CAUSALITY AND ONTOLOGICAL HIERARCHY IN THOMAS AQUINAS: FROM DIVINE DEPENDENCE TO HUMAN AUTONOMY

Martinho Moura
Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Centro de Estudos Filosóficos e Humanísticos,
Faculdade de Filosofia de Braga (Portugal)[1]

Abstract

This article explores Thomas Aquinas' concept of causality, as well as his rejection of Democritus' materialist view — which proposes a linear and mechanical chain of events. Aquinas' proposal of a hierarchical causality, where all secondary causes depend on the First Cause or God, is also exposed. For Aquinas, causality is not a blind sequence of events, but a dynamic network of ordered interactions. Each being acts within an ontological hierarchy, where there is a first cause that continually sustains the order and existence of the universe. Aquinas distinguishes various degrees of causal autonomy among beings. A stone, with purely passive causality, responds to external forces according to the laws of physics, while an animal, such as a cat, exhibits greater autonomy, guided by its soul that gives it a center of action. The cat's behavior is more unpredictable than that of the stone, since it is determined by its intrinsic nature. At the top of this hierarchy is the human being. Endowed with reason and will, the human being represents the highest expression of causal autonomy among composite beings. Humans do not act solely by instinct, but have the capacity to deliberate on good and evil and shape their lives based on freely chosen values. This freedom is not absolute, since the human, as a secondary cause, also acts under the design of the First Cause and consciously collaborates with the divine purpose. Causality in Thomas Aquinas is therefore more than a natural explanation of events; it is an ontological relationship that unites all beings with the divine order, with God as the First Cause and source of all being and movement. Humans uniquely integrate matter and spirit in the cosmos and possess a rational and moral capacity that distinguishes them from other living beings. This autonomy allows them to consciously participate in the divine plan and transcend material causality, a view that can be enriched by quantum superposition, which suggests that a being's potential (or capacity to be) is actualized by form, analogous to the actualization process that occurs in the universe according to divine order. Finally, Thomistic philosophy differs from pantheism in asserting that the universe, although unified, does not have an intrinsic self-sufficient purpose, since it depends on the creative will of God. There is an ontological distinction between Creator and creation.

Keywords: Causality, Aquinas, autonomy, finality, superposition.

1. Hierarchical causality and substantial autonomy

For Thomas Aquinas, causality transcends the linear, mechanical perspective of materialists like Democritus, who argued that atoms move in a blind, deterministic chain of events. Aquinas presents a hierarchical view of causality, where secondary causes are subordinate to a First Cause or God. Plants, animals and, especially, human beings are intrinsic units with their own centers of action, intimately linked to a formal principle that organizes matter toward its natural end. Causality is not just a feature of physical reality, but reflects a broader ontological order that includes a final cause and, therefore, transcends what can be measured.

Although empirical observation provides insights into physical interactions, it is insufficient to understand the deeper principles that govern reality (such as formal and final causes). Causality is rooted in reality itself; cannot be reduced to empirical and quantitative elements without losing the essence that defines real and complex units — those that have quantitative and qualitative dimensions. For Aristotle and Aquinas, qualities are intrinsic properties of substances — do not depend on the subject's perception to exist. These units are not mere products of subjective impositions, as might be suggested by certain idealist

structures such as those of Immanuel Kant. If Husserl's phenomenology investigates how phenomena present themselves to consciousness, Aquinas claims that reality exists independently of human cognition.

Reality is grounded in the metaphysical act of existence (esse), the foundation that actualizes form and matter by giving them concrete reality; transcends both sense experience and human conceptualization — Aquinas's ontology rejects structures that reduce the intelligibility of being to subjective or a priori structures of thought, and emphasizes the primacy of being as the source of intelligibility. His philosophy recognizes varying degrees of causal autonomy among beings. A rock, for example, exhibits passive causality, which corresponds to interactions governed by physical laws (modern science would describe its behavior as predictable within specific limits). On the other hand, a cat, endowed with a sensitive soul, demonstrates spontaneity and a degree of unpredictability (even if evaluated through advanced probabilistic models).

The human being represents the maximum expression of autonomy. Because he possesses reason and will (intellectual soul), he can choose and act according to objectives that transcend immediate instincts. Freedom, in this context, is not merely circumstantial — as in deterministic material processes -- but is essential; reflects the integration of efficient and final causes by aligning human action with divine order. This autonomy allows human beings to contemplate God, the ultimate end of existence and the source of their freedom. As Norris Clarke states:

> A higher form can incorporate the operations and properties of lower types of forms. Yet, to preserve the unity of nature, it is necessary to integrate them into a single synthetic unity, in a unified structure where the subordinate lower elements lose their complete autonomy of being and operation" (Clarke, 2001: 96).

2. Intrinsic and extrinsic units: The hierarchy of substantiality and autonomy in natural beings. Artifacts

Things are intelligible insofar as they have an intelligible form that our intellect can grasp. Forms manifest themselves in natural clusters, as they reflect the expression of Aristotelian forms. Clusters evidence the inherent order and teleology of nature — forms correspond to the intrinsic principles that define and direct beings. Qualities are related to teleology, essences and metaphysics. They have purpose and intelligibility that guide actions and interactions. The substantial unity, in living beings, reveals the profound interrelationship of form and matter, and reality is ultimately grounded in the metaphysical structure of being. Each entity embodies a union of act and potency, reflecting an ordered cosmos.

The stone, being an intrinsic unit, differs from things like an artifact, which is an extrinsic unit — its purpose is assigned by external agents. Both are dependent on God, but intrinsic units reflect divine action by possessing their own inherent meaning. Within intrinsic units, we also have a hierarchy. A cat has a stronger substantial unity than a stone, as its parts form an organic totality guided by the soul or substantial form. If we "divide" it, he loses its vital essence, something that does not happen with the stone.

This unity reaches its highest level in human being; it integrates body and soul, which orient it through rationality and will. Human autonomy enables one to choose, deliberate, and consciously participate in the divine plan.

2.1. Creativity and intelligence. Thomistic view of authentic creation

Tied to reason (abstraction, judgment and intuition), creativity reflects the capacity to transcend matter; is associated with an intellect understood as an immaterial faculty oriented toward the transcendent. If we think about what is commonly understood today as artificial intelligence (AI), despite being highly advanced, it results from operations limited by algorithms and deterministic or probabilistic processes. AI combines and even configures, in different ways, existing data and patterns, but it is devoid of intentionality or the human-like way of understanding in its creativity; does not grasp essences, nor does it transcend matter, and this is essential in Thomism to create something truly new. AI produces new combinations, and this may be a simulation of creativity, but it is an inauthentic "creativity"; it lacks a true form of understanding that includes the ability to assign a free and final purpose to what it creates. The innovative results are instrumental and limited and never express the depth of the human creative spirit. Intentionality, authentic creativity and freedom are attributes without which, according to a Thomistic view, there is no true creation.

2.2. *Esse*. Divine source

We can say, with Eudaldo Giralt, that «all existing beings — whether inert, vegetative, animal, human, spirits or angels, and God — are, according to Saint Thomas, placed on a scale ordered by the degree of intensity of their perfection or being», and that this «'being,' distinct from the Aristotelian being, is a universal metaphysical principle and, like the others, is not apprehensible by the senses»:

Unlike the Aristotelians, the intellect cannot form any concept of it [being], because it is truly distinct from essences, from what things are. However, a certain knowledge is possible because, for every person, their own being is revealed in their intellectual consciousness, in an intellectual perception of their existence, whose object is indicated by the word "I." (Giralt: 153)

This notion of being revealed in the "I" through intellectual self-awareness possesses a depth that surpasses the classical phenomenological approach (which is focused on the rigorous description of phenomena). Here, being is not merely an object of intentional analysis, but something that manifests as a fundamental reality in the existential and ontological experience of the subject.[2] Aquinas distinguishes between *being* and essence, with *being* understood as the act of existing, directly revealed in the subject's intellectual experience. On the other hand, its proximity to existential phenomenology emerges from the emphasis on the immediate and lived experience of the "I," where being is not abstract but concretely present.

In short, it`s a vision that transcends mere conceptualization, linking the experience of being to existence itself and the subject's consciousness, enriched by a metaphysical (transcendent) and existential horizon. Being is granted by divine creation; it is not eternal as in Aristotle but is a free and continuous act of God. The act of existence (*esse*) is the absolute metaphysical foundation that enables any being to be, regardless of its essence or categories. Before defining ourselves as humans, we first exist. Existence allows us to be something concrete; without it, essence would remain a mere possibility or idea.[3]

In created beings, *esse* does not exist in isolation — it is always united with essence. The act of existence animates the essence, while the essence determines what this act of existence will be. Unlike created beings, in God, *esse* and essence are identical; God is *ipsum esse subsistens*, the very act of being itself. The *esse* of created beings is a participation in the fullness of existence that only God possesses in its entirety. This relationship underscores the dependence of all contingent beings on God. The *esse* is not self-sufficient, but rooted in the divine source, wich avoids any existentialist interpretation like Jean-Paul Sartre, as it points back to the ultimate ground of all being. Our existence is not an isolated fact but is intimately connected to God's order, signifying that He alone fulfills and perfects us, as the cause and ultimate end of all things.

3. Self-knowledge in Thomas Aquinas and the Cartesian Cogito

For Descartes, the "Cogito, Ergo Sum" is an indubitable intuition of the act of thinking, affirmed by the mind itself. The subject becomes the center of epistemological certainty. In contrast, Aquinas argues that we come to know our existence through experience of the sensible world and the intellect, which abstracts universal forms from these sensible impressions. Thought is not sovereign, as it is merely a tool for knowing the being that exists independently of the intellect. The intellect operates in unity with the sensitive faculties that allow it to know, although not in an absolute way, the essence of things as they exist in reality. Descartes' mind-body dualism places thought as independent of the body, while Thomas Aquinas sees the human being as a unity of body and soul. Self-knowledge is part of a universal order dependent on God as the First Cause and knowledge is a participation in the order of being. It is not isolated or subjective as is the case with Descartes' dualism.

The human spirit is an immaterial substance that is the form of the body; not an incarnate spirit. According to the Aristotelian hylomorphic conception of matter and form, reinforced by Thomas Aquinas,

Every spirit is an immaterial substance, intelligible to itself, intellectual and volitional. The human spirit, unlike other spirits, is a spiritual substance and at the same time the form or soul of the body, according to the Aristotelian hylomorphic conception of matter and form. Therefore, the human being is not an incarnate spirit. He is a substance composed of spirit and body, united by the being of the first (Giralt, 155).

The Thomist and Cartesian cogitos differ in their sources and foundations of knowledge. For Descartes, the certainty of thought is a subjective intuition; For Thomas Aquinas, self-knowledge is an objective participation in reality, revealed through the intellect's apprehension of the essences of things. Unlike Descartes, who argues that the subject's thought is fundamental to knowledge, Thomas Aquinas argues that knowledge begins with the sensible world and proceeds to intellectual abstraction, in which the essence of things is grasped.

It is important to note a significant feature of Aquinas's account of research that distinguishes him from Aristotle. Although both Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle claim that inquiry aims at the knowledge of essences,

---

[2] This approach is close to what would later become Heidegger's existential phenomenology.

[3] In God, essence and existence coincide. Being beyond the confines of time, God does not first conceive for things to then exist; rather, everything occurs simultaneously. This implies, too, that by the very fact of our existence, we humans recognize a transcendent essence, manifesting through the metaphysical concepts of composite beings: act and potency, matter and form.

Thomas Aquinas maintains that we never know essences directly except through their effects. The proper object of human knowledge is not the essence itself, but the *quidditas* of the particular existing thing, through which we come to understand, as far as possible, the essence of whatever it is (MacIntyre, 1990: 46).

4. Epistemology and perception

Descartes presents a radical doubt about sensible perceptions, considering that they are potentially illusory and even possibly created by an "evil genius". As a result, it places sense perceptions in an inferior epistemological position — fallible and often obstacles to certainty because they lack a direct connection to objective reality.

For Thomas Aquinas, sensitive perception is the starting point of knowledge and allows contact with the particular and material aspects of reality. Through sensitive images, the intellect abstracts forms or essences, in a movement that starts from the particular to a higher level of understanding. Although sense perception is corporeal and material, it serves the rational soul; guides it towards the apprehension of universal forms. When reflecting on sensitive data, the intellect not only judges the existence of things, but also comes to understand human existence and the Creator.

5. Universe as extrinsic unity

The universe is seen by Aquinas as a unity, but an extrinsic unity. Its purpose does not emanate from a self-sufficient internal order. Parts of the universe cannot exist outside of it, but human autonomy transcends some unifying center within the cosmos. The universe, in this sense, is not self-explanatory; does not find its purpose in itself, but depends on the creative will of God as the first and transcendent cause of all being.

The unity of the universe is not substantial; It is an ordered arrangement of distinct substances united by divine action. Unity is desired by God; It is a way for God to manifest his perfection, while at the same time being a reflection of the relationship between the contingency of the world and the need of the Creator. Although it is an extrinsic unity, the universe is still a unity; it is ordered to an ultimate end or Supreme Good. This understanding rejects any pantheistic view, preserves divine transcendence and defends the free will of the creator.

6. Aquinas against materialist Reductionism

Materialist and physicalist philosophies, which reduce reality to tangible or measurable quantities, ignore the substantial distinctions between beings, seen simply as aggregates of matter. The substantial change is reduced to a rearrangement of particles without any intrinsic qualitative transformation. For Thomas Aquinas, substantial change is not a mere rearrangement of parts, but is a qualitative substantial transformation, guided by a substantial form.

There is also a metaphysical shift closely related to qualitative flourishing. Classical mechanics regards time and space as neutral containers in which events occur, separate from their intrinsic relation to change. For Thomas Aquinas, time and space are continuous with change, since "time is the measure of what is before and after, in movement" (Aquinas, *STh*, I, q. 10, a. 2). Here, change involves the realization of a natural end, guided by a final cause and in an understanding that can only diverge from materialism.

In Thomistic philosophy, we can even speak of a "top-down" metaphysical causality, by which the substantial form of, for instance, a seed organizes and unifies the material elements that constitute it. This form subordinates the parts to the whole; endows them with function and purpose. The example of a tree, whose shape organizes its parts, illustrates this principle. It turns out that this teleological order does not imply retrocausality (where future states determine present ones); rather, it reflects an interdependence between the four causes—material, formal, efficient, and final—that together explain the realization of a substance as a whole.

Unlike "bottom-up" emergentist approaches, where the parts determine the whole, Thomistic philosophy asserts that the whole, as substance, governs the parts; integrates them with purpose. The atoms of a seed thus gain meaning as components of a teleologically oriented living substance. As Robert Koons observes, "parts of substances are metaphysically dependent on the whole."

As regards its application to quantum mechanics (QM), the same principle can be observed. Quantum particles result in the nature and states of the bodies to which they belong, and not the other way around. As Koons argues, "these particles have only a virtual existence until they manifest themselves in interactions between substances" (Koons, 2021: 14). Ignacio Silva, discussing Werner Heisenberg and Thomas Aquinas on natural indeterminism, observes:

Given the disturbance caused by observation, Heisenberg thinks that the potentiality of the system is actualized [...] This new form was in the potentiality of matter and is brought to the present by the interaction with the measuring device in observation" (Silva, 2013: 652).

These perspectives suggest that QM can accommodate a teleological interpretation without compromising causality with determinism, in a stance consistent with Thomistic philosophy. The Aristotelian "four causes" should be understood as "four whys" that describe the ontological modalities and interdependencies involved in any change. This framework rejects the reduction of reality to mere material mechanisms and reinforces the notion that each substance has intrinsic unity and purpose, organized by its substantial form.

Finally, it is essential to clarify that the Aristotelian concept of "purpose" does not imply the deliberation of inanimate nature, as if it acted as a rational agent. Rather, the realization of "for the sake of" (heneka tou) in nature arises from its intrinsic order and purpose. As Aristotle rightly observes in De Caelo (290a3), "nature leaves nothing to chance."

7. Freedom

Freedom is the ability to deliberate and act according to reason oriented towards the supreme good or God. It does not oppose the divine order because it is an integral part of it. By making free choices, human beings participate in the first cause. Human freedom cannot be absolute. We make conscious decisions subordinate to a divine purpose. Freedom is not the ability to act without cause or end, but to act rationally in accordance with the universal good; it is integrated into divine causality, without diminishing God's sovereignty over the universe. It is not a void that human beings fill alone, but a gift from God, which allows us to choose between good and evil, always within the divine plan. Divine grace cooperates, in this sense, with free will, by helping human beings to orient themselves towards the supreme good. Grace does not nullify freedom, but increases it; it is a help in choosing the greater good. Happiness is not in the freedom to do what one wants, but in the freedom to choose union with the ultimate end. It is not therefore an arbitrary freedom, but one directed towards moral and spiritual perfection.

References

Aristóteles. (2023). *Sobre o Céu.* Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda: Lisboa.

Clarke, W. N. (2001). *The One and the Many*. University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame.

Giralt, E. (n.d.) São Tomás de Aquino, Síntese Filosófica e Harmónica com a Fé Cristã. Rev. Sophia – Filosofia medieval | *Super Interessante Historia Ed. Biblioteca nº 25*.

Inman, R. D. (2018). *Substance and the Familiarity of the Familiar: A Neo-Aristotelian Mereology*. New York: Routledge.

Konznjak, B. (2020). *Aristotle and Quantum Mechanics: Potentiality and Actuality, Spontaneous Events and Final Causes*. Springer Nature B.V.

MacIntyre, A. (1990). *First Principles, Final Ends, and Contemporary Philosophical Issues*, Marquette University Press: Milwaukee.

Koons, R. (2021). Powers Ontology and the Quantum Revolution. *European Journal for Philosophy of Science, 11*(14). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13194-020-00314-9

Aquinas, T. (1962). *Summa Theologiae*, Editiones Paulina: Rome.

Silva, I. (2013). *Werner Heisenberg and Thomas Aquinas on Natural Indeterminism*, John Wiley & Sons: Oxford. DOI: 10.1111/nbfr.12036