

Intersubjectivity and Reciprocal Causality within Contemporary Understanding of the God-World Relationship

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The Dignity of Being a Cause

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2018-0013>

Received November 8, 2017; accepted February 13, 2018

Abstract: Theologians, philosophers, and scientists have pondered the causalities of human beings, nature, and cosmos. This seeks to avoid the reduction of all activity to God and to understand the richness of beings other than God. Thomas Aquinas valued this “secondary causality” greatly, while recent thinkers are also advocating its importance again.

Keywords: causality; Thomas Aquinas

The following pages ponder the reality of causality, the nature and independence of developments and interplays on Earth and in a wider cosmos. Philosophy and science have long analyzed different kinds of causalities. Nonetheless, the independence of finite causes and the often projected sovereignty of the divine raise both popular and theoretical issues. Past thinkers and contemporary discussions address them.

Beings are endowed with capabilities and powers leading to action and production. A being's causal endowments can bring about remarkable effects like producing honey or giving birth to a baby whale. Fields ranging from astrophysics to theology study these multiple kinds of interaction. William Stoeger, S.J., writes of the importance of considering causality in light of the new directions in scientific fields about deeper levels of being and life. “Over the past century there has been an explosion of knowledge and understanding about all aspects of nature and of the vast universe of which we are a part. Along with the emerging details of physics, chemistry, biochemistry, and biology from focused scientific research has come a more refined awareness of the many different intricately related factors, ‘causes,’ that are at work in nature and in the universe.”¹ Evolution and complexity on Earth and in its universe suggest considering today not a defense of the reality of cause and effect but their modalities and breadth.

The human interpretation of causality – ranging from composing music to a nebula generating stars – has a history. John Haught observes a shift in the interpretation of intersecting forces. “As long as the cosmological background of evolutionary science is taken to be the necessity-ridden, inertial, and linear world of classical physical laws the contingent emergence of life will appear impossibly difficult and improbable.”² Science, however, is granting to physical reality “an open readiness for dramatic, irreversible, and creative transformations that take less time, and make the emergence and evolution of life much more likely.”³ Examples of adaptive, self-organizing, informationally rich systems in non-human nature and human culture include cells, brains, immune systems, ecosystems, economic systems, and religions. Nature at both the atomic and galactic level has a “propensity to branch out into self-organizing patterns...beyond the pale of what can be subjected to rigid, deterministic, or a priori analysis.”⁴ Moreover,

1 Stoeger, “Cosmology, Evolution, Causality and Creation,” 247. A dynamic of birth and absorption, of gathering and clustering reaches through the galaxies; see Dorminey, “What Galaxy Superclusters Tell Us about the Universe”; O'Meara, “Community as Primary Reality.”

2 Haught, “Chaos, Complexity and Theology,” 192.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 188.

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patterns and forces in the universe have a variety and reality not yet clearly seen. This sets aside picturing its Source as residing at the top of a hierarchy or as a powerful Mover at the edge of constellations. The following reflections on causes touch on the past and the present, person and cosmos, science and religion.

1 Thomas Aquinas and the greatness of causality

In a theological metaphysics, Thomas Aquinas singled out being a cause as a most important endowment of any reality. There is only one ultimate or “primary cause,” God. Other beings are “secondary causes.” They are not marionettes: they are real agents acting out of their species’ forms to fashion being and life. Through a “proper causality” newly born gorillas are directly and formally caused by their parents, while indirectly bananas, sunlight, and oxygen contribute to their growth.

Beings acting out of their natures do not detract from their ultimate source considered to be the sole, primary cause of all. The medieval professor observed that the ultimate causality is so powerful and complex that it can permit creatures to act in their own ways. “It is not out of God’s incompleteness or weakness that he gives to creatures causal power but out of a perfect fullness that is quite capable of sharing itself with all.”⁵ The causal reality of being – of every being – is a power, a gift, a dignity. “On account of the abundance of his goodness (and not at all as a defect in power) God communicates to creatures the dignity of causality.”⁶ The universe unfolds from and through the effects of these proper, proximate causes. Thus the activity of God is not the proximate cause of most things. Through the mediation of suitably adapted causes “the divine will prearranges a mode for things from the arrangement of its wisdom.”⁷ Ordinary investigation can find the factors which influenced a car being hit by a truck or the production of a calf by a cow. Who causes eagles? Other eagles feeding and training young eagles. The causalities of creatures are the executors of divine plans.

The extraordinary causality of an ultimate Reality need not detract from other causalities. To ignore the distinction between primary and secondary causes is to replace God by a creature or to replace the creature by God. God is not the only cause in the universe, and beings are not merely accidental impetuses or minor backgrounds. For Aquinas “it is clear that a single effect is not attributed to its natural cause and to God as if one part was from God and the other from the natural agent: it is totally from both but differently.”⁸ God subtly furthers being and life in a network of proper activity and complex self-organization. In the line of Aquinas (and Meister Eckhart) John Haught continues: “If God is to create a world truly distinct from the divine being, then such a world would have to possess an *internal* self-coherence or autonomy, simply in order to be distinct from God. Divine creation may perhaps be understood as a ‘letting’ of the world.”⁹ He withholds too direct exercises of omnipotence and withdraws intrusive forms of his presence. “The universe that is then called into being by God would be not only an expression of divine might but just as fundamentally the product of divine humility.”¹⁰ Traditional aspects like God’s infinity or omnipresence are not the dominant facets of one large power overshadowing other realities but they are aspects of infinite activity and extensive permission.¹¹

⁵ Aquinas, *De Spiritualibus Creaturis* q. 10, ad 16. One recalls a phrase from John Damascene in the seventh century cited by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth: the divine is an infinite ocean of reality (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 11, citing John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa* 29).

⁶ “...dignitatem causalitatis etiam creaturis communicet” (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 22, a. 3).

⁷ *De Veritate*, q. 23, a. 5.

⁸ *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 70.

⁹ Haught, “Chaos, Complexity and Theology”; Fabel and John, *Teilhard in the 21st Century*, 193.

¹⁰ Haught, “Chaos, Complexity and Theology,” 193.

¹¹ The medieval metaphysical principle that the Creator sustains constantly the being and activity of every creature expresses a quite different contact between creator and creature than that of the proper secondary causal world. “God is therefore necessarily in things as the cause and maintainer of their being. This maintenance means maintaining the possibility and actualization of being a cause so that God as the ground of being ‘*immediate in omnibus agit*.’ This being-in of the first mover in all that is active is the effective permanence of the primary cause in the secondary causes” (Beuttler, *Gott und Raum – Theologie der Weltgegenwart Gottes*, 105).

2 Causalities in ordinary life and religion

The world includes natures with their forms, limitations, and development, although that range of necessities and contingencies is initially willed by the first cause.¹² Created and infinite causalities are not in opposition to each other; nor are they aiming at a replacement of one by the other. The primary cause is not glorified by interfering in the course of its creation. God is helped by creatures in as much as they accomplish what are his designs.¹³ The divine presence is not theatrical and monopolizing. Credit belongs to the creature as well as to the creator.

God could alter the capabilities of a species in ways unsuited to that species – for instance, make a donkey fly – but he does not do that. Does this curtail God's power? Aquinas observed that the basic structures of nature set down by God through his freely chosen plans for creation do subsequently put limitations on him.¹⁴ These limits come not from any weaknesses in his omnipotence but from the lack of some reality's feasibility. Causal beings are a central part of divine providence for the universe.

Some viewpoints frequently join ordinary causality to the intervention of a transcendent being. For instance, sports are for the recreation of those playing them and for fans who watch the contests. Success in sports results from the physical talent, quickness, and strength that lie within these men and women. A viewer soon notices a boxer or a kicker praying for divine assistance or a basketball player falling to his knees to thank the Almighty for his successful shot. There is no reason, psychological or theological, to think that God intervenes in athletic games. If an outside higher power assisted this one player or that one team, then the reality of the game would be vitiated. Like sports, the achievements of artists – in music and in the other arts like acting, painting, and writing – come from the talents of the artist inherited from parents and developed by teachers. In a concert God does not intervene for a few minutes to bestow a high soprano range or implant in fingers a sudden dexterity on the pipe organ. What has just been said of athletic and artistic performances is true of intellectual activities. Neglecting study and avoiding personal preparation for examinations cannot be remedied by narcotic stimulants or prayer.

An appreciation of secondary causality challenges some popular religious ideas and practices that expect automatic success from rituals and prayers. Do not venerable words like omnipotent and all-powerful indicate that God is the mover of everything? Here some faithful enthusiastically replace human accomplishments with divine activity, working to exalt the divine by viewing it as easily miraculous. Is not God always at hand to cure diseases, end droughts, or pass academic exams? An empirical view of secondary causality challenges easy effects caused supernaturally to enhance human performance or to remove illness. Prayers, blessed objects, places of pilgrimage do not have automatic effects in medicine or business. Created causality is an opponent of what underlies every fundamentalism.

3 Causality as violent

Causality enables growth, perhaps into future worlds and civilizations. However, science fiction in films and television too often presents worlds outside of Earth as violent. Even essays in scientific journals appear to find evil normal. The language of popular and academic astrophysics is not infrequently violent. Equipped with violent armaments and intent on conquest messianic figures appear. Alliances of galaxies employ imaginary, advanced technologies and make warfare exciting.

In a violent world the cosmos acts in frightening ways. Galaxies “gobble up” each other. When stars emit “fierce” gasses, the effect is “devastating.” When after millions of years a star's fuel is exhausted, it

¹² See Hislop, “Introduction”; Stoeckele, *Gratia supponit natura*. In the phrase, “Grace does not destroy but perfects nature,” one should note that “destroy” or “perfect” are not equivalent English words for the Latin terms. “Perfect” means reaching adequately the proper realization of a specific nature – with its limitations and lack of “perfection.”

¹³ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 23, a. 8, ad 2.

¹⁴ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 25, a. 3. Albert the Great declared: “When I study nature, I do not expect to come upon miracles” (Albert the Great, *De generatione et corruptione* I, 1. 22).

“destroys” itself. Stars are “cannibalized” by a “monster” galaxy.¹⁵ Atoms and stars do contact each other in ways leading to fiery explosions. This is the result of the patterns and structures of the universe and seems to have as its goal the further expansion of the cosmos which would bring forth more planets, and so civilizations and culture. Cosmic processes and stages in the fiery lives of stars are simply in line with the evolutionary process of stars. The eventual falling apart of a comet is not really “suicide.”

There is no need to think that evil is more prominent in the universe however widespread it is on Earth. Existence and intelligence are good, and evil is not their necessary companion. Perhaps in the universe of civilizations most creatures’ free choices further life and order while enacting injury to others is rare. Even fiery causation is good; the end of a being contributes to further stages and worlds.

4 Recent theologians of causality

In the past century philosophers and theologians looked anew at created causality. After 1920 a Polish-German Jesuit Erich Przywara emphasized that “the developing stream of creatures”¹⁶ participates in existence and life through independent and interactive ways. The theologian saw participation in levels of being to be the structure of reality; causality was its vitalization. A dynamic of secondary causes, basic to the array of beings, had been highlighted by Christian theologians ranging from Thomas Aquinas to Ignatius Loyola. This is not surprising: causality has an incarnational structure. “Thomas Aquinas penetrated into reality in such a way that he distinguished between the all-reality and all-efficacy of God and the true proper reality and proper efficacy of creatures.”¹⁷ Moreover, the capabilities of causes and their interplay could draw out of material and rational worlds the dynamics being pursued by modern philosophies and new sciences.

In the next generation, Karl Rahner pondered human causality through the approaches of modern philosophies of the active subject penetrated by history. Contrary to past static neo-scholastic chains of effects, he presented both the transcendental nature of the human being and the intimate self-giving of God as the sources of religious themes and activities. God, other than a highest being, was an atmosphere of sharing and love. Revelation and grace are terms for God’s address, implicit and yet guided into explicit forms, expressing in men and women “the intimate being of God and God’s free, personal relationship with spiritual creatures.”¹⁸ The contact of divine causality with human actions had been after the Reformation a puzzling problematic challenging Protestant and Catholic theologians. Rahner saw it as a facet of a larger mystery: how can beings not just act freely but exist at all outside of the infinite? “The mystery of the relationship between the all-efficacious activity of God and the proper freedom of the creature is simply the application at the level of activity of the mystery of the co-existence of a finite being that really *is* – one that is different from God and yet before God affirms its own valid causality — with God.”¹⁹ Here issues traditionally expressed in a limited mechanistic ontology were moving into new conceptualizations and expressions.

For Joseph Bracken science and religion need new ways of reflecting on divine activity. The universe should be seen as constituted not by individual entities in varying distances from one another but by dynamically ordered corporate entities. This calls for a theology of universal inter-subjectivity relating God to the cosmos in an ontology emphasizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of everything. There is an embracing divine field of activities, and there is too the independent world that has slowly taken shape after the Big Bang fourteen billion years ago. Being holds within itself the dynamics and formats that tend to interaction. Created societies fit into an inter-subjective world that is constituted by a further dynamic, the interrelation of the divine persons who lead into the future a vast assembly of creatures. God is at work in the cosmos to achieve plans destined to appear far beyond contemporary thousands of solar

¹⁵ Sparrow, *The Stargazer’s Handbook*, 63, 121, 142, 211.

¹⁶ Przywara, “Thomas und Hegel,” 950, see “Katholischer Radikalismus.”

¹⁷ Przywara, “Zwischen Religion und Kultur,” 98.

¹⁸ Rahner, “Revelation.”

¹⁹ See Rahner, “Prädestination.”

years as they unfold from the laws governing multiple evolutions and the freedom of intelligent beings. An ever-expanding cosmos of active forms is a panentheism marked by the triad of immanence, emergence, and transcendence. As God is community in action, the world is a structured society of sub-societies. That cosmos possess a proper autonomy before God.²⁰

Michael Dodds sees realities and theories of causality being locked and unlocked by philosophy and science in their histories. Greek and medieval thinkers offered a rich account of causality, although subsequently modern Newtonian science reduced causality to one type: the force that moves the atoms. "The discussion of divine action ended in simple theories about that causality within or opposite to the notions of causality of modern science. Ultimately it seemed that God could not act in the world at all, for any act of God would interfere with the proper causality of creatures."²¹ Today, however, newer theories of the sciences do not reject wider views of causality. Some theories of quantum mechanics or an acceptance of the presence of design and indeterminism can encourage an expectation of God's free levels of activity in the universe. This gets beyond seeing God as a single, univocal cause and beyond expecting religion to be the advocate of a god active in mysteries or miracles. Alternative ways of thinking, old and new, maintain God's transcendence even as they affirm vital modes of presence and immanence among independent beings. Dodds' questions go beyond this sample of modern theologians to new kinds of inquiries concerning how God is the source of plan, freedom, and indeterminacy.²²

5 Conclusion

In recent decades the problem of causality has migrated from philosophy to physics. The universe has a range of causalities, and new scientific theories will give unexpected ways of conceiving of creation and Creator. Origin and time, power and efficacy, cause and ground point to a transcendent and richly seminal power. Stoeger sees what was called "primary causality" to be a "causality beyond causality."²³

Material and physical contacts and results do not represent all there is to causality: for instance, in artistic and scientific creation, or in religion. There are influences on men and women that are not physical like heat but psychological and cultural. The human personality holds a receptivity for a range of subtle inspirations instructing and inspiring men and women. Silent alterations envelop someone arriving in a new city; the presence of one deeply loved or thoroughly feared is powerful. Mysticism and liturgy imply non-material modes. A different, invisible being who is infinite spirit and widely powerful need not have its effects limited to particles, gravity, and fire. It could influence those who have an intellect in ways other than through optical images or degrees of blood pressure.

There can be visible and invisible fields of causality with original structures and theories. The exploration of sub-atomic particles suggests interactions that are more than what was called by Greek and medieval philosophies the efficient cause; a variety of causalities would correspond to the diversity of charges and particles in matter. The projection of forces within dark matter may transcend our kinds of causality. The hypotheses of parallel worlds suggest remaining open to the unexpected.²⁴ Just the ever increasing number of galaxies, suns, and planets suggest further realms of interaction. Newly accessible galaxies and as yet unperceived forms awaiting discovery underlie not only astrophysics but community or music, religion and revelation.

²⁰ Bracken, "Panentheism: A Field-Oriented Approach," 217, 144, 58; see Bracken, "Being: An Entity, an Activity, or Both an Entity and an Activity?"; Bracken, *God. Three Who Are One*.

²¹ Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action*, 259.

²² Ibid., 260; see Dodds, "Scientific Vetoes and the 'Hands-off' God: Divine Immanence, Quantum Mechanics, and the Search for a Better Way."

²³ Stoeger, "Cosmology, Evolution, Causality and Creation: The Limits, Compatibility and Cooperation of Scientific and Philosophical Methodologies."

²⁴ See Hafner and Valentin, *Parallelwelten. Christliche Religion und die Vervielfachung von Wirklichkeiten*.

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