced to nothingness, viz., by withdrawing his action from that thing.

Reply to objection 2: God’s goodness is not a cause of things by a necessity of nature, since God’s goodness does not depend on created things; instead, He is a cause of things by His free will. Hence, just as He was able, without prejudice to His goodness, not to bring things into being, so too He is able, without detriment to His goodness, not to conserve things in being.

Reply to objection 3: If God reduced a thing to nothingness, this would occur not by any action, but by His ceasing to act.

Article 4

Is anything in fact reduced to nothingness?

It seems that something is in fact reduced to nothingness:

Objection 1: The ending (*finis*) corresponds to the beginning (*principium*). But in the beginning there was nothing except God. Therefore, things will be brought to this ending: that nothing will exist except God. And so creatures will be reduced to nothingness.

Objection 2: Every creature has finite power. But no finite power extends to what is infinite; hence, *Physics* 8 proves that a finite power cannot effect motion for an infinitely long time. Therefore, no creature can endure for an infinitely long time. And so at some time it will be reduced to nothingness.

Objection 3: Forms and accidents do not have matter as part of themselves. But at some point they cease to exist. Therefore, they are reduced to nothingness.

But contrary to this: Ecclesiastes 3:14 says, “I have learned that all the works which God has made continue for ever.”

I respond: Of those things that are done by God with respect to a creature, some stem from the natural course of things, while, as will be explained below (q. 105, a. 6), others are done miraculously outside the natural order instilled in creatures. Now what God is going to do in accord with the natural order instilled in things can be seen from the very natures of the things, whereas what is done miraculously is ordered toward the manifestation of grace—this according to the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 12:7, “The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man unto profit,” where he then goes on to talk about miraculous acts, among other things..

Now the natures of creatures show that none of them is reduced to nothingness, either because (a) they are immaterial and so do not have within themselves a potentiality for non-being, or because (b) they are material and so remain forever at least with respect to their matter, which is incorruptible inasmuch as it serves as the subject of generation and corruption.

Moreover, reducing something to nothingness has nothing to do with the manifestation of grace, since God’s power and goodness are manifested instead in a thing’s being conserved in being.

Hence, one should say without qualification that nothing at all will be reduced to nothingness.

Reply to objection 1: The fact that things were brought into being after not having existed makes manifest the power of the one who produced them. But their being reduced to nothingness would impede the manifestation of this power, since God’s power is made manifest to the highest degree in His conserving things in being—this according to the Apostle in Hebrews 1:3 (“Upholding all things by the word of His power”).

Reply to objection 2: A creature’s power to exist is a merely receptive power, whereas the corresponding active power belongs to God Himself, from whom the outpouring of *esse* comes forth. Hence, the fact that things endure for an infinitely long time follows from the unlimitedness of God’s power.

However, the power to endure is limited in the case of certain things to a determinate temporal interval, because they are prevented from receiving God’s outpouring of *esse* by some contrary agent that their finite power can resist only for a limited time and not for an infinitely long time. This is why things that do not have a contrary persevere forever, despite the fact that the power they have is finite.

Reply to objection 3: Forms and accidents are not complete entities, since they do not subsist; instead, each of them is something that *belongs to* some being (*quodlibet eorum est aliquid entis*); for each is called a being because it is that *by which* something exists.

And yet, even given the sense in which they exist, they are not altogether reduced to

nothingness—not because some part of them remains, but rather because they remain either in the potentiality of matter or in the potentiality of the subject.