



REVIEW

Reframing Providence: New Perspectives from Aquinas on the Divine Action Debate, by Simon Maria Kopf, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 320, £97, hbk

A standard format in analytic philosophy is to defend a given theory in the context of competing theories. Rejected positions are typically presented first, starting with their strengths and then moving to serious, perhaps fatal, flaws. The favoured theory is then shown to overcome what defeated the rejected approaches. Yet, the favoured position might have its vulnerabilities, too, though the author seeks to convince the reader that the vulnerabilities are less concerning than those of the rejected theories. The discussion often ends at this point, leaving space for future debate.

But how are rival theories, perhaps with very different vulnerabilities, to be compared? The answer appears straightforward: in terms of satisfying lists of theoretical desiderata, not exhibiting what are deemed theoretically unattractive features, and fitting into narratives that are argued to be credible, even compelling. Yet such methods are themselves permeated by commitments that are open to dispute. After all, what is deemed theoretically attractive or unattractive, credible or unpersuasive, can reflect perspectives that might be questioned by many.

In this excellent book, Simon Kopf presents his long and detailed case in terms of rejected positions, followed by a favoured position, which he then shows fits into narratives to the extent of helping to elucidate hitherto unresolved debates. Kopf's topic is providence and divine action. More specifically, Kopf contends that 'actionistic', i.e., action-based, accounts in which providence is understood largely in terms of divine action modelled on human action, have serious flaws; and that a broadly Thomist conception of providence ('prudential-ordinative') is greatly to be preferred.

The book is in three parts. Part I outlines and evaluates an array of actionistic accounts. Part II presents and defends the prudential-ordinative theory. Part III makes an additional case for the superiority of the prudential-ordinative theory. This last part includes an illuminating analysis of the celebrated debate between Stephen Jay Gould and Simon Conway Morris on the contingency of outcomes of evolution.

Kopf begins Part I with comparisons of accounts of providence and divine action by, for example, Maurice Wiles, Gordon Kaufmann, and John Polkinghorne. Kopf categorises the debates in terms of 'liberal' versus 'conservative' positions. In broad terms, conservative positions, unlike their liberal counterparts, are more open to special divine intervention (including 'overruling' the laws of nature) producing objective effects in the world and not just changes in subjective response.

With the Divine Action Project (1988–2003), to which Kopf dedicates a chapter (still in Part I and also still actionistic), the debate moves in a scientific direction, often not shying away from the theoretical complexities of contemporary natural sciences. The project arose from a study week in 1997 organised by the Vatican Observatory at Castel Gandolfo. This event resulted in an extended project: interdisciplinary conferences

from which came six major tomes that have come to be seen as ‘the state of the art in contemporary theories of special divine action’ (p. 43).

Chief among the accounts from the Divine Action Project are forms of Non-Interventionist Objective (Special) Divine Action (NIODA) theories. These hold that nature is not a causally determined system. The lack of deterministic closure within nature, it is claimed, opens up a ‘gap’ in which God can act whilst respecting the integrity of nature, not overruling the laws of nature.

But how is this to be explained in scientific detail? Kopf evaluates leading NIODA accounts and finds them wanting. Quantum divine action forms of NIODA theories, for example, rely on the questionable ground that changes at the non-deterministic quantum level, at which the gaps are to be found (it is claimed), can result in sufficiently significant macroscopic events (p. 65). Yet, for Kopf, a perhaps more fundamental problem with NIODA approaches is theological (see especially Chapter 3): by having to act in the gaps within nature, divine action is viewed as extrinsic to creation with the activity of God on the same ontological level as activity within nature. As with other actionistic accounts, God’s actions are in a sense in competition with natural processes, except that the all-powerful God always knows how to win.

In Part II, Kopf moves in a full-blooded theological direction utilising a broadly Thomist classical conception of God. Rather than operating in the gaps within nature, God, as Creator and Sustainer of the natural order, includes within the natural order both what is necessary and contingent. God is ‘the primary cause’, with the causal operations within nature the ‘secondary causes’. God as primary cause creates and sustains the secondary, and in so doing enables secondary causality (necessary and contingent elements alike) to uphold providence in accord with his knowledge and will.

Kopf explains the prudential-ordinative account using the metaphor of a queen with a wise plan for her kingdom (pp. 111–2). Rather than implement directly the plan herself, she is ordinative. She directs her ministers to put her plan into effect. As fallible human beings, the ministers are prone to errors in the implementation of the queen’s plans. The corresponding question for the prudential-ordinative account is (p. 172): how can God employ contingent secondary causes to execute temporarily his providential order without putting at risk the realisation of this order? The answer for Kopf (especially pp. 171–88) is that God is sufficiently involved in creation through primary causality that he is able to ensure outcomes whilst sustaining contingency (as well as necessity) within the order of secondary causality.

This latter position is relevant to the Gould/Conway Morris debate, which Kopf discusses in Part III. On the basis of fossil evidence, Gould argued that the emergence of the life forms that currently exist is highly contingent to the degree that if the evolutionary process were rerun, the outcomes would probably be very different. Also on the basis of fossil evidence, Conway Morris, by contrast, argues that nature facilitates a convergence in evolutionary outcomes. The theological subtexts are clear. Gould’s account, unlike Conway Morris’, seems *prima facie* at odds with human beings having special value in keeping with the natural order established by God with rational creatures like us in mind. We are for Gould an accidental outcome of evolution; a providential ordering with humanity at its centre seems debunked.

Yet, as Kopf points out, on the prudential-ordinative account: even if the processes within evolution are capable of upholding high degrees of contingency and lack of

convergence in outcome (as per Gould), God as the primary causal agent can use such secondary causes to bring about outcomes that are certain because they have been providentially determined by God. In terms of a logical distinction: the necessity of the consequence does not entail the necessity of the consequent (pp. 247–54). God can will (and ensure) both the outcome of the process and the mode (*i.e.* whether necessary or contingent) of the means by which it is achieved (see especially Chapter 5).

Kopf's adjudication in favour of the prudential-ordinative account relies on both the failure of the actionistic accounts to satisfy theoretical desiderata (Part I) and the attractiveness of prudential-ordinative account on largely theological grounds. The prudential-ordinative approach upholds a theory in which providential ordering operates from within a divinely-sustained nature 'pregnant with and full of directionalities' (p. 191) without sidelining contingency or reducing God to a competitor with the nature he has created. Yet the defender of actionistic accounts could respond with explanatory concerns about, for example, God's knowledge of future contingents and regarding primary/secondary causality (*e.g.* how do they interact?).

Such differences of perspectives among philosophical theologians and philosophers of religion are, it seems to me, of relevance on a much broader canvas than the debates between advocates of actionistic *versus* Thomistic accounts. Much philosophy of religion presents God in theologically thin terms, as though 'God' were simply the proper name of an individual with a set of special attributes essential to his nature, rather than theologically thicker classical conceptions of God as Creator *ex nihilo* understood as existing at a radically different ontological level to the created order. Both sides can marshal their defences, but both sides can agree that any philosophical account involving God involves stretching our explanatory resources to their limits. Even so, Kopf's book, by making a case for an account requiring a theologically thicker classical conception of God, in effect makes a general point about how best to conduct philosophy of religion or theological philosophy that goes beyond the specific question of providence and divine action.

The book is not, however, beyond minor criticism. There is perhaps too much signposting and some unnecessary repetition, presumably due to the work's genesis as a doctoral thesis. I would have liked some more discussion on, *e.g.* the work of Ignatio Sliva, especially as Kopf asserts similarities with his own position (p. 7); and on the deficiencies of Austin Farrer's primary/secondary causality account (pp. 121–6). Regardless of minor cavils, Kopf presents an almost encyclopaedic overview of the range of actionistic theories with insight and subtlety, followed by a meticulous and judicious account of a Thomistic-inspired alternative, which he convincingly shows can reframe major debates. Highly recommended.

John Daniel OConnor 

Blackfriars, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Email: john.oconnor@bfriars.ox.ac.uk