

Aquinas on Providence, Control, and Divine Simplicity

The Providential Collapse of the Providential Collapse Argument

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Abstract: In this article, I address Joe Schmid's argument of providential collapse against divine simplicity. After presenting my reservations about Daniel Shield's solution based on Aquinas's theory of relations, I outline a three-step strategy to defend classical theism against Schmid's argument: two steps are based on Aquinas's doctrine of providence, and the third is based on his conception of causal control. The first step is to show that, given God's goals in creation, fixing all the facts about God doesn't imply that any world can come about randomly. The second step lies in showing that an indeterministic conception of providence, in which God doesn't predetermine secondary causes but counts with their real contingency, is compatible with God's control over His fundamental goals in creation. The third step is to show that, according to Aquinas's conception of causal control, nothing can prevent God from having downstream control of His effects.

Keywords: Aquinas, Providential Collapse, Divine Simplicity, Providence, Control

1. Introduction

The doctrine of divine simplicity (DDS) is one of the core doctrines of classical theism. According to DDS, God is not composed of either physical or metaphysical parts; also, according to DDS, God is identical with His intrinsic attributes. Also, classical theists affirm both that God exists necessarily and that He wills his creatures contingently, not by absolute necessity. Given simplicity, God must be identical with his own act of will. For some scholars, the conjunction of these claims seems to lead to modal collapse, i.e., the collapse of all modal distinctions (possibility, contingency, necessity) into absolute necessity: if God is

identical with his act of willing and God exists necessarily, then his act of willing seems to be also necessary; but then this world must exist necessarily given that what God intends cannot fail to happen (Schmid 2022, 3). This modal collapse argument has been formulated in many different ways and has been the subject of intense debates over the last few years.¹

However, Joseph Schmid has recently declared the fruitful death of modal collapse arguments (Schmid 2021). According to Schmid, in order to avoid modal collapse, classical theism needs to ensure that all contingent predications concerning God's actions are extrinsic; this can be done by embracing an indeterministic link between God and his effects (Schmid 2022, 4). This strategy, however, would not come without a price for the classical theist, since it would generate new problems from DDS. First, the problem of intentional collapse: for God to be the causal explanation of his effects, his act of creating must be intentionally directed to them, and cannot, therefore, be a mere extrinsic description. Second, the problem of providential collapse: if God's being is compatible with the obtaining of any possible effect, then God has no providential control over the effects He produces.

Both problems are closely connected, and some scholars seem to deal with them as a single problem.² Nevertheless, I think that they are distinct enough from each other to deserve separate treatment. Also, I think that the version of classical theism defended by Thomas Aquinas—who is one of its most important representatives—, appears immune to both problems, once one understands its metaphysical principles. I will deal with the problem of intentional collapse in a forthcoming article, so the aim of this paper is to present a defense of classical theism from the problem of providential collapse, based on Aquinas's thought.³ First, I will explain in detail the problem of providential collapse. Second, given that Daniel Shields (2024) has already proposed a Thomistic solution to this problem, inspired by Aquinas's ontology of relations, I will present my reservations explaining why I think his solution can be controversial among classical theists. Then I will present my strategy to block Schmid's argument in three steps: two based on Aquinas's doctrine of providence, and one based on his conception of control. The first step lies in showing that, on Aquinas's conception of divine providence, God has essential goals in creation, that determine the order and structure of the world and the range of worlds that He could create.

¹ A very comprehensive summary of the most relevant arguments and counterarguments in this discussion can be found in Mullins & Byrd (2022).

² See, for instance, Rooney (2025: 54-55) and, as we will see, Shields (2024).

³ I first presented my defense against both problems in my paper "Intention, Control, and Divine Simplicity. The Providential Collapse of the Providential Collapse Argument," presented at the international workshop *Providence, Free Will, and God's entitative attributes*, Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, June 27–28, 2024.

The second step consists in showing that, according to Aquinas, the type of control that providence demands over the effects is indeterministic, and does not necessarily exclude a certain degree of contingency and randomness in the development of the world, compatible with the fulfillment of God's purposes in creation. The third step is to present some elements of Aquinas's notion of causal control, in order to show that Schmid fails to show that, once all the facts about God are fixed, He cannot have downstream control of His effects. I will conclude by pointing out that, if the Thomistic defense I propose is successful, the problem of providential collapse itself has a providential role for the development of classical theism.

2. The Problem of Providential Collapse

Let us first consider the problem of providential collapse in detail. According to Schmid, if the classical theist adopts radical indeterminism, which he needs to do in order to avoid modal collapse, he must deny that God has control over whether creation obtains or not, and over what precise contents obtain in creation; hence he must deny God's providence (Schmid 2022, 9). If God is identical with his act of willing in every possible world, then it seems that there is no distinctive act or intentional exercise of his power that brings this particular creation into existence; in other words, regardless of what the facts about God are, "[...] none of these facts specify or determine any particular possible world to obtain or even any subset of possible worlds among the infinite array of such worlds" (Schmid 2022, 10).

To illustrate this problem Schmid appeals to some "well-nigh self-evident cases" that he considers "relevantly similar to the God of classical theism" (Schmid 2022, 20). Suppose that the temperature of a room can be any negative number between 0 and, say, 412.2, and suppose that, regardless of one's actions, intentions, desires, or mental states in general, none of them specify any value or subset of values among the infinite possible temperatures of the room; in that case, we could not say that one has "control" over the precise temperature of the room (Schmid 2022, 10). Or suppose one presses a button on a lottery machine and this causes the machine randomly to pick up a number; even if one was the cause of that number coming up, one would have no control over what number comes up, or over what precise effect is produced (Schmid 2022, 10). Or suppose that someone throws a ball but, posterior to the throwing, the ball could indeterministically go anywhere in the target; we would not talk about control in that case either (Schmid 2022, 15). The same would be true if God's act were identical in every possible world: God would be responsible for the existence of some creation, but not for which particular creation comes into being (Schmid 2022, 11).

In short, according to Schmid, embracing an indeterministic link between God and his effects “collapses God’s providential control over which precise creation obtains” (Schmid 2022, 2). Schmid formalizes the argument as follows:

13. If fixing all the facts about an agent and their act(s) is perfectly compatible with the obtaining of any possible effect of their act(s) among an arbitrarily large range of possible effects, then the agent is not in control over *which* effect of their act(s) obtains.
14. If DDS is true, then fixing all the facts about God and his act is perfectly compatible with the obtaining of any possible divine effect among an arbitrarily large range of possible divine effects.
15. So, if DDS is true, God is *not* in control over which divine effect obtains. (13, 14)
16. But since God is provident, God *is* in control over which divine effect obtains.
17. So, DDS is false. (15, 16) (Schmid 2022, 11, italics in original)

Schmid’s purpose in presenting this argument is to “[. . .] urge to develop workable classical-theist-friendly accounts of divine control on which the downstream indeterminism doesn’t collapse (and, indeed, doesn’t even diminish) God’s control over which effect obtains” (Schmid 2022, 20). This is precisely what I will attempt to do below, based on the Thomistic conception of providence and control. But first, I consider it important to analyze a different Thomistic response, proposed by Daniel Shields.

3. Contingent Relations: A Possible Solution?

Shields has offered a solution to the problem of providential collapse based on Aquinas’s metaphysics of relations. According to Shields, although classical theists in general, and Aquinas in particular, hold that there cannot be a plurality of truly distinct ontological items in God, they have no objection to admitting that there is a plurality of relations in Him (Shields 2024, 4–5). This is seen especially in the way Aquinas conceptualizes the doctrine of the Trinity, postulating that the divine persons are subsistent relations; according to this way of conceiving the Trinity, divine persons are relations internal to God himself, that constitute a principle of distinction not determined by the absolute characteristics of distinct *relata* (Shields 2024, 5). According to Shields, the compatibility between divine simplicity and the multiplicity of Trinitarian relations makes it possible to conceive of simplicity also being compatible with a multitude in God’s relations *ad extra*, namely, those relations by virtue of which God knows all possible creatures and wills to give actual existence to some of them (Shields 2024, 6). Under this assumption, there would be no problem in holding that God has contingent relations toward His creatures, relations that

determine “[. . .] whether God’s one, simple, and necessary act is an act of creating or not, and whether it is an act of creating this or of creating that” (Shields 2024, 6).

According to Shields, God’s relations to creatures are not, in the technical Thomistic sense of the term, “real” relations, but relations “of reason”, because they are not accidents that inhere in a substance, and because God does not depend in any way on the creatures with which He enters into relation (Shields 2024, 7). Nevertheless, they are not purely fictional relations, but are relations established by the reason of God himself—or, rather, by his will, understood as “rational appetite”—insofar as He contingently wills the creatures (Shields 2024, 7). These relations are neither accidents nor quasi-creatures situated between God and creatures; on the contrary, these relations are “[. . .] simply the way his non-composite essence relates to creatures. His essence is of such surpassing perfection that it is not restricted to relating to creatures in one way rather than another. He can determine himself how he is related to them” (Shields 2024, 7). Under these premises, God need not be different in himself to have different relations, but can relate in different ways to his possible creatures without compromising simplicity: “[. . .] relations of reason allow a simple, perfectly necessary God who is identical with his own act to exercise providential control over contingent creatures” (Shields 2024, 7).

Shields’ proposal is certainly suggestive. Moreover, if successful, it would end at the same time with both the problem of intentional collapse and the problem of providential collapse. One might even argue that it has more textual evidence in its favor in Aquinas’s texts than Shields himself provides.⁴ However, I have some doubts about whether this is the best way to approach the problem of providential collapse in particular. Mainly because this proposal seems to be contrary to what Tomaszewski calls the “modal indiscernibility thesis” (MIT). MIT is the idea that “if the doctrine of divine simplicity is true, then God in any possible world is really, intrinsically indiscernible from God in any other possible world” (Tomaszewski 2023, 238). To say that there are contingent relations in God established by His will implies that God establishes these relations of reason in some possible worlds and does not establish them in others; therefore, His will is not identical in every possible world with regard to these relations, which is contrary to MIT.

This conclusion is not avoided by saying, as Shields holds, that relations are not accidents or absolute ontological items in God, and so they are not intrinsic properties. As Shields himself admits, God’s contingent relations are different “ways” in which God’s will is determined with respect to certain possible

⁴ Consider, for instance, the following passages: “The divine will, which has necessity for itself, determines itself to what is willed, with which it has a not necessary relation [*habitudinem*].” (*ST* I q. 19 a. 2 ad 5); see also *SCG* I c. 79 n. 8 and *SCG* I c. 82 n. 12.

creatures. Moreover, since they are relations “of reason,” their only possible ground must be in God’s will (rational appetite) itself, and not in something extrinsic to it. Hence, the existence of these relations implies by itself an intrinsic determination in God’s will, because they imply the intentional and intrinsic direction of the will toward certain possible creatures in particular, instead of others. Being contingent relations, this intrinsic determination of God’s will obtains in some possible worlds and not in others. Therefore, the very existence of these relations implies that the divine will is not intrinsically identical in every possible world. But if, given DDS, the divine will is identical with God’s being, and the divine will is not intrinsically identical in every possible world, then MIT must be denied. And if DDS implies MIT, it must be denied as well.

Of course, one simply could deny that DDS implies MIT. MIT is a contested thesis within classical theism after all, and even some Thomists seem to deny it.⁵ But if one can find a different way to respond to the problem of providential collapse that doesn’t assume a controversial point among classical theists, such as denying MIT, then I think that response is to be preferred. I believe that some alternatives are open to classical theists and specifically to Thomists.

3. Providence, the Perfection of the Universe, and Randomness

In what follows, I will outline a three-step strategy to defend classical theism against Schmid’s argument of providential collapse. Since Schmid’s argument is built on the notions of providence and control, I think it is appropriate to respond to the argument by clarifying what these notions imply (and do not imply), according to Aquinas. The first step will be clarifying Aquinas’s definition of divine providence, and the relation it has with the order and perfection of the universe.

It is important to notice that, for Aquinas, the definition of providence does not refer mainly and more fundamentally to the “control” or “dominion” of God’s will over creation, but to the ordering of created things toward their end. For Aquinas, each creature is teleologically ordered towards its own end, according to its own nature (*ST* I q. 2 a. 3); also, all of them are ordered to each other (*ST* I q. 11 a. 3) and to the end of the whole universe (*SCG* III c. 17). Since creatures are effects of the creative action of God, who acts by His intellect, their natures pre-exist in God’s mind, such as the idea preexists of a work of art pre-exists in the artist’s mind (*ST* I q. 15 a. 2). Now, since the teleological order of creatures is also an effect of God’s creative action, this order must pre-exist in God himself as their first cause; and this is precisely what, for Aquinas, defines

⁵ See, for instance, Stump (2016, 206).

divine providence, namely, *the order of created things to the end, inasmuch as this order preexists in the mind of God*:

All the good that is in things has been created by God, as has been shown above. Now, in things we find goodness, not only as regards the substance of things, but also as regards the order of things to the end, and especially to the ultimate end, which is divine goodness, as has been seen above. Therefore, the goodness of the order existing in created things has been created by God. Now, since God is the cause of things by means of His intellect, and so it is fitting that the reason of any effect of His pre-exists in Him, as is evident from what has been said above, it is necessary that the reason of the order of things to the end pre-exists in the divine mind. Now, the reason of the ordering to the end is providence, properly speaking. (*ST I q. 22 a. 1 co.*)⁶

Although providence is attributed to God's intellect, it also "[...] presupposes the will of the end, for no one is concerned with what is to be done for the sake of the end unless he wills the end" (*ST I q. 22 a. 1 ad 1*). Providence is therefore a sort of "practical science," by which God's intellect orders what He wants to do. In order to understand this correctly, we must take into account that, according to Aquinas, since God is necessarily absolute and essential Goodness, there is only one thing that God wills necessarily and as "end," namely, His own Goodness (*ST I q. 19 a. 3 co.*; also *SCG I c. 80*); all created things are only willed by God as "ordered to an end," i.e., insofar as they participate in God's goodness (*ST I q. 19 a. 3*). But, since God's goodness obtains necessarily, with or without the existence of the participated goodness of creatures, to say that God has His own goodness as His end, is not to say that He seeks to obtain something that He does not already have, but rather, that by willing His own goodness, He communicates his likeness to others (*SCG I c. 75*). Hence, according to Aquinas, the proper effect of divine providence—that is, of the teleological order of things pre-existing in God's mind—is the communication of that likeness to other things:

[...] God by his providence orders all things to the divine goodness as their end: yet not in such a way that his goodness is increased by the things that come to be, but in such a way that the likeness of his goodness, as much as possible, is impressed on things. (*SCG III c. 97 n. 2*)

The end of the divine will, which is its own goodness, obtains in any case, and contains in itself the goodness of every possible creature. No creature or collection of creatures can represent the infinite goodness of God perfectly.

⁶ All translations of Aquinas's texts are my own.

Therefore, there are innumerable possible ways of impressing the likeness of divine goodness on things. Since in God's mind pre-exists not only the exemplar of the things actually created by Him and their teleological order, but also of other innumerable others He could create (*ST I q. 14 a. 9*),⁷ providence does not necessarily impose a particular order and a particular course of things on the world, but rather it could cause multiple and very diverse orders and courses of things. In Aquinas's own words:

It is evident that every reason of order which a wise man imposes on the things made by him is taken from the end. Therefore, when the end is proportioned to the things made by the end, the wisdom of the maker is limited to some determinate order. But divine goodness is an end that disproportionately exceeds the created things. Therefore, the divine wisdom is not determined to a certain order of things, so that a different course of things cannot flow from it. (*ST I q. 25 a. 5 co.*)

This does not mean, however, that from God's decision to create things distinct from Himself any order of things could follow randomly. While the end intended by God in creation does not impose *per se* a particular and completely determinate course of things, it nevertheless does provide a "reason" for divine providence to dispense goods in creation according to a certain general disposition. As Thomas Aquinas explains:

[. . .] since it is necessary that every created substance should decay from the perfection of the divine goodness, in order that the likeness of the divine goodness might be communicated more perfectly to things, it was convenient that there should be diversity in things, so that what cannot be perfectly represented by any, might be represented by diverse things in a diverse way in a more perfect way: [. . .]. Now, things are diversified by having diverse forms, from which they derive their species. Thus, the reason for the diversity of forms in things is taken from the end. Now, the reason for the order of things is taken from the diversity of forms. For since form is that by which a thing has being, and anything, insofar as it has being, has a likeness of God, who is His own simple being, it is necessary that the form be nothing other than the divine likeness participated in things. (*SCG III c. 97 n. 2–3*)

Since the goodness of God cannot be represented adequately by any particular creature or type of creature, the communication of God's goodness is the cause

⁷ It is important to point out in this respect that, given that God's mind necessarily contains not only the actual order of things, but the possible ones that are in accordance with His ends, Aquinas's definition of providence does not introduce any intrinsic contingent feature in God's mind, and thus it does not violate MIT.

of the diversity of kinds of being (or substantial “forms”) we find in creation. For Aquinas, the diverse kinds of being constitute diverse ontological degrees of perfection, and all of these degrees must exist in creation in order that the universe may have sufficient perfection to represent the divine goodness. For Aquinas, then, not any possible world can follow from God’s will but only a certain range of worlds that meet certain conditions set by God’s goals in creation. The perfection of the universe depends on it having certain degrees/kinds of being which constitute its “essential parts” (SCG I c. 86 n. 6):

[. . .] it belongs to providence to order things to the end. Now, after the divine goodness, which is the separate end of all things, the principal good in the existing things themselves is the perfection of the universe, which certainly would not exist if all the degrees of being were not found in things. Therefore, it belongs to divine providence to produce all the degrees of entities. (*ST* I q. 22 a. 4 co.)

Let us now consider how all these features of Aquinas’s conception of providence are relevant as a first step to deal with the problem of providential collapse. Let’s recall that, according to Schmid, in classical theism, none of the facts about God “[. . .] specify or determine any particular possible world to obtain or even any subset of possible worlds among the infinite array of such worlds”; so God would be responsible for the existence of some creation, but not for a particular creation coming into being. This idea is clearly expressed in the following premise of his argument:

14. If DDS is true, then fixing all the facts about God and his act is perfectly compatible with the obtaining of any possible divine effect among an arbitrarily large range of possible divine effects.

According to Aquinas’s conception of providence, as we have explained it, it seems that premise 14, as formulated, is plainly false. On this conception, divine providence is the order of created things to the end preexisting in God’s mind, which presupposes God’s will of the end. Therefore, “all the facts about God” would have to include:

- A) the act of will by which God wills the end, which is His own goodness.
- B) the order of created things to the end, pre-existing in the mind of God.

But from the fact that God wills His own goodness, and that the order to the good that we find in created things preexists in His mind, it does not follow that any world could come about randomly or arbitrarily. The range of worlds that God’s providence might bring about is determined by the end that God pursues,

which is His own goodness, and which provides the ground and reason for creating a world with a particular order or disposition, that which follows from the perfect communication of the likeness of His goodness; and this disposition requires the existence of the various kinds of beings and degrees of perfection that constitute the essential parts of the universe. So, whatever world God decides to create, it would not be in any case selected randomly, but according to the general disposition required by God's goodness, once all the facts about God are fixed.

This first step seems sufficient to challenge premise 14, at least as formulated by Schmid. Yet, the proponent of the problem of providential collapse might have legitimate reservations about this step as a sufficient response to the problem. As we have seen, according to Aquinas, divine wisdom is compatible with multiple orders of things and courses of events. It seems that the range of possible effects that could follow once all the facts about God are fixed, although selected through a non-random process, is still too wide to consider that God has providential control of it, if God does not determine *which* effect comes into being. So, even if the effect is not the result of a completely random process, it seems that it is still something that falls beyond God's intention. At most, this first step could be sufficient to deny that all the fixed facts about God don't determine "[...] any subset of possible worlds among the infinite array of such worlds" (Schmid 2022, 10). Consider, then, the following rephrasing of the argument of providential collapse:

- 13'. If fixing all the facts about an agent and their act(s) is perfectly compatible with the obtaining of any possible effect of their act(s) among a set of possible effects arranged according to the agent's ends, then the agent is not in control over *which* effect of their act(s) he obtains.
- 14'. If DDS is true, then fixing all the facts about God and his act is perfectly compatible with the obtaining of any possible divine effect among a set of possible effects arranged according to God's ends.
- 15. So, if DDS is true, God is *not* in control over which divine effect obtains. (13, 14)
- 16. But since God is provident, God *is* in control over which divine effect obtains.
- 17. So, DDS is false. (15, 16)

This rephrasing needs further moves on the part of the classical theist, if he wants to avoid providential collapse. Again, I think that one can find in Aquinas the resources to take two further steps in that direction.

4. Providence and the Contingency of Secondary Causes

One step could be to introduce a model of compatibility between divine providence and control that allows for secondary causes to determine different possible ways for God to achieve His ends in creation. This would imply denying that providential control requires a complete, detailed, or exhaustive control over which effects are produced in each and every case. Let's see how this can be done by appealing to Aquinas's conception of providence.

As we have seen, for Aquinas, divine providence requires that God create things in accordance with a certain order which determines that the different degrees of being that constitute the essential parts of the universe are actualized. Among the essential parts of the universe Aquinas includes that type of creatures which, because of their degree of being, can decay from the good in their action "[. . .] the perfection of the universe requires that there be some things that can decay from the good; [. . .]" (*ST I q. 48 a. 2*). A cause that can decay from its proper effect is what Aquinas calls an "impedible" or "contingent" cause (*ST I q. 19 a. 8 co.*). It is contingent in the sense that it is not determined to one alternative, but is open to opposite alternatives (*Expositio Perihermeneias*, 1 l. 14 n. 8). Hence, for Aquinas, supposing that God creates, it is guaranteed that there will be contingent causes, and so there will be a certain degree or level of contingency or randomness in creation.

Does this mean that divine providence has no control over what happens in the universe? By no means. For Aquinas, since God's providence is the order of created things towards their end, preexisting in God's mind, God's providence extends to everything that falls under God's causality, i.e., to every single and particular created thing, insofar as it participates in the being and in the goodness of God:

Since every agent acts for an end, so much extends the ordering of the effects to the end, as much as the causality of the first agent extends. From this, it follows that in the works of some agents something can occur that is not ordered to the end, because this effect arises from some other cause beyond the agent's intention. Now the causality of God, who is the first agent, extends to all beings, not only as regards the principles of the species, but also as regards the individual principles, not only of incorruptible things, but also of corruptible things. Therefore, it is necessary that all things that have being in some way, be ordered to the end by God, [. . .]. Therefore, since providence is nothing other than the reason for the order of things to the end, as has been said, it is necessary that all things, insofar as they participate in being, to that extent be subject to divine providence. (*ST I q. 22 a. 2 co.*)

Nevertheless, the fact that God has providential control over creation does not mean that he infallibly pre-determines every single thing that happens in creation. God has “control” insofar as nothing that happens in the world occurs *apart from* or *beyond* the intention of the divine will. For Aquinas, the occurrence of some particular events really depends on the concurrence or lack of concurrence of the secondary causes that are by nature impedible. But the very fact that there is a realm of secondary causes that act in a contingent manner does not escape God’s intention, but rather, it is in itself an effect of God’s providence:

God wills that some things happen necessarily, and some contingently, in order that there may be order in things, for the fullness of the universe. For this reason, for some effects he has ordained necessary causes, which cannot decay, from which effects necessarily proceed; on the other hand, for some he has ordained defectible contingent causes, from which effects proceed contingently. (*ST I* q. 19 a. 8 co.)

On Aquinas’s view, then, God infallibly wills to obtain certain fundamental goods in creation that reflect divine perfection; nevertheless, this does not exclude contingency in the “way” or “means” by which those goods are finally produced or obtained. In some cases, God wills the means or ways to His ends only conditionally. In other words, He wills some particular goods to exist if and only if the secondary causes don’t prevent or thwart them by not concurring with them. It is important to clarify that contingent secondary causes can thwart some effects that are conditionally willed by God, only insofar as they act not as efficient but rather as deficient causes (*De malo*, q. 1, a. 3), and not because they have some positive independent power that could impose itself over God’s will. Hence, the goods to which God directs the creature only conditionally fall under what Aquinas calls God’s “antecedent will.” Those goods that are effectively produced, taking into account the deficient non-cooperation of the creature, fall under God’s “consequent will”:

[. . .] that to which God has commanded the creature insofar as it depends on Him, is said to be willed by Him as of first intention, or antecedent will. But when the creature is prevented from attaining this end by virtue of its own defect, God nevertheless accomplishes in it that goodness of which it is capable; and this happens almost as by a second intention of His, and is called consequent will. (*De veritate*, q. 23 a. 2 co.)

When a creature impedes some particular good that God wishes to accomplish through her, the creature is subtracted from a certain order of fundamental goods intended by providence; nevertheless, it falls back on another order of fundamental goods, also intended by providence; hence, it is impossible for the

creature to completely subtract itself from every order of fundamental goods intended by divine providence:

[. . .] what seems to be subtracted from the divine will according to one order, falls into it according to another, just as the sinner, who, insofar as it depends on him, is subtracted from the divine will by sinning, falls into the order of the divine will, insofar as he is punished by its justice. (*ST I* q. 19 a. 6 co.)

In short, according to Aquinas, for God to have providential control over his creation, it is not necessary that he directly predetermines all its particular effects in detail, but it is sufficient that nothing happens *beyond* the intention of God's will. As Aquinas holds, the existence of a type of creature that acts contingently is part of God's intention, insofar as it helps to complete the degrees of perfection of the universe. Even if we were to consider questionable the hierarchical conception of degrees of perfection of the universe proposed by Thomas Aquinas, it would suffice to think that it is *possible* that God has reasons—of whatever kind—that determine that, whatever universe God creates, it will have a certain essential structure, and that this structure will include causes that act contingently. But the existence of contingent secondary causes need not be incompatible with the attainment, by one means or another, of the ultimate goods that God wills to be obtained in creation. It is possible to think that, in whatever world God creates, it will be guaranteed that God's fundamental intention will be fulfilled, even with a large margin of contingency in the means by which those ends are achieved. And the order to the end of what effectively happens in the world will, in any case, pre-exists in God's mind, whether things happen one way or the other. Whatever the case, He will "intend" and "know" everything that happens, so there will be providence. No good that is produced in creation, even the most contingent and particular, can fail to have its first cause and its ultimate reason in the mind and the will of God, in whom the perfection of the ordering to the good of all creatures, actual or possible, pre-exists. Hence, for Aquinas, fixing all the facts about God, which include God's goals in every possible creation, is perfectly compatible with the obtaining of a wide variety of possible effects deriving from the contingency of secondary causes, without losing *providential* control.

In this sense, a fundamental problem with Schmid's approach is that it seems to assume an unwarranted dilemma between "absolute control" and "absolute randomness": either God does not have complete deterministic providential control over his creation, or any creation can come about randomly. This dilemma seems to be implicitly assumed in the "well-nigh self-evident cases" provided by Schmid. However, it is easy to see how this dilemma could be avoided even in those same cases. Think of the case of the button that regulates

the room temperature. We could think that the proper effect and goal of the mechanism are not to set a particular degree, but to achieve the optimal temperature according to the weather conditions. These conditions may vary within a wide range, but the intention of the one who presses the button will be in all cases the same, and his objective will be obtained in all cases with the same action. Think of the case of the lottery. The machine could be designed so that a winning number is always obtained, within a wide range of possibilities. Finally, in the case of the throwing of the ball, a sufficiently powerful and wise agent might have the ability to hit the center of the bull's-eye every time, regardless of the path and number of bounces the ball makes in between. In all of these cases, the agent can be in control of the final result he or she intends, while at the same time allowing a wide range of possibilities for achieving it.

An alternative case will help us grasp intuitively the conception of providence and control I propose. Suppose there is a person whose sole purpose in life is to be the best tennis player possible. Suppose, further, that he is in possession of the desired end: he is indeed the best possible tennis player. He inherently has the ability to beat any player who comes along. Moreover, he has developed a single perfect move, that allows him to return to win every possible game point. Neither his ability to play nor his desire to be the best is increased in the least by whether he plays or not, or whether he plays with one player or another. Let us suppose that, freely and out of pure goodness, he decides to open himself to the possibility of someone challenging his status as the best player, signing up for a tournament of the highest competitiveness. He gains absolutely nothing by doing so, but by putting on a great show, he gives others the opportunity to play with him, to admire him, and to recognize his greatness by awarding him the title of champion. This tournament is not open to anyone, but only to players who meet certain conditions related to its purpose. If other people sign up for the tournament and play, he will beat everyone, one way or another, because he can return any ball with his super-move, come what may. There will be a lot of contingency in the process, because one player or another may sign up and may advance in the tournament in very different ways. The matches will have many particular contingent circumstances. But the result will always be the same: the player will advance to the final and win. Moreover, he has foreseen all possible scenarios and knows *a priori* that, no matter what happens, his end will be met. Whether other people sign up or not, he will still be the best and will have the title of champion. No one would say that in a situation like this, things happen completely at random, nor that the player has no "control" over what happens, even if he does not pre-determine the course of events in its details. Randomness and contingency, then, are not opposed *per se* to providential control, but, at most, to deterministic providential control.

5. Creation and Control

I think that the second step explained above is sufficient in itself to challenge the providential collapse argument as rephrased in the fourth section of this article, by denying premise 13', at least as far as strictly providential control is concerned. Nevertheless, this step also presents some obvious limitations. The most obvious and fundamental one concerns God's act of creation. Indeed, even if we were to admit that a certain level of contingency and randomness in the course of world's development is compatible with *providential* control—that is, God's control over the content or events that occur in the world, once it is assumed that He has decided to create one—, if God is the creator, He needs to have control over his act of *creation*. This means, as Schmid himself points out (2022, 9), that God needs to have control over whether He creates or not at all; and He also needs to be in control of the content of creation in terms of the kinds of entities—or even the particular individuals—that populate the universe, within the range of possibilities allowed by the communication of his goodness to creatures. This problem is obvious if we consider the case of the tennis player presented above: he is not the “creator” of the scenario he finally faces, because he doesn't choose whether to play or not, and with whom he will play. Therefore, even if this example could be regarded as “relevantly similar” to God's providence, it seems that it is not relevantly similar to God's act of creation.⁸

Even if this objection is sound, it should be noted that it no longer relates directly to the notion of providence. We are no more, therefore, faced with a *providential* collapse, but at most with a *creational* collapse. This is a relevant point, because, as we shall see, the concept of creation is precisely the key to dealing with the objection. Indeed, the third step that the classical theist can take to deal with this last objection is to reverse the burden of proof with regard to premise 13'. The proponent of the problem of providential (or, better, *creational*) collapse is the one who needs to justify that, if fixing all the facts about an agent and their act(s) is perfectly compatible with the obtaining of any possible effect of their

⁸ Another possible concern could come from classical theists, even Thomist ones, who find the picture of providence introduced above unsatisfactory. It could be objected that this account is sufficient to explain how providence works in terms of its *general* goals, but it is problematic as an account of *special* providence. Indeed, even if we grant that God's conditions the occurrence of some events to the cooperation of secondary causes, a classical notion of providence seems to require that God secures the occurrence of at least some contingent particular events that could have been otherwise (for instance, the Incarnation and the Redemption through the Passion of Christ in Christian theology). Even when I think that this is not an insurmountable objection, it is clear that the account of providence I introduced needs further development to deal with this problem. Therefore, as a solution to the problem of providential collapse, perhaps it could be subject to the same kind of concern that I pointed out in the case of Shields's proposal of contingent relations: it could be a controversial solution among classical theists.

act(s) among set of possible effects arranged according to the agent's ends, then the agent is not in control over which effect of their act(s) he obtains. This is in itself a very difficult claim to justify, and it is even more difficult to do so in the case of an agent like God, if He is to be understood as the creator.

To clarify this point, it is important to start discussing the notion of "control." Consider Schmid's definition. Recall that, for Schmid, the problem of providential control is not just a version of the luck objection to libertarian free will, because in the specific case of God's action, DDS implies downstream indeterminism over which effect obtains. In order to support this claim, Schmid uses a definition of control based on Levy (2011) and Coffman (2007), and summarized by Carusso (2018) as follows: "[A]n agent has *direct control* over an event if the agent is able (with high probability) to bring it about by intentionally performing a basic action and if the agent realizes that this is the case" (2022, 11). We can identify four elements in this definition: A) an intentional basic action on the part of the agent that causes an event; B) an effect or event produced in accordance with the agent's basic action; C) the agent's realization that that's the case (i.e., that the effect is produced in accordance with his basic action); D) a high probability that the effect produced is the one intended by the agent. Note that this definition seems to follow the lines of what is commonly known as "guidance control," according to which an agent is in control if he is able to recognize and respond to reasons for action.⁹

Now, I don't see how the first three elements of this definition of control, applied to God, could possibly be incompatible with DDS as presented by Aquinas. On the one hand, from Aquinas's perspective, God has a unique basic action (A), which is His own being and His willing His own goodness. On the other hand, in Aquinas's view, all created things depend radically on this basic action (B), and God realizes perfectly that this is the case (C). Also, God is able to recognize and respond to reasons for action—i.e., He has guidance control—because, in His case, His very goodness is the only possible reason why He could decide to do some things or others, or could have decided not to produce anything at all. Therefore, if once all the facts about God were fixed, the creation of the actual world followed, there would necessarily be a reason for it; if the creation of another world had followed, there would also necessarily have been a reason for it; and if the creation of no world had followed, there would also necessarily have been a reason for it. Whatever God may decide concerning His effects, we shall in any case find that there is a reason to produce them in

⁹ Significantly, it leaves aside any element of "regulative control," i.e., the power of the agent to act otherwise and/or produce different effects. On the notions of regulative and guidance control in the discussions about free will, see Fischer (1994, 132).

accordance with God's ends.¹⁰ Whatever results from God, a reason can always be given for it by appealing to God's goodness as the ultimate reason, even if it is not a "sufficient reason" or a "contrastive explanation" that necessarily excludes other alternatives.¹¹ God's decision to create, and to create something in particular, could never be a random or arbitrary decision, taken "without reason"; it is, in any case, a completely and utterly free and gratuitous decision.

However, the fourth element of Schmid's definition of control, namely the high probability of achieving the intended effect, still remains to be considered. This is, in fact, the element on which Schmid apparently bases the weight of his argument, stating that "[...] the classical theistic God cannot perform some action such that the action has a high probability of bringing about a precise effect" (2022, 11, footnote 14). However, I believe that this element of the definition of control relies on human intuitions about how created agents act, and cannot be applied to God. Indeed, if we assume that God is the creator, it is not just highly improbable, but simply impossible for Him to lose downstream control of His effects. But this, far from reinforcing Schmid's claim, goes against it, as we shall see.

To clarify this point let's analyze Aquinas's doctrine of God's intentional action and causality. For Aquinas, an effect can fall outside the control of an intentional agent only when that effect depends on more than one concurrent cause. Now, on Aquinas's view the proper and exclusive effect of God's action is the communication of the act of being (*ST I q. 45 a. 5*), through which God gives all the perfection that a creature has (*ST I 104, 1, ad 3*). God creates things *ex nihilo*, which means that creatures receive all their reality and every perfection they have from God, and are totally and radically dependent on Him (*ST I q. 45 a.1*). Therefore, no other concurring causality can prevent God's intentional causality from obtaining its effect in creating. Hence, since God is the universal first cause of the being of all things, the being of none of its effects can escape the control of His intentional causality, even though it may escape the control of some other particular secondary cause. As Aquinas explains:

[...] something can happen outside the order of some particular agent cause, but not outside the order of some universal cause, under which all particular

¹⁰ One could object to this line of reasoning by pointing to what Schmid says about the multiplicity of reasons in God: "[...] the existence of such a multiplicity of reasons would plausibly entail that there are positive ontological items intrinsic to but numerically distinct from God, [...]" (2022, 16). Against this, it should be said that "plausibly entail" is not a sufficient reason to dismiss Aquinas's well-known arguments about the compatibility between simplicity and multiplicity of ideas in God. See *ST I q. 15 a. 2 co.*; also Doolan (2023).

¹¹ For an account of how God's creation doesn't require a contrastive explanation, see O'Connor (2004); on the notion of contrastive explanation applied to free agents, see Clarke (1996).

causes are comprehended. For if any particular cause decays from its proper effect, this happens by virtue of some other particular cause that prevents it, which is contained under the order of the universal cause, so that it can in no way escape the order of the universal cause. [. . .] Therefore, since the will of God is the universal cause of all things, it is impossible for the will of God not to achieve its own effect. (*ST I* q. 19 a. 6 co.)

God's causality has complete control over his effects in creating, because being the first universal cause of every being, God's causality extends to everything that has its act of being participated from Him, and so no other cause can positively impede its result. In order for God's causality to fail to obtain its effect, there should be some concurrent efficient cause downstream to impede it, but this is not possible in the case of God's radical causality in being, i.e., His act of creation. Therefore, from Aquinas's perspective, it seems that even though once all the facts about God are fixed, it is possible for creation to come into existence or not, and it is possible for some kinds of entities and individuals or others to come into existence, none of these possibilities could escape God's control, because, by principle, none of these possibilities can depend on any other concurrent cause. Therefore, for an agent such as God, the probability of *not* bringing about a precise effect equals zero.

To deny God's control, then, one should justify the claim that "the classical theistic God cannot perform some action such that the action has *absolute certainty* of bringing about a precise effect." This could be done by denying Aquinas's notion of control, and by saying that an agent may not have control over an effect not because other causes intervene, but because his basic action and his reasons are not sufficiently or adequately directed toward that precise effect. This assumption (and not the proviso about probability *per se*) seems to be what is doing all the work in Schmid's argument. He states that, in the case of God's simple act, "[n]othing in the act, then, distinctively favors a precise effect over another, given that all possible worlds are equally open consequences of that one, simple act" (2022, 11, footnote 14). However, this statement presupposes without justification that God needs contrasting reasons to act. Besides that, it does not specify what conditions God's basic simple action would have to fulfill in order to be adequately directed toward favoring a precise effect. Presumably, making these conditions explicit would bring the discussion to the core of the argument of intentional collapse, and to a discussion of the scope of the claim that for God to be the causal explanation of his effects, his act of creating must have "[. . .] a character adequate to provide an intentional explanation for creation's obtaining" (Schmid 2022: 9). Taking the discussion into this territory would imply that, as Enric F. Gel has pointed out, the argument of providential collapse not only depends on the argument of intentional collapse, but also adds nothing

of substance to the latter.¹² This is not the place to discuss the problem of intentional collapse in detail. Here suffices to point out that there seem to be no obvious reason why the simple act of God's will, identical with his being, and intentionally directed toward the fullness of God's unparticipated goodness, could not fulfill all the conditions required to produce a precise effect without the need to add any contingent item aimed at one effect to the exclusion of others.¹³

In short, Schmid's definition of control fails to show that an agent such as God, who acts by communicating the act of being to creatures and acts by His only act of willing His own goodness, would not have control of His effects if all the facts about Him were fixed. Of course, the example of the tennis player is inadequate, but that's because any analogy taken from creatures to illustrate God's action will be inadequate as a matter of principle. There can be no example taken from creatures of an agent whose effects do not depend, to some extent, on external concurrent causes.¹⁴ The conception of control underlying Schmid's argument seems to presuppose, either the basic elements of the argument of intentional collapse, or that every effect of an intentional agent always depends on a multiplicity of concurrent causes. This second assumption seems to exclude *a priori* the possibility of God's creative causality, in which the whole reality of the effect depends entirely on a single intentional cause. If one wants to continue to raise the problem of providential (or, better, creational) collapse under such presuppositions—and without conflating it with the argument of intentional collapse—, one should go beyond the simple critique of classical theism and DDS, and object to the possibility of a creative *ex nihilo* causality on the part of God. But an objection of this kind seems to go beyond what Schmid expressly intends to do.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Aquinas's version of classical theism is immune to Schmid's problem of providential collapse. I showed that a solution to the problem based on God's relations, such as Shields's, has the disadvantage of introducing an intrinsic contingent direction in God's will towards a particular creation, thus denying MIT. Then I outlined a three-step defense of Aquinas's view, based on his conception of providence and control. The first step was to show that fixing all the facts about God is not compatible with the obtaining of

¹² See Gel (2025).

¹³ I have developed this argument in detail as a response to the problem of intentional collapse in my oral presentation cited above and in a forthcoming article.

¹⁴ But then, for the same reason, the cases provided by Schmid are also far from being "relevantly similar" to the case of the God of classical theism.

any possible divine effect among an arbitrarily large range of possible divine effects. The end that God intends, which is his own goodness, determines a certain order and disposition of the universe, which provides a principle of rationality to providence that considerably narrows the range of worlds that God could create. The second step was to show that an indeterministic conception of providence, in which God doesn't predetermine secondary causes but counts with their real contingency, is compatible with God's control over His fundamental goals in creation. The third step was to show that, according to Aquinas's conception of control, lack of control over one's own effects can only occur in causes that do not produce the totality of their effect; therefore, since God creates *ex nihilo*, no other downstream cause can impede Him from having control over His effects. Also, whatever follows from Him cannot fail to have its pre-existing ordering in God's mind and its ultimate reason in God's goodness, without needing contrastive reasons for creation.

Probably none of the arguments presented in this article will make the problem of providential collapse go away forever. My hope is that I have at least shown that, as it stands, this argument needs some refinement to take off. In any case, I would like to make two final remarks. First, the conclusions of this article, especially those in the last section, do not derive directly from DDS, but rather from a conception of God as the supreme Good, as the first creative cause, and as the ultimate source of all reality. This conception is, in principle, broader than that of classical theism. Therefore, any attempt to refine the argument of providential collapse—and maintain it as a distinct argument from the argument of intentional collapse—would probably have to broaden the target of its criticisms beyond classical theism as such.

Second, I would like to point out an unexpected result of this inquiry. In presenting his arguments of intentional and providential collapse, Schmid states that these are not meant "[. . .] to *knock down* classical theism, but to *serve* it" (Schmid 2022, 20), insofar as they help to further clarify its position. I think classical theists should be grateful for this service. Indeed, if the defense proposed in this paper is sound, then the collapse of the argument of providential collapse against DDS has itself a providential role for classical theism. Perhaps it serves to show that, surprisingly, classical theism is more at ease with an indeterministic conception of providence, such as the one introduced in this article, than with a deterministic one, for which there should be some sort of contingent mental state, act, or any other ontological item in God that pre-

determines in advance each and every single event in creation.¹⁵ But this idea requires further exploration that falls beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Interestingly, this conclusion may come as a surprise to some Thomists who believe that the only way to defend God's simplicity and aseity is to postulate the existence of infallible predetermining decrees of God's will, which could have been different if God had decided otherwise.

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