

AMOS YONG'S PENTECOSTAL THOMISM

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In responding to Amos Yong's provocative and engaging works I fear that the Thomistic principle of double-effect may apply. That is, I intend to juxtapose central elements of Yong's work on divine causation – specifically his account of eschatological divine causation and his notion of pneumatological theology – with certain (often misunderstood) elements of Thomistic metaphysics. The unintended effect –or at least the secondary effect – of this will be to irritate my colleagues (especially LeRon Shults and Tom Oord) by reintroducing that most unwelcome of philosophical guests, Aristotle.

What I contend is that there are at least two elements of “consonance” between Yong's account of divine causation and Aquinas's that warrant serious consideration. In fact, Yong explicitly appeals to Aristotle when he contends that we should reintroduce teleology into our causal explanations (“How Does God Do What God Does?”62). Those elements are (1) the primacy of teleology and (2) a “participatory” understanding of creaturely action within the divine order. There are, of course, significant differences. For example, Yong advocates for a libertarian account of human freedom while Aquinas accepts a kind of “compatibilism.” Here, I wholeheartedly side with Yong. Yong also notes that on the Thomistic account of primary and secondary causality that the problem of evil remains. I agree that Aquinas never sufficiently provides an answer here but then again I remain skeptical about any account to solve this.

However, the most important point of divergence concerns the nomological behavior of “substances.” For Aquinas, laws of nature do not vary unless God changes the formal nature of the cosmos. But for Yong’s Peircean ontology, laws of nature are rather “habitual tendencies that function teleologically like final causes” (*Spirit of Creation*, 138). This last point plays a critical role in the reconsideration of a Thomistic ontology that subscribes to fixed essences.

As I read Yong’s work, I see the desire to steer the middle course between classical accounts of divine action in the world as too mechanistic and “interventionist,” on the one hand, and modernist accounts where Special Divine Action is sacrificed to an account of General Divine Action which simply is not robust enough to account for traditional Pentecostal (and Yong would claim, “biblical”) accounts of how the Spirit of God acts in the world, on the other hand. He is initially suspicious of Thomistic accounts of divine causation for a number of reasons, but he may have interpreted Aquinas in a way that does not lend itself to a more productive dialogue than it could.

In his discussion of Aquinas Yong claims that “Most pertinent for our purposes, is Thomas’s argument from motion: (a) there is no movement that is purely self-caused; (b) an infinite regress of movers is self-contradictory; thus (c) there must be a first Unmoved Mover” (“How Does God Do What God Does?” 52). Although the arguments from motion and efficient causality get a great deal of attention following Aquinas’s time, I believe that the most important of the arguments is the argument from final causality (often misnamed “the argument from design”). But why is that? For Aquinas, as

for Aristotle, the most important of the four causes was the final cause since a being took its formal nature from its end, or goal. Since the “Five Ways” flow from Aristotle’s four causes, we can see that the Fifth Way likely represents the most important of the “Ways” since it represents the most important of the causal explanations. In fact, the entire structure of the *Summa Theologiae* is patterned after the *exitus-redditus* scheme in which teleology plays the central metaphysical role as creatures “return” to God from whence they came. But divine causality is represented not only in terms of a temporal teleology but also with respect to a causal dependency of the creature upon God.

Aquinas sees a hierarchy of agents at work in the created order. There are clearly lower and higher agents. Any lower agent obtains its power through the efficacy of the higher agent as “the artisan applies an instrument to its proper effect, though he neither gives the Form whereby the instrument works, nor preserves it, but simply gives it motion” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 70).

The underlying rationale for this analogy is Aquinas’s participation metaphysics. All creation participates in God because there can be no being apart from God. He says,

Creatures are said to be in God. . . in one sense insofar as they are contained and preserved by the divine power; even as we say that things that are in our power are in us. And thus creatures are said to be in God, even according to their existence in their own natures. In this sense we must understand the words of the Apostle when he

says, *In Him, we live, and move, and have our being*; since our living, being, and moving are themselves caused by God (Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, Ia.18,4,ad1).

God provides the ontological grounding for all creaturely activity because all creatures derive their being from God not merely as a child derives her being from her mother and father but in the more profound sense that they continually rely upon God as the higher cause of their activities. Not only has God granted being to all creatures when they first receive their existence, God also conserves their being as long as they continue to exist since a creature's being is radically contingent upon God. As long as a creature has being it also has the causal powers God has granted it. Thus, "If this divine influence were to cease, every operation would cease. Therefore, every operation of a thing is traced back to Him as to its cause" (Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 67).

It is in light of the participation metaphysics of Aquinas where we see another avenue of convergence. Because many contemporary interpreters portray Aquinas as drawing a radical separation between Creator and creation, the transcendence of God is emphasized at the expense of divine immanence. As a result, we see little emphasis on the participation ontology that permeates Aquinas's thought. What we see is a radical contingency of the creation on the Creator. It is here that God is no longer merely one agent among others acting in the created order, but the Spirit of God that permeates the created order.

Contemporary Thomists, like W. Norris Clarke, seem to articulate accounts of this kind. Clarke writes,

God is constantly working creatively with the ongoing unfolding of the world's own built-in active potentialities, stepping up his creative collaboration at certain key thresholds to inject new information-sets—not necessarily new physical energy—into the process to enable new qualitatively higher ontological centers with new properties to appear on the scene. Such. . . creative collaboration of God, acting on a totally spiritual level, would entirely escape all empirical observation, quantitative measurement, or scientific detection in any way (*The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001], 256).

Here, the created order—in traditional Thomistic understanding—is full of potencies waiting to be actualized by various causes—both God and creatures. On this view, the creation continues to develop not in the manner of predetermined Augustinian *rationes seminales* but with respect to genuinely new creatures—a decided departure from Aquinas's own Aristotelian view of essential natures.

This neo-Thomist account offered by Clark bears an interesting similarity to Yong's Pentecostal account of divine agency. Peirce, Clark, and Yong all have the advantage of working in a post-Darwinian age—an advantage Aquinas could not have anticipated. However, if the "Angelic Doctor" could have known what we know

today about so-called “laws of nature” he may softened his radical essentialism and opted for a metaphysic that looked, in many ways, similar to that of Amos Yong’s Pentecostal account of divine causation.