

QUESTION 22

God's Providence

Now that we have considered what pertains to God's will absolutely speaking, we must proceed to those things that are related to both His intellect and will together. These include providence, which is had with respect to all things (question 22), as well as predestination and reprobation and what follows upon them in the order of salvation—especially with respect to human beings (questions 23-24). For in moral science prudence, which clearly pertains to providence, is considered after the moral virtues.

On the topic of providence there are four questions: (1) Does providence exist in God? (2) Are all things subject to God's providence? (3) Is God's providence immediate with respect to all things? (4) Does God's providence impose necessity on the things it provides for?

Article 1

Does providence exist in God?

It seems that providence does not exist in God:

Objection 1: According to Tully, providence is a part of prudence. But since, according to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 6, prudence involves good deliberation, it cannot belong to God; for there is nothing which God is not sure about and which He would thus need to deliberate about. Therefore, providence does not belong to God.

Objection 2: Whatever exists in God is eternal. But providence is not eternal, since, according to Damascene, providence has to do with existing things that are not themselves eternal. Therefore, providence does not exist in God.

Objection 3: Nothing composite exists in God. But providence seems to be something composite, since it includes within itself both the will and the intellect. Therefore, providence does not exist in God.

But contrary to this: Wisdom 14:3 says, "But Your providence, O Father, governs all things."

I respond: It is necessary for providence to be posited in God. For, as has been shown (q. 6, a. 4), all the good that exists in things is created by God. But good is found in things not only with respect to their substance, but also with respect to their being ordered to their end, and most especially to their ultimate end, which, as was established above (q. 21, a. 4), is God's goodness. Therefore, this good of ordering that exists among created things is itself created by God. However, since God is a cause of things through His intellect, and since, as is clear from what was said above (q. 15, a. 2 and q. 19, a. 4), the idea of each of His effects must thus preexist in Him, it is necessary that a plan for the ordering of things to their end should preexist in God's mind. And this plan for ordering things to their end is providence, properly speaking.

For providence is the principal part of prudence, and the other two parts—viz., memory of what is past and insight into what is present—are ordered to it. For it is from the past as remembered and the present as understood that we make inferences about future things that have to be provided for. Now according to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 6, it is the role of prudence to order other things to their end—whether this be (a) with respect to one's own self, and in this sense a prudent man is one who skillfully orders his acts to the purpose of his life, or (b) with respect to the end of others who are subject to one in the family or in the city or in the kingdom, and it is in this sense that Matthew 24:45 says, "... the faithful and prudent servant, whom his lord has appointed over his family." It is in this second way that prudence or providence can belong to God. For in God Himself there is nothing that can be ordered to an end, since He Himself is the ultimate end.

Therefore, it is this plan for ordering things to their end that is called providence in God.

Accordingly, in *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 4, Boethius says, “Providence is divine reason itself, grounded in the ultimate ruler of all things, which disposes all things.” Now ‘disposition’ can refer either to a plan for ordering things to their end or a plan for ordering the parts in a whole.

Reply to objection 1: According to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 6, prudence, properly speaking, gives commands about matters which good deliberation (εὐβουλίᾳ) has skillfully inquired into and which sound judgment (σύνεσις) has correctly passed judgment on. Hence, even though deliberating does not belong to God, given that deliberation involves inquiry into matters that one is not sure about, nonetheless, it does belong to God that He should issue commands about the ordering of things to their end, concerning which He has ‘right reason’ (*recta ratio*)—this, according to Psalm 148:6 (“He has made a decree, and it shall not pass away.”) And this is the sense in which the nature of prudence and providence belongs to God.

Moreover, even though one can claim that the plan for things to be done may itself be called ‘deliberation’ [or ‘counsel’] in God, this will not be because of any sort of inquiry in God; instead, it will be because of the cognitional certitude that all those who deliberate aim to arrive at by means of their inquiry. Hence, Ephesians 1:11 says, “Who works all things according to the counsel of His will.”

Reply to objection 2: Two things are pertinent to care, viz., (a) the *plan* of the ordering, which is called *providence* and *disposition*, and (b) the *execution* of that ordering, which is called *governance*. The first of these is eternal, and the second is temporal.

Reply to objection 3: Providence exists in the intellect but presupposes the willing of the end. For one does not give commands concerning what is to be done for the sake of an end unless he has willed the end. Hence, prudence also presupposes the moral virtues, through which the appetite is ordered to the good, as *Ethics* 6 says.

Still, even if providence were related equally to God’s will and to His intellect, this would still not compromise God’s simplicity. For, as was explained above (q. 19, a. 1 and a. 4), in God the will and the intellect are the same.

Article 2

Are all things subject to God's providence?

It seems that not all things are subject to God’s providence:

Objection 1: Nothing that is provided for is fortuitous. Therefore, if all things are provided for by God, then nothing will be fortuitous, and so there will be no such thing as chance or fortune. But this is contrary to common opinion.

Objection 2: Every wise provider eliminates defects and evils as much as possible from the things that he takes care of. But we see that many evils exist among things. Therefore, either God is unable to prevent them and so is not omnipotent, or else He does not have care of all of them.

Objection 3: What happens by necessity does not require providence, i.e., prudence. Hence, according to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 6, prudence is right reason with respect to contingent things that are open to deliberation and choice. Therefore, since many things in the world happen by necessity, not everything is subject to providence.

Objection 4: Whoever is left to himself is not subject to the providence of any ruler. But men are left to themselves by God, according to Ecclesiasticus 15:14 (“God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel”). And this holds especially for evil men, according to Psalm 80:13 (“So He let them go according to the desires of their heart”). Therefore, not all things are subject

to God's providence.

Objection 5: In 1 Corinthians 9:9 the Apostle says, "God is not concerned about oxen," or, for the same reason, about other non-rational creatures. Therefore, not all things are subject to God's providence.

But contrary to this: Wisdom 8:1 says of God's wisdom, "She reaches, therefore, from end to end mightily, and orders all things sweetly."

I respond: Some thinkers, e.g., Democritus and Epicurus, have completely denied providence, claiming that the world came about by chance.

Others have claimed that only incorruptible things are subject to providence, and that corruptible things are subject to providence not as individuals but only according to their species, since in this respect they are incorruptible. In the person of these thinkers Job 22:14 says, "The clouds are His covert, and He does not consider our things, and He walks about the poles of heaven." Rabbi Moses separated men off from the general run of corruptible things because of the splendor of the intellect they participate in, but he followed the opinion of the others in the case of other corruptible individuals.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to claim that all things are subject to divine providence—not only in general, but also as individuals. This is made clear as follows:

Since every agent acts for the sake of an end, the ordering of effects to their end extends as far as the first agent's causality does. For in the works of any given agent, the reason why an effect occurs that is not ordered to the end is that this effect follows from some other cause and falls outside the intention of the relevant agent. But the causality of God, who is the first agent, extends to all beings—not only with respect to the principles of their species, but also with respect to their individual principles, and not only with respect to the principles of incorruptible things, but also with respect to the principles of corruptible things. Hence, everything that has *esse* in any way must be ordered by God to its end—this according to the Apostle in Romans 13:1 ("The things that are from God are ordered by God"). Therefore, since, as has been explained (a. 1), God's providence is nothing other than a plan for ordering things to their end, it must be the case that all things, insofar as they participate in *esse*, are to that extent subject to God's providence.

Similarly, it was shown above (q. 14, a. 11) that God knows all things, both universals and particulars. And since, as was explained above (q. 14, a. 8), God's cognition is related to things as a craftsman's cognition is related to his artifacts, it must be the case that all things are subject to God's ordering in the way that all of a craftsman's artifacts are subject to his ordering.

Reply to objection 1: Universal causes differ here from particular causes, since something can elude a particular cause's ordering, but not a universal cause's ordering. For something eludes a particular cause's ordering only because of some other particular cause that impedes that ordering; for instance, a piece of wood is prevented from bursting into flame by the action of water. Hence, since all the particular causes are included under the universal cause, it is impossible for any effect to escape the universal cause's ordering.

Therefore, insofar as a given effect escapes the ordering of some particular cause, it is called a chance effect or fortuitous effect with respect to that particular cause. However, with respect to the universal cause, whose ordering it cannot be released from, it is said to be provided for. Similarly, it might happen that two servants of the same master meet one another, and that even though the meeting is a chance event from their perspective, it was nonetheless provided for by their master, who knowingly dispatched them to the same place in such a way that neither knew about the other.

Reply to objection 2: Someone who has care of a particular thing differs here from someone who is a universal provider. For a particular provider eliminates defects as much as possible from that which is subject to his care, whereas a universal provider permits defects to occur in particular cases in order

not to impede the good of the whole. Hence, the corruptions and defects in natural things are said to be contrary to a particular nature, but they nonetheless fall within the intention of nature as a whole, insofar as a defect in one thing works to the good of some other thing or to the good of the universe as a whole. For instance, the corruption of one thing is the generation of some other thing, and through this generation a species is preserved.

Therefore, since God is the universal provider for the totality of being, it pertains to His providence that He should permit certain defects to exist in some particular things in order that the complete good of the universe not be impeded. For if all evils were prevented, then many goods would be absent from the universe. For instance, the life of a lion would not exist if there were no killing of animals; again, the patience of the martyrs would not exist if it were not for the tyrants' persecution. Hence, in the *Enchiridion* Augustine says, "Almighty God would never allow any evil to exist among His works if He were not good and powerful enough to do well even given the evil."

Now these first two objections that we have just answered seem to have influenced those who excluded corruptible things from God's providence, since it is among corruptible things that chance events and evils occur.

Reply to objection 3: Man did not institute nature, but instead uses natural entities to his own advantage in his works of art and virtue. Hence, human providence does not extend to the necessary things that happen by nature. However, the providence of God, who is the author of nature, does indeed extend to these things.

This third objection seems to have influenced those who removed the course of natural things from God's providence and attributed it to the necessity of matter—e.g., Democritus and other ancient natural philosophers.

Reply to objection 4: Man is not excluded from God's providence by the statement that "God left man to himself." Instead, what this statement shows is that an operative power determined to a single effect is not fixed for him ahead of time, as it is for natural things. For natural things act only as if they are directed by another to their end, and they do not act as if they are directing themselves to the end, in the way that rational creatures do through the power of free choice by which they deliberate and choose. Hence, rational creatures are explicitly said to be "in the hand of their own counsel."

However, since the very act of free choice is traced back to God as a cause, the things that are done by free choice must be subject to God's providence. For human providence is contained under God's providence in the way that a particular cause is contained under a universal cause.

Moreover, God has providence over just men in a more excellent way than over wicked men, since He does not permit anything to happen to just men that would definitively undermine their salvation. For as Romans 8:28 says, "To them that love God all things work together unto good." On the other hand, from the fact that He does not restrain the wicked from the evil of sin, He is said to send them away—not, however, in the sense that they are totally excluded from His providence. For they would fall into nothingness if He did not conserve them through His providence.

The present objection seems to have influenced Tully, who removed from God's providence human affairs of the sort we deliberate about.

Reply to objection 5: Since, as has been explained, a rational creature has dominion over his own acts through free choice, he is subject to God's providence in a special way, so that guilt and merit are imputed to him and punishment and reward are rendered to him. And it is in this respect that the Apostle denies that God cares about oxen. However, he does not mean that individual non-rational creatures do not fall under God's providence, as Rabbi Moses thought.

Article 3

Is God's providence immediate with respect to all things?

It seems that God does not have immediate providence with respect to all things:

Objection 1: Whatever is dignified must be attributed to God. But it is part of a king's dignity that he has ministers through the mediation of whom he provides for the things subject to him. Therefore, *a fortiori* God does not provide immediately for all things.

Objection 2: It pertains to providence to order things to their end, and the end of each thing is its perfection and its good. But it pertains to a cause that it should lead its own effect to the good. Therefore, every agent cause is a cause of an effect of providence. Therefore, if God provided immediately for all things, then all secondary causes would be eliminated.

Objection 3: In the *Enchiridion* Augustine says, "There are some things it is better not to know of than to know of, e.g., vile things." And the Philosopher says the same thing in *Metaphysics* 12. But everything that is better should be attributed to God. Therefore, God does not have immediate providence with respect to things that are vile and evil.

But contrary to this: Job 34:13 says, "What other has He appointed over the earth? Or whom has He set over the world which He made?" Commenting on this, Gregory says, "He rules by Himself the world which He created by Himself."

I respond: Two things are relevant to providence: (a) a *plan* for ordering the things provided for to their end (*ratio ordinis rerum provisarum in finem*); and (b) the execution of this ordering, which is called *governance* (*gubernatio*).

As regards the first of these, God immediately provides for all things. For in His intellect He has a plan for all things, even the very least things, and He has given the power to produce given effects to every cause that He has preordained for those effects. Hence, He had to have had the order of those effects in His plan beforehand (*oportet quod ordinem illorum effectuum in sua ratione praehabuerit*).

As regards the second, there are certain mediators of God's providence. For God's providence governs lower things by means of higher things—not because of any defect in His power, but rather because of the abundance of His goodness, so that He might communicate the dignity of causal activity even to His creatures.

This rules out an opinion of Plato's that is reported by Gregory of Nyssa. According to this opinion, there are three kinds of providence. The first kind belongs to the highest God, who provides primarily and principally for spiritual things and, as a result, for the whole world with respect to its genera, species, and universal causes. The second kind of providence is that by which generable and corruptible individuals are provided for, and this kind of providence he attributes to the gods who circle the heavens, i.e., to the separated substances that move the celestial bodies in circles. Lastly, the third kind of providence has to do with human affairs, and this kind of providence he attributes to the daimons, whom the Platonists posited between us and the gods, as reported by Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* 9.

Reply to objection 1: It is indeed part of a king's dignity to have ministers who execute his providence, but it is a defect for him not to have a plan for those things that are to be done through his ministers. For all operational knowledge (*scientia operativa*) is more perfect to the extent that it considers things that are more particular, since acts have to do with particulars.

Reply to objection 2: As is clear from what has been said, the fact that God has immediate providence with respect to all things does not rule out secondary causes insofar as they execute this ordering.

Reply to objection 3: For us it is better not to know evil and vile things because (a) they keep us

from considering better things, since we are unable to hold many things in our understanding at the same time, and also because (b) thinking about evil things sometimes perverts our will toward evil. However, these considerations have no place in God, who sees all things at once with a single act of vision and whose will cannot be turned to evil.

Article 4

Does God's providence impose necessity on the things it provides for?

It seems that God's providence imposes necessity on the things it provides for:

Objection 1: As the Philosopher proves in *Metaphysics* 6, every effect that has a *per se* cause which already exists or has existed and from which that effect follows by necessity is such that it has issued forth by necessity. But since God's providence is eternal, it has already existed; and an effect follows from it by necessity, since God's providence cannot be frustrated. Therefore, God's providence imposes necessity on the things it provides for.

Objection 2: Every provider makes what he produces as stable as possible, lest it perish. But God is maximally powerful. Therefore, to the things He provides for He gives the firmness of necessity.

Objection 3: In *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 4 Boethius says that fate, "proceeding from the sources of immutable providence, constrains men's acts and fortunes with an indissoluble series of causes." Therefore, it seems that providence imposes necessity on the things provided for.

But contrary to this: In *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says, "It is not part of providence to corrupt nature." But the nature of certain things is such that they are contingent. Therefore, divine providence does not impose necessity on things in a way that excludes contingency.

I respond: God's providence imposes necessity on some things, but not—as some have held—on all things.

For it pertains to providence to order things to their end. But after God's own goodness, which is an end that is separated from things, the principal good that exists in the things themselves is the perfection of the universe, which would not exist if there were not many grades of being found among things. Hence, it pertains to God's providence to produce all the grades of beings. And so God has prepared necessary causes for certain effects, so that those effects occur necessarily, whereas for other effects He has prepared contingent causes, so that they occur contingently in accord with the status of their proximate causes.

Reply to objection 1: The effect of God's providence is not just that something should occur in some way or other, but that something should occur contingently or that it should occur necessarily. And so if God's providence disposes a thing to occur infallibly and necessarily, then it occurs infallibly and necessarily, whereas if the plan of God's providence decrees that a thing should occur contingently, then it occurs contingently.

Reply to objection 2: The ordering of God's providence is unshakable and certain in the sense that the things that are provided for by God all occur in the mode which He Himself has provided for them, i.e., either necessarily or contingently.

Reply to objection 3: The indissolubility and immutability that Boethius mentions pertain to the certitude of providence itself, which cannot fail either in its effect or in the mode of occurrence that it has provided for. Nonetheless, indissolubility and immutability do not pertain to the necessity of the effects themselves.

Also, notice that *necessary* and *contingent* follow upon *being* as such. Hence, the modes of

contingency and necessity fall under the oversight of God, who is the universal provider for all of being, and not just under the oversight of certain particular providers.