

The Meaning of Possibility

The determination of the meaning of possibility begins from the casual ~~an~~ conjunction of concepts. Hens cluck and frogs croak. But could hens croak and could frogs cluck? It is not the answers to these questions but their classification that concerns us. Croaking hens are negatively possible if there is no internal contradiction in the two concepts. Clucking frogs are positively possible if not merely contradiction is absent but positive coherence is present.

Still, the relevant positive coherence must be from an absolute viewpoint. The series of scientific hypotheses, each antiquated by its immediate successor, is a series of positive possibilities. For a hypothesis presents not merely an absence of contradiction but also an internal coherence. It is one thing to understand; it is another to understand rightly. Again, there is an internal coherence to the personal God of Jewish and Mohammedan belief; but in fact there are three persons in God, and there could not be fewer, for God is immutable. Hence one must sub-divide positive possibility ~~coherence~~ into abstract and concrete. Abstract possibility offers internal coherence from some finite viewpoint but not from an absolute viewpoint. Concrete possibility offers internal coherence from an absolute viewpoint.

See III 3 3

A further distinction must be drawn. ~~Nothing~~ Everything possible must be compatible with divine wisdom and goodness [I 25 5 lm]. But wisdom is the principle of order and integration; sapientis est ordinare; hence everything possible must also be ordered. Besides internal coherence, then, there is also the requirement of external coherence, that relates beings to a world order and world orders to their first cause and last end. Accordingly, concrete possibility must be sub-divided into partial and complete. Partial possibility exhibits internal coherence from an absolute view point but it does not include external coherence. Complete possibility exhibits both internal and external coherence, and it exhibits both from an absolute viewpoint.

There is a final distinction. A posse ad esse non valet illatio. But it is also true that there is no necessary inference from posse to futurum fuisse. The possibility of cooperation under merely sufficient grace is positive, concrete, and complete; but in no world order is there the conjunction of merely sufficient grace and actual cooperation. The possibility of non-cooperation under efficacious grace is again positive, concrete, and complete; but in no world order is there the conjunction of efficacious grace with actual non-cooperation. The posse exists for man remains free; but under the given conditions ~~the~~ actual cooperation or actual non-cooperation never occur. Hence complete possibility must be sub-divided into fruitful and unfruitful. Unfruitful possibility

admits the transition from objective to subjective potency; but in no world order does the further transition from subjective potency to act occur. On the other hand, fruitful possibility is the complete possibility/would be realized not merely as potency to act but as act.

that at least in some world order/

Certain observations are in order, and the first is that the divisions are cumulative. Positive possibility adds to negative; concrete adds to positive; complete adds to concrete; and fruitful adds to complete.

A second observation is logical. One can argue from the more inclusive to the less, but not from the less to the more. To prove fruitful possibility is to prove complete, concrete, and positive possibility. Inversely, to prove positive possibility is not to prove concrete possibility, and so forth.

A third observation introduces the distinction between notional and real possibility. The dividing line is the presence or absence of compatibility with divine wisdom. What is compatible with divine wisdom is really possible. What satisfies one of the defined meanings of possibility yet is incompatible with divine wisdom is a merely notional possibility. Hence, complete possibility, whether fruitful or unfruitful, is real possibility. On the other hand, ~~partial, abstract, negative, or merely positive,~~ negative, merely positive, abstract, merely concrete, and partial possibilities are notional.

In the fourth place it is to be noted that in discussions of possibility the principle of non-contradiction fulfils two distinct functions. The absence of contradiction between concepts gives only a notional possibility. On the other hand, there is to be established a general theorem that makes non-contradiction in an ontological context not merely a necessary but also a sufficient criterion of real and fruitful possibility. This twofold use of non-contradiction is one of the fundamental ambiguities in the general issue.

And behind this ambiguity is the impossibility of classifying it to something who confuse meaning and knowing

Finally, this account of the meaning of possibility is applied to the statement, "God could create intellectual beings without equipping them for the beatific vision or destining them to it." Clearly, it affirms a possibility. Abstractly it might be taken to mean a merely notional possibility, a real but unfruitful possibility, or a fruitful possibility. On the first meaning, grace would not be gratuitous. On the second meaning, grace would be gratuitous but there would be no implication of the possibility of some order containing intellectual beings and not containing grace. On the third meaning, grace would again be gratuitous and there would be affirmed the real possibility of a world order quite distinct from the present in which there were intellectual beings ~~not~~ of which received grace or was destined to glory.

this statement

It seems plain that the ~~meaning~~ of the relevant passage in the encyclical, Humani generis, was to affirm a real and fruitful possibility/ *none/ intention*

~~Absolute~~
Theorem on Possibility

The basic theorem on possibility is that anything is possible and nothing impossible.

The theorem is self-evident in a metaphysics worked out in terms of an accurate notion of being. Generally, however, it is more convincing to argue from divine omnipotence and, among theologians, it is more compelling to take as one's premise the article of the creed: "Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem."

Because God is omnipotent, he can do anything; therefore anything is possible and nothing impossible. As the ultimate premise admits neither qualification nor restriction, the conclusion must be unqualified and unrestricted. Unlimited power has a necessary correlative of unlimited possibility, and unconditioned power has a necessary correlative of unconditioned possibility. But God's power is unlimited and unconditioned; therefore, possibility is unlimited and unconditioned.

~~Still, possibility is not another God; its absence lack of limits or conditions cannot be a positive and real attribute of the same order as divine omnipotence. It remains that possibility is unlimited in the sense that outside possibility there is nothing.~~

Next, what is meant by denying limits and conditions to possibility? Obviously, possibility is not unlimited and unconditioned in the same sense as omnipotence is, for it is grounded upon omnipotence and is derived from it. The absence of limits to possibility is simply the fact that the impossible is nothing. The absence of conditions to possibility is simply the fact that the impossible supposes a condition, namely, self-contradiction, the contradiction of being, and that the absence of such contradiction suffices for possibility.

Hence, as St. Thomas wrote: "Quaecumque igitur contradictionem non implicant, sub illis possibilibus continguntur, respectu quorum Deus dicitur omnipotens. Ea vero quae contradictionem implicant, sub divina omnipotentia non continentur, quia non possunt habere possibilitatem rationem." I 25 3.

Complementary to the basic theorem is its application to the meanings of possibility.

Now the affirmation of divine omnipotence has as its correlative the absence of limits and conditions to fruitful possibility. When one affirms that God can do anything, one means that he can make it really actual. It follows, since any impossibility supposes contradiction of being, that unfruitful, partial, abstract, and negative possibility are grounded upon some contradiction. This implication should be verified.

without limits
AA
without conditions
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Complementary to the basic theorem is its application to the meanings of possibility.

Now, when one affirms divine omnipotence, one means that God can make anything not only real in ~~potency~~ potency but also real in act. Hence it is fruitful possibility that is without limits or conditions. It follows that types of possibility that fall short of fruitful possibility and in that respect are impossible must involve some contradiction. It further follows that these types arise inasmuch as they involve contradiction in some respect while in other respects they do not involve contradiction and so are named possible.

Thus, unfruitful possibility is unfruitful because it involves a contradiction of actuality though not of subjective potency. ~~Thus~~ It would be contradictory for grace to be merely sufficient yet cooperation to be actual, or for grace to be efficacious and non-cooperation actual. On the other hand, since grace does not destroy liberty, the possibility of both cooperation and non-cooperation is real.

Again, partial possibility is a possibility inasmuch as internally it is in accord with divine wisdom, and it is an impossibility inasmuch as externally it is not in accord with divine wisdom.

of a finite mind;/ Finally, merely negative and merely abstract possibility are possibilities in the notional order, but they are impossibilities in the real order because they are in conflict with the absolute viewpoint of divine wisdom.

~~It remains to be shown, at least in greater detail, that the affirmation of the basic theorem is not to be restricted by the requirements of divine goodness and divine wisdom.~~

~~First, then, there is no conflict between divine goodness and the affirmation that anything is possible. In other words there is no restriction of divine freedom to some optimum or to some minimum. The proof is that God necessarily wills his own absolute goodness, that ~~in-comparison-with-that-goodness~~ he necessarily intends any finite goodness because of absolute goodness, that any finite goodness falls infinitely short of its transcendent end, and so all finite goodness share in that respect a radical equality. Compared with absolute goodness they are essentially superfluous; and the essentially superfluous is ~~incomparably~~ incapable of setting any standard optimum or minimum standard~~

~~Now God necessarily wills his own absolute goodness. Necessarily he intends any finite end because of ~~his~~ absolute goodness. On the other hand, any being whatever is good by participation of divine goodness; and any being whatever is ~~a~~ by metaphysical necessity for the sake of ~~his~~ absolute goodness. But these requirements are met by any being~~

instances of/

finite being/
none/

Now, let us bear in mind that the divine will is immutable and efficacious; what God chooses, he chooses eternally; what he wills, cannot be undone. Then, on the supposition that God selects one world order and rejects all others, it follows that the selected order is necessary and that the rejected orders are impossible. Thus, from the antecedent situation in which anything is possible and contingent, no-thing is necessary, and nothing impossible, one passes to the consequent situation in which nothing is possible or contingent, one world order is necessary, and all the others are impossible.

Such is the basic Thomist division, and its characteristic is that it is thoroughly concrete. God is concrete. The total range of world orders that are ~~pa~~ antecedently possible are concrete. The empirical world order that is necessary ex suppositione is concrete. The hypothetical world orders that ex suppositione are impossible are concrete.

But there is quite another and more familiar meaning of necessity and contingency. It is Abstract. It is relative to the natures of finite beings, and ~~no-finite nature is~~ every finite nature is really distinct from its existence and its operations

But there is quite another and more familiar meaning of necessity and contingency. It is ~~the~~ not the necessity by which God must be. It is not the necessity by which everything God wills must be. It is an abstract necessity with a corresponding abstract contingency. It is affirmed absolutely but not concretely, for it is relative to the natures of things; ~~and-natures-are-not-the-whole-of-any-finite-being~~ and finite things are composite, for they include not only nature but also existence and not only potency but also operation (I 54 1-3). It is this abstract order of necessity and contingency that divine will transcends. For while it is true that any nature must have its inseparable properties and the satisfaction of its exigences, it is also true ~~that this requirement can be met in a vast variety of manners, and that merely meeting this requirement does not result in a concrete order.~~ and that any particular ~~man-~~ and concrete manner is contingent.

All/

both/ both/
or or

To put the point more systematically, the first of causes ~~is~~ is the end which moves the agent to select a nature in suitable matter. ~~But-the-end-of-it~~ But the ultimate end, which is absolute goodness, is not something to be produced. It transcends finite being utterly. It fixes no determinate order. Only finite ends demand determinate means in a determinate arrangement. But finite ends are an unrestricted "anything" for anything is possible and God is free. It is only relative to finite ends that ~~natures-are-selected-in-a-the-divine-artisan-selects-natures-in-world-orders~~ divine wisdom orders natures and essences that could exist and operations that could occur. Thus, ~~the intelligible structure of the universe depends upon the free choice of God no less than upon his wisdom.~~

The whole of the existing world order, then, is antecedently contingent and consequently necessary. Obviously it is in quite a different sense of necessity and contingency that one affirms some finite effects to be necessary and others contingent. Nor is it difficult to determine what that different sense is. For the necessity and contingency within world orders is abstract; it is relative to the natures of things; and no finite ~~being consists solely of nature, besides being of such a kind; it also exists; moreover, if it is material, its being consists solely of nature, besides essence; and necessarily the finite essence is distinct from its existence.~~

being consists solely of nature, for every finite nature is distinct both from its existence and its operations (I 54 1-3). It is this abstract necessity and this abstract contingency that is transcended by divine freedom

~~This exquisitely balanced position is a ground of integration~~

This exquisitely balanced position is not without its relevance to the problem of integration. For Aquinas the ~~the-existing-universe-was-a-matter-of-fact~~---To counter emanationism with divine freedom was to insist that the existing universe is simply a matter of fact. To counter voluntarism with divine wisdom was to insist that everything in the existing universe has its ~~intelligible-ground~~ explanation. The Thomist technique of assigning reasons for everything by making the right suppositions about the fact of divine free choice has its exact parallel in the later scientific technique of verifying hypotheses by appealing to matters of fact. For Aquinas the primordial fact was divine free choice; but in this life Aquinas did not inspect divine will; he inspected the universe and found that there were multiplicity and inequality, material and immaterial creatures, necessary and contingent causes, and he made it his aim to account for the order of the universe by working out the correct explanation of the facts. Finally, the correct explanation was ~~no more than~~ made no pretence to absolute necessity. It could not, for then one would be back with the emanationists who did pretend to deduce the order of the universe from an initial One or an initial Necessary Being. Clearly, a correct explanation that makes no claim except conformity with the facts is a ~~verified-hypothesis~~, the type of conclusion that later was named a verified hypothesis.

~~But if it is true that a universe that is produced by wisdom and freedom is to be known by hypothesis and verification, there is a basic harmony between Thomist theology and philosophy and, on the other hand, the method of empirical science. Still this harmony does not justify the relativist inference that, since the universe is to be known by hypothesis and verification and since verification never is complete, so the universe never is to be known in any Thomist thought grounds philosophy no less than scientific method. Everything in the universe is a product of wisdom and freedom: to that extent scientific method is correct. But among the beings are the in the universe are intellectual creatures, and they participate absolute being not merely by existing but also contingently but also by sharing in the divine proportion, to the totality of being. God is omnipotent; he can produce anything with the ratio artis. But there is also a participated omnipotence, the capacity of the intellect as potens paria facere et fieri. (CG III 112 §5). So intimate is this participation that any finite intellect must be a passive potency, for were it not passive it would be infinite I 79 2. It is because the light of our intellects is a created participation of uncreated light (I 84 5 c; 33 3 lm) that we are capable, not of an Augustinian vision, but of a rational utterance of the rationes aeternae.~~