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Divine Action – Some Comments

I am grateful to Ignacio Silva for his perceptive and careful survey of my thinking about the issue of relating theological belief in the special providential action of God to scientific knowledge of physical process. I think that he is right to identify three broad phases in the development of my thought.¹

The first period was characterised by the science and theology community's adopting the strategy of emphasising that the intrinsic unpredictabilities present in physical process indicate the metaphysical possibility of interpreting the physical world as possessing a degree of causal openness to its future that would allow scope for the action of divine providence, without requiring God to abrogate the action of the divinely ordained laws of nature. At the same time, there was a desire to identify an aspect of divine action that would serve to distinguish it from the forms of creaturely activity. Two suppositions motivated the adoption of this strategy. One was a belief that causality is a 'zero-sum game', so that if physical causality totally determined all that happened, there would be no room for special divine action. The Thomistic idea of the simultaneous compatibility of divine primary causality and secondary creaturely causality was not accepted. Yet there was also a desire to find a distinction between the detailed characters of creaturely and divine action, so that God was not simply to be seen as yet another cause acting among like causes. Silva thinks that this latter attempt was not successful but, in any case, the kenotic phase would modify this attitude.

Various forms of 'causal joint' were proposed. God was seen as either the extraphysical determinant of quantum outcomes or as the selector of the pattern in which a chaotic system traversed its strange attractor, determined by a divine input of pure information. I chose the latter option because of its manifest macroscopic relevance, while knowing, of course, that the *mathematical* theory of chaos is derived from deterministic equations. However, we know that these equations are themselves only an approximation to what we may believe to be a more subtle and supple physical reality. I do not suppose that any participant in this first phase of discussion really supposed that they had achieved a fully adequate understanding of divine action but, in the wise words of Ernan McMullin, they might claim to have 'defeated the defeaters' by showing that one could take science's account of process with all due seriousness without being

1 Polkinghorne, J.C. *Science and Religion in Quest of Truth*, London/New Haven: SPCK/Yale University Press (2011).

driven to deny that special providential action was possible.

The underlying theological motivation was to show that the Creator need not be considered as capriciously interfering with created nature, but rather as acting within its divinely ordained open grain. The stronger the account that one can give of divine providential action, the more acute becomes the issue of theodicy, asking why that action is not more manifestly effective in removing the disease and disaster that afflict creation. The key insight of the second phase, as Silva recognises, was the recognition that an insightful response to this problem is offered by the concept that the act of creation by the God of love is an act of kenosis, allowing creatures to be and to 'make themselves' (the theological interpretation of evolutionary process).

This kenotic act can be seen as a great good, but it has an inescapable shadow side. All evolutionary processes take place 'at the edge of chaos', where order and disorder intertwine, and in consequence they inescapably have ragged edges as well as great fertility. Genetic mutation both brings into being new forms of life and is also a source of malignancy. Therefore, though permitted by the Creator, not everything that happens is in accord with God's positive will. A kenotic theology allows many possibilities denied by classical theism, including even the possibility that God condescends to act as a cause among causes. The Thomistic emphasis on the absolute distinction between divine and creaturely action is relaxed. It may be that special providence acts through the input of pure information – such an idea is attractively consonant with the concept of hidden guidance by the Spirit – but one does not have to insist that this is so.

The fact of the matter is that we are not in a position to give a fully accurate account of the details of agency, either human or divine. What we can say is that appeal to the models of causal joint explanation show that these possibilities are not excluded by what an honest science can actually tell about physical process. From this recognition arises what Silva identifies as the third phase, with an emphasis on thought experiments of a kind that take us beyond simple fideistic assertion that God acts providentially, without presuming to claim that the mode of divine action is fully and adequately understood. I see my own thinking on these issues as being in a process of continuing development over the years, seeking to offer a contribution to the wider and deeper discussion of how the insights of science and the insights of theology can be in a relationship of fruitful mutual consonance!

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