

THE EFFICIENT SUSTAINING CAUSE

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IN the first part of the *Summa Theologica*, q. 104, a. 1, St. Thomas calls attention to a relation which scientists and others seem to have lost sight of. A profound thinker on the Continent, Père Garrigou-Lagrange, O. P., has recently re-directed the attention of serious-minded investigators to it, and some of the professors in our Catholic colleges have also done so, but, as far as we know, the presentation of this matter has never been singled out and published in English.

Modern philosophers outside the pale do not, as a rule, think along the lines of the Aristotelian "four causes." *Matter* and *form* they do not comprehend; *finality*, whether they be of the mechanistic or deterministic persuasion or not, they refer to as a *purpose* or something else, not as a *cause*. But the *efficient cause*, ah yes, that they will talk about whether they admit there is such a thing or not. In brief, for our esteemed contemporaries, *cause* means *efficient cause*, and that is all. The notions of some of them as to just what this agent does, and what this causal relation is, if anything, are so wild as to make a poor naive seeker after truth gasp for breath and wonder if words mean anything at all. As one sane mind among the moderns remarks, anent Objective Idealism, "any clear statement of their position would falsify it."¹

However, among those who do admit efficient causality, and mean by it something the same as we do, no one, as far as we know, adverts to the very enlightening distinction which St. Thomas brings up in the article cited above, and in many other places in his works.² St. Thomas here calls attention to the fact that efficient causes, or agents, are of two kinds: those that cause only the *production* of the thing, and those that cause also the *existence* of the thing produced—the *causa secundum fieri* and the *causa secundum esse*—and this is the distinction which it is the intention of this paper to bring out, and of which we hope to show the value. The English translation of

¹ Santiana in "Egotism in German Philosophy."

² *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, q. 109, a. 2, ad 3um; a. 8 c.; a. 9 ad 1um. *Contra Gentes*, III cap. 65 et 67, ratione 3. *De Potentia*, q. 5, a. 1. Joan. IV, lect. 2.

the *Summa Theologica*,³ renders *causa secundum fieri* as the "cause in becoming," and *causa secundum esse* as the "cause of the being." While that terminology may be more exact, still it seems preferable to refer to these two subdivisions of the efficient cause more simply as the *originating cause* and the *sustaining cause*, and to trust that no misunderstanding will result therefrom.

The Master Scholastic goes on to explain what he means by these two causes; and first in regard to the originating cause. A builder, he says, is the producing cause of a house. As long as he is operating in putting that house together, his immediate effect, the *becoming* of that house, continues. When he ceases, and goes away, his effect stops also. The house is no longer in course of production—it exists; and the architect is not the cause of this existence, he has stopped working on it, he has departed, he may be dead. What is the cause of the continued existence of the house? The natures of the materials of which it is made, and since we are speaking strictly of efficient cause, it is whatever, or whoever, gives those materials their specific natures.

This second kind of cause, then, which is responsible for the continued existence of the thing produced, is the sustaining cause, the *causa secundum esse*, and this is the important point of our whole discussion. As was intimated above, the only cause which can thus sustain the effect produced, can keep the thing made in existence, is that cause which can give the things produced their specific natures and actuating principles. St. Thomas illustrates this second kind of cause by the example of the sun illuminating the atmosphere; not only is it the cause of the production of the effect, but also of its continuation (or, if you wish to call it so, a continued series of new productions). Whether this example of the light of the sun would stand analysis or not, we don't know. It may be that, like most examples, it limps a bit, still, it serves admirably as an illustration of the sustaining cause. What we wish to emphasize is the *here and now* element in this causation. This sustaining cause, or cause of the thing's existing, is the motive, the present reason why, behind this thing that we perceive here and now.

Not even natural causes which produce effects of the same specific nature as themselves, St. Thomas says, can give this continued existence; as, for instance, when fire generates fire, or when a horse generates a horse, for such a cause does not produce the specific

³ Ia, q. 104, a. 1.

nature and actuating principle, but only brings it about that this particular individual nature actuates this particular lump of brute matter.

In scholastic terminology it is extremely easy to say it: Only that principle which can cause the substantial form can cause the existence which follows upon that form. But we are trying to talk the language of the opposition, and so terms like "substantial form" are consequently useless and taboo.

Everything that was caused at all, then, and that still exists, requires, if we are to account fully for its present existence, more than that originating cause, which, let us say, has long ago disappeared. It requires something operating here and now, keeping it in existence. This may be a hard saying for those to whom it is new. It certainly is not new to the Scholastic philosopher—it is an old and well-known fact; one, however, about which we do not, perhaps, think often enough. There may be a whole chain of created agents actually operating at this moment keeping this thing in being, but some cause there must be. Here is a thing—it is existing. Whence is it drawing its existence? Not from itself—it cannot cause itself: not from the originating cause, for that cause has ceased to work, therefore, from some cause operating here and now. If this cause is in turn actuated by another, and so on into infinity, it makes no difference. No matter how many causes there are in this chain *actually operating at once*, the same reason holds good for any and all of them, and so we must come to an actuating principle, a Prime Mover, a First Cause that is not being caused.

It is in this connection, in the proof for the existence of God, that Père Garrigou-Lagrange uses this point which is made by St. Thomas. The force of the argument is that all the objections in regard to the possibility of an infinite series are avoided, because in this argument for a Prime Mover, that is to say, as a First Sustaining Cause, rather than as a First Originating Cause, it doesn't make any difference whether the series is infinite or not. Here is an effect: the hands of the clock move. It matters not whether there are ten wheels moving them, or an infinite number of wheels moving them; none of them will ever move itself, and a prime mover is required just the same. And so, there is no need of going back to the beginning of the world, arguing to a First Cause in that sense; no need to go into the question of whether the same physical and general cosmological laws held good in the first condition of things as the ones we formulate for the world of today. Evolution, and so forth? What of it? That is entirely beside the question. The pres-

ent existing universe is here before our eyes, an evident palpable fact. Its existence demands a Prime Mover actuating and sustaining it here and now; why go back to the beginning?

It is not a new proof, of course. It is simply a different statement of St. Thomas' *tertia via* of proving that God exists—the argument from contingency and necessity, or rather, that third way of stating *the* argument, for all the five ways are one argument at base.

Some of our opponents may here bring up an objection: You Scholastics have unfortunately cut your own throats. You say that you have discovered, from the nature of this mysterious thing that you call the human soul, that it is a substantial something, and furthermore that it is spiritual, and that it can never die. And yet, here you are telling us that everything, everything outside of God, is contingent. Your own St. Thomas refers to the human soul, the angels, etc., as beings that are *necessaria in essendo*. How can anything be *necessarium in essendo* and still require a sustaining cause?

We shall answer in the words of another distinguished Thomist, Rev. N. Del Prado, O. P., who has gone deeply into the ultimate reasons and differences of things. In his work *De Veritate Fundamentalī Philosophiæ Christianæ*,⁴ Father Del Prado says that these beings, although called “necessary in existence,” do not have that necessity in themselves, but in God, and are said to be necessary inasmuch as they have no intrinsic principle of corruption. “For, just as it depends on the will of God that He produced things ‘necessary in existence,’ so also it depends on His will that these things remain necessarily in existence, for God does not conserve things in being in any other way than by always giving them being. Therefore, if God should withdraw His action in giving them being, everything would be reduced to nothing.”

⁴ p. 458.