

**Orientis Aura**  
**Perspectives in Religious Studies**

# **Aquinas' Reception and Modification of Boethius' Theory on the Relationship between Providence and Free Will**

Lingchang Gui

*School of Philosophy, Huazhong University of Science and Technology*

*Center for Bioethics, HUST*

*Center for the Study of Hermeneutics & Gadamer Library, HUST*

## ***Abstract***

Aquinas largely adopts Boethius's approach to the relationship between providence and free will, yet he remains acutely aware of the inherent difficulties in this framework. In his efforts to address and resolve these challenges, Aquinas continues to draw upon Boethius's own philosophical resources—a point that has not been sufficiently emphasized by scholars. This paper begins by tracing Boethius's views on providence as presented in the *Consolatio Philosophiae*: because God's mode of knowledge is fundamentally different from that of humans, His providence is non-temporal and necessary. Consequently, future contingent events and human free actions exhibit different modalities and temporal characteristics in themselves and within God's knowledge. The difficulty with this idea lies in explaining how God can engage in a causal relationship with creatures that exist under different existential modalities. This paper further argues that in addressing this issue, Aquinas, by unifying providence with creation, utilizes Boethius's distinctions between existence (*esse*) and essence (*essentia*), as well as the three different modes of participation, to describe God's causal influence on creatures as a unique form of causal participation. This is different from intentional participation (where a particular participates in a universal) or ontological participation (where a substance participates in accidents), and is instead based on the idea that existence itself cannot be participated in, thereby

describing a causality that grants existence and modes of existence in a creative sense. This form of participation is distinct because it implies a creative causality where the cause (God) is entirely extrinsic to its effect (creatures). Thus, by asserting that God exerts causal influence on creatures while preserving His transcendent nature and distinctly different mode of existence, Aquinas ultimately resolves the mentioned difficulty. This study enhances our understanding of how Aquinas inherited and employed Boethius's philosophical resources to provide a more robust ontological account of human free will and to resolve the tensions inherent in Boethius's thought.

## ***Introduction***

In Christian philosophy, the tension between providence and free will has always been a central issue. On one hand, theologians must ensure God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, while on the other hand, they must also ensure that these divine attributes do not render human free will and human actions meaningless, thereby stripping actions of their moral value.

To address this issue, Boethius in the fifth book of *The Consolation of Philosophy* first seeks to resolve the tension between providence and contingent events, and then extends this solution to the problem of free will. For Boethius, the key lies in the fundamental difference between how God understands the world and how things exist. The compatibility of providence with both contingent events and free will is based on this distinction. However, tension remains regarding God's role as the creator and his causal involvement in the world. Aquinas, drawing on Boethius' distinction between existence and essence, offers a solution to ease this tension.

Currently, there has been a large amount of mature research on Boethius' solution to the tension between providence and free will in *The Consolation of Philosophy* (see, for example, Marenbon<sup>1</sup>). Aquinas' reception and adaptation of Boethius' related ideas have also gained considerable attention (McGinn<sup>2</sup>, Janakiefski<sup>3</sup>, Torrijos-Castrillejo<sup>4</sup>). However, much of the research remains focusing on the relatively broad

---

<sup>1</sup> Marenbon, J. (2013). Divine prescience and contingency in Boethius's *Consolation of philosophy*. *Rivista di storia della filosofia*: LXVIII, 1, 2013, 9-21.

<sup>2</sup> McGinn, B. (1975). The development of the thought of Thomas Aquinas on the reconciliation of divine providence and contingent action. *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review*, 39(4), 741-752.

<sup>3</sup> Janakiefski, K. (2017). Preserving Human Freedom: Aquinas on Divine Transcendence and Creaturely Contingency. *Dianoia: The Undergraduate Philosophy Journal of Boston College*.

<sup>4</sup> Torrijos-Castrillejo, D. (2020). Divine foreknowledge and providence in the commentaries of Boethius and Aquinas on the *De interpretatione* 9 by Aristotle. *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia*, 13(2020)2, 151-173.

and direct perspective of highlighting how Aquinas shifts the discussion from epistemology to theory of creation.

Building on current research, this paper will first briefly review Boethius' approach in *The Consolation of Philosophy* to resolving the tension between providence, contingent events, and free will, and point out its limitations from Aquinas' perspective (Part I). Then, we will explore how Aquinas, within his own theoretical framework, transforms Boethius' approach into a solution based on theory of creation, thereby overcoming the internal tension (Part II). Following that, we will demonstrate how Aquinas' solution draws upon Boethius' own conceptual resources (Part III), and conclude with final remarks.

## ***I. Providence, Contingent Events, and Free Will in Boethius' Thought***

Boethius' discussion of divine providence is closely related to his treatment of Aristotle's exploration of the nature of modal propositions concerning future events in *De Interpretatione*. Aristotle points out a fundamental difficulty regarding individual future events: if we accept the principle of bivalence—that a proposition is either true or false—then, for any pair of contradictory singular propositions, one must necessarily be true and the other false. If this pair of contradictory propositions concerns a future event, it seems that the event has already been determined by one of the singular propositions. In response to this dilemma, Boethius resolves the issue by distinguishing between types of necessity: those events that occur with absolute necessity due to their inherent nature or necessary causal factors, and those that, while actually occurring, do not involve this necessary causal element and thus possess only hypothetical necessity. Therefore, even though future events do occur, their actual

occurrence does not alter the contingent nature of the event itself—the nature of the future event remains contingent.<sup>5</sup>

This means that the necessity in statements about future propositions is independent of the nature of the thing itself or the causal modality of the event. In other words, the modality of knowing or understanding something can be independent of the modality of the thing itself. This principle of independence originates from the famous Iamblichus' principle: things are known according to the way the knower knows them, not according to the way they are known. Boethius restates this principle in *The Consolation of Philosophy* as follows:

The cause of which error is because thou thinkest that all that is known is known only by the force and nature of the things themselves, which is altogether otherwise. For all that is known is not comprehended according to the force which it hath in itself (*ex vi atque natura cognosci*), but rather according to the faculty of them which know it (*secundum cognoscentium facultatem*).<sup>6</sup>

By employing this new principle, which is fundamentally different from the classical Greek principle of “like knows like,” a contingent thing can be known in a necessary way, as long as the knower's mode of knowing is necessary. Similarly, an event that occurs in time can be known in a timeless manner, as long as the knower's way of knowing is timeless. At the same time, this necessary or timeless mode of knowing does not alter the nature of the thing or event itself, nor the modal characteristics inherent in that nature.

Unsurprisingly, Boethius uses this model to explain divine foreknowledge and contingent things, and further to clarify the relationship between providence and human free will. Boethius argues that although the world exists in a temporal manner, God's mode of existence

---

<sup>5</sup> Torrijos-Castrillejo, D. (2020). Divine foreknowledge and providence in the commentaries of Boethius and Aquinas on the *De interpretatione* 9 by Aristotle. *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia*, 13(2020)2, 152-154.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart, H. F., Rand, E. K., & Tester, S. J. (1973). *Boethius: Theological Tractates. The Consolation of Philosophy* (Loeb Classical Library 74). Harvard University Press. 386-389.

is eternal. Therefore, His knowledge of the world is a direct, immediate knowledge that transcends all temporal movement. Strictly speaking, divine providence is not “foreknowledge” of something that is going to happen, but rather knowledge of an ever-present, unchanging moment (*non esse praescientia quasi future, sed scientia numquam deficientis instantiae rectius aestimabis*).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, for Boethius, even though God knows all things and events in a necessary mode, and this mode of knowing is timeless, fundamentally different from the modal existence of things themselves, this does not alter the nature or the modal form of the things themselves. The necessity of God’s knowledge is not imposed upon the things themselves—God’s providence does not change the nature and properties of things (*natura rerum proprietatemque*), nor does God’s insight into all things interfere with their qualities (*qualitas rerum*)<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, what God foresees does not become necessary simply because of His providence; contingent events will still happen contingently, in accordance with their own nature.

This principle and approach likewise apply to human free will: since free actions can be seen as contingent events arising from the individual, divine providence does not nullify human free will. Boethius argues that a person’s actions, when measured by God’s knowledge, are necessary; yet, when considered by their own nature, they are free (*liberum*) and unrestrained. Most free actions of humans do not inherently include the necessity to perform a certain act, but only do so when a certain condition is added (*conditionis adiectio*). Thus, while we may say that when we see someone walking, it is necessary that she is walking, but the act of walking itself is voluntary (*voluntas*).<sup>9</sup>

This model seems to resolve the potential tension between divine providence, contingent events, and free will: The divine providence is a result of His mode of existence, and His way of knowing does not

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 402-403.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 404-407.

interfere with or affect the mode of existence of things themselves. Thus, things are able to maintain their own modes of being, and human free will and choice are preserved. However, this approach contains an evident difficulty: how can God, who does not share the same mode of existence as created beings, causally interact with the world?

## ***II. Aquinas' Advancement of Boethius' Theory of Divine Foreknowledge***

Before addressing the question raised at the end of the previous section, it is first worth clarifying a point that Marenbon repeatedly emphasizes: in Boethius' theory, the eternal presentness of God manifested in providence is not a metaphysical eternity, but rather an epistemological mode of timeless cognition. If we read *The Consolation of Philosophy* and other texts, we might mistakenly think that Boethius implies that God, in His timeless way of knowing temporal things, simultaneously coexists with events and things in time, so that all things are connected to God in an immediate, present manner. However, Marenbon points out that there is no such metaphysical or ontological coexistence in Boethius' texts. Boethius' stance in *The Consolation of Philosophy* is rather an epistemological one; in other words, it is not that all past, present, and future events coexist or occur simultaneously with the eternal God. Instead, God's mode of knowing is simply timeless.<sup>10</sup>

Based on Marenbon's interpretation, Boethius limits God's eternal, timeless modality in divine providence to the realm of cognition, which removes the contradiction between its eternal mode and God's causal relationship with the world. However, in Boethius' thought, the question

---

<sup>10</sup> Marenbon, J. (2013). Divine prescience and contingency in Boethius's *Consolation of philosophy*. *Rivista di storia della filosofia*: LXVIII, 1, 2013, 18.

of how this causal interaction actually occurs remains unresolved. It is precisely from this angle that Aquinas advances Boethius' thought.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, q. 14, a. 8 c.<sup>12</sup>, Aquinas states that, in general, intelligible form does not denote a principle of action in so far as it resides in the one who understands unless there is added to it the inclination to an effect, which inclination is through the will (*adiungatur ei inclinatio ad effectum, quae est per voluntatem*). In other words, only when this intelligible form is united with a corresponding inclination of the will can they together bring about the effect of action. For since the intelligible form has a relation to opposite things (inasmuch as the same knowledge relates to opposites), it would not produce a determinate effect unless it were determined to one thing by the appetite (*nisi determinaretur ad unum per appetitum*). In the intellect of rational creatures, existence is not sufficient contained, and therefore the act of understanding is distinct from the act of creation in rational beings.

In contrast, because God's act of being is identical to His act of understanding (*suum esse sit suum intelligere*), His knowledge must necessarily be the cause of things (*sua scientia sit causa rerum*). In other words, His knowing the world also implies His creating the world. Due to the direct identity between God's act of understanding and His act of granting existence, there is no question for divine will choosing from indeterminate opposites. The modality of God's creation of the world and His knowledge of the world are identical—both are non-temporal and absolutely necessary.

As with Boethius' discussion of divine providence, God's necessarily creative act does not affect the mode of existence of created beings, nor does it impact the free actions of rational beings endowed with

---

<sup>11</sup> Torrijos-Castrillejo, D. (2020). Divine foreknowledge and providence in the commentaries of Boethius and Aquinas on the De interpretatione 9 by Aristotle. *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia*, 13(2020)2, 161.

<sup>12</sup> The *Summa Theologiae* cited below, with Latin text sourced from Thomas Aquinas (1884) *Pars Prima Summae Theologiae. A Quaestione L Ad Quaestionem CXIX, Opera Omnia Iussu Leonis XIII P. M. Edita t. 6. Typographia Polyglotta, Rome*. English translation: Aquinas T. (2007). *Summa theologiae*, transl. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Cosimo, New York.

free will. In *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, q.83, a. 1, ad 3, Aquinas states that in human acts of free choice, it is not individual created beings but God who acts as the first cause (*Deus igitur est prima causa movens et naturales causas et voluntarias*). As the cause of free will, God does not deprive actions of being voluntary; rather, it is precisely God who enables actions to be voluntary and free, as He operates in each being according to its own nature (*operatur enim in unoquoque secundum eius proprietatem*).

This means that God's creation is a granting of both existence and modes of existence, whereby creatures are determined by God through creation to be contingent, necessary, or free. Within this paradigm of creation, on one hand, God is the cause of all created beings because He grants them both existence and their mode of existence; on the other hand, His mode of creation is entirely transcendent, so that the mode of existence of created beings does not in any way affect God's own mode of existence.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, Aquinas transforms what, in Boethius, was an epistemological issue into one of creation: God's possessing a non-temporal mode of cognition, allowing Him to know contingent things with necessity, is based on His transcendent act of creating all things—whether necessary or contingent. The transcendent cognitive ability in Boethius is further redefined by Aquinas as a transcendent creative power, through which, he argues, God relates to the created world.

As Aquinas states in *Summa Theologiae*, Part I, q.14, a. 8, in God's transcendent mode of creation, the divine will is unified with His intellect. Aquinas employs the unity of divine will and intellect to transform the epistemological relationship between God and creatures, originally established through divine providence, into a creative ontological relationship constructed through God's creative act. This transformation, along with the introduction of the element of divine will, represents a

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Janakiefski, K. (2017). Preserving Human Freedom: Aquinas on Divine Transcendence and Creaturely Contingency. *Dianoia: The Undergraduate Philosophy Journal of Boston College*, pp. 60-61.

significant contribution by Aquinas in addressing the relationship between divine providence and the free will of rational created beings.<sup>14</sup>

### ***III. Boethian Ontological Elements in Aquinas' Doctrine of Providence***

So, how is this transcendent act of creation by God—creating existence and modes of existence—even possible? Aquinas's understanding of the mode of creation begins with his interpretation of Boethius's discussion on the issue of participation. Therefore, this section will first explore how Boethius distinguishes between existence and existent beings, as well as essence, and the application of participation theory within this distinction. Following this, we will examine how Aquinas, through his commentary on Boethius, advances Boethius's theory of participation concerning existence, ultimately uncovering the metaphysical foundation in Aquinas's thought that makes God's transcendent act of creation possible.

In *De Hebdomadibus*, Boethius differentiates between existence and being things, thereby separating existence from concrete entities and their essence:

Being (*esse*) and that which is (*id quod est*) are diverse. For being itself (*ipsum esse*) as yet is not. That-which-is however, once the form of being (*essendi*) has been taken on, is and stands together

Here, Boethius separates existence from other essential determinations, regarding it as the foundation of all other determinations. After distinguishing “existence” and indicating its foundational role, Boethius goes on to explain the source of the existence and other essential

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Torrijos-Castrillejo, D. (2020). Divine foreknowledge and providence in the commentaries of Boethius and Aquinas on the *De interpretatione* 9 by Aristotle, p. 167.

determinations. Following Platonic tradition, Boethius uses the concept of “participation” to illustrate this source. In Proposition III, Boethius states:

What-is (*quod est*) can participate in something, but being itself (*ipsum esse*) in no way participates in anything. For participation occurs when something already is. Something is, however, when it has received being (*esse*).<sup>15</sup>

In this proposition, the subject of participation must be something that already exists; otherwise, it would not be able to participate in anything else. From this, we can infer that what Boethius is discussing here is the act of participation that follows the reception of being—namely, the participation in essential determinations and accidents.

In his *Commentary on the De Hebdomadibus*, Aquinas divides participation into three categories<sup>16</sup>:

1. Particular participation in the universal: “when something receives in a particular way that which belongs to another in a universal way, it is said ‘to participate’ in that” Aquinas uses the example of “man” participating in “animal” and “Socrates” participating in “man.” Since this participation is in a logical or conceptual sense, Wippel calls it logical or conceptual participation.

2. Subject participating in accident and matter participating in form: This occurs when a form, whether it is an essential or accidental form, is universal in nature (*de sui ratione*) and is participated in by this or that matter or subject. Wippel refers to this type of participation as real participation or ontological participation.

3. Effect participating in its cause: Aquinas uses the example of air participating in sunlight to illustrate this type of participation by analogy

---

<sup>15</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas. (2001). An exposition of the On the Hebdomads of Boethius (J. L. Schultz & E. A. Synan, Trans.). Catholic University of America Press, 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

—the light in the air is not identical to the light of the sun itself. Wippel calls this causal participation.<sup>17</sup>

And everything participates in being/existence. In Proposition VI of *De Hebdomadibus*, Boethius similarly uses participation to explain the relationship between being things and existence.

Everything that is (*omne quod est*) participates in that which is being (*participat eo quod est esse*) with the result that it be. It participates in something else with the result that it be something. And through this, that-which-is (*id quod est*) participates in that which is being (*participat eo quod est esse*) with the result that it be. It is, however, with the result that it can participate in anything else you like.<sup>18</sup>

Here, we can see that, for Boethius, any created being must first participate in its existence before it can participate in other attributes and accidents; participation in existence is a prerequisite for the participation in other attributes.

But where, then, does the existence of created beings itself participate from? Aquinas points out that the participation of a created being in existence cannot fall under the second type—ontological participation—because “to be” itself is signified as something abstract (*ipsum esse significator ut quiddam abstractum*). The second type of participation involves a real composition, an actual union of the participant with the participated perfection. However, since a being must first exist in order to participate, existence cannot be something external that requires union. Likewise, this existence cannot come from the first type of participation, because existence is the most universal (communissimum), whence indeed it is participated in by others, but still does not participate in anything else.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysics Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finit Being to Uncreated Being*, Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000, p. 97.

<sup>18</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas. (2001). *An exposition of the On the Hebdomads of Boethius* (J. L. Schultz & E. A. Synan, Trans.). Catholic University of America Press, 14-15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

Therefore, for Aquinas, the way in which the existence of a created being comes from God can only be of the third type, namely, causal participation. However, Aquinas does not state this in his commentary here; rather, he explains it under a more precise distinction in the *Summa Theologica*, Part I, q. 104, a. 1 c. In this text, Aquinas first elucidates the relationship between air and light as an analogy, comparing it to the relationship between fire and heated water. Aquinas points out that in natural things, there are two types of causal relationships. In one, an agent may be the cause of the "becoming" of its effect, but not directly of its "being." (*aliquod agens est causa sui effectus secundum fieri tantum, et non directe secundum esse eius*). In this case, the agent is not the cause of the form as such (*causa formae inquantum huiusmodi*); it is only the cause of the effect's formation. Any causal operation of "like produces like" falls under this type; for example, fire heating water—the water receives the form of heat in the same mode as it exists in fire. In this situation, even if the fire stops heating the water, the hot water remains warm, as the water's matter receives the form of heat in the same way (*secundum eandem rationem*) as it exists in fire.

However, if an effect cannot receive a form in the same mode as it exists in the cause, then the cause is not only the cause of the effect's coming into being but also the cause of its continued existence. In such cases, if the agent causing the effect's formation ceases, the effect will no longer continue to exist. This is the case with the relationship between the sun and the air: if the sun's action ceases, the light in the air will immediately cease, as the air does not possess light in the same way that light exists in the sun; the light has no root in the air (*[lumen] non habet radicem in aere*).

Aquinas then states that the relationship between created beings and God is similar to the relationship between air and the illuminating sun. The sun is bright by its very nature, while the air is bright because it participates in the light of the sun, yet the air does not participate in the sun's essence. Similarly, only God is the existence by His essence, for His essence is His existence. All created beings, like air participating in light,

participate in the existence given by God in an effectual manner, since their essence is not their existence.

The analysis thus far indicates that although every being participates in existence as an effect of God's creative act, the existence they participate in, as an effect, is essentially different from the existence of God as the cause and existence itself, because the essence of created beings is not existence. In this way, created beings can, on the one hand, possess their own unique modes, allowing for contingency and free will in their existence, while God's existence remains absolutely transcendent in relation to them. On the other hand, the existence of created beings is undoubtedly the result of God as their cause.

### ***Conclusion***

From the above study, we can see that, for Boethius, the tension between providence and free will is primarily an epistemological issue. Boethius addresses this tension by using the Iamblichus' principle: the non-temporal and necessary nature of providence does not affect the temporal and contingent nature of things, nor the free will and free actions of rational agents.

Aquinas, by equating divine intellect with divine creative act, transforms this epistemological issue into one of creation. Similar to Boethius's approach, Aquinas also maintains that the modal characteristics of God and His creative act do not influence the modal characteristics of creatures.

To explain how this God-creature relationship is possible, this study examined Aquinas's commentary on *The De Hebdomadibus*: in this text, Boethius distinguishes between existence and essence, and based on this distinction, Aquinas understands God's creative act as a unique form of causal participation, analogous to air participating in sunlight. In this type

of participation, the existence acquired by creatures is essentially different from God's own existence. It is this essential difference that allows God to be causally related to created beings on one hand, while on the other hand, remaining transcendent over them in creative act.

This study shows that Aquinas not only actively inherits and utilizes Boethian philosophical resources but also develops them creatively, even to the extent of addressing theoretical difficulties within Boethius's own theology and philosophy.