

THE DIGNITY OF THE PERSON IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN PROVIDENCE

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Abstract. Thomas Aquinas understands providence as the reason of directing things to ends (*ratio ordinis rerum in finem*), and as the execution of that directing, i.e. governance (*gubernatio*). Thus, providence is one of the fundamental attributes of the person that reveals the person's perfection and dignity. Providence consists in a free and reasonable directing of oneself and the reality subject to oneself in order to actualize potentialities of oneself and of other beings in the context of the ultimate goal of existence. Human providence joins the providence of the Absolute with regard to the world. In spite of its deficiencies human providence reveals the essential dignity of the human person.

Experience of freedom

For human beings freedom is one of the most fundamental existential experiences. As Battista Mondin notices freedom is „the essential and primary constitutive component of the human person.¹ The importance of this attribute is now recognized as unchallenged, in contrast to the understanding of its content which ranges from strong indeterminism to strong determinism. These extreme views give an erroneous understanding of freedom, either by claiming that freedom may ignore reality (e.g. Sartre) or by denying freedom altogether (e.g. Marxism).

In the realist tradition starting with Aristotle and developed by St. Albert the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas it is stressed that freedom reveals itself

¹ B. Mondin, „Wolność jako istotny i pierwotny czynnik konstytutywny osoby ludzkiej” [„Freedom as the essential and primary constituent of the Human Person”], in: *Człowiek w kulturze* [„Man in Culture”], 9/1997, ed. Fundacja Lubelska Szkoła Filozofii Chrześcijańskiej, p. 79.

in those acts of decision named free will.² The subject or person, as a result of the deliberative cooperation of his/her spiritual powers – intellect and will – chooses a practical judgement that determines action. The content of this judgement refers on the one hand to a given good which is the object of free action, and on the other hand – to the way of achieving it. In the realist tradition this kind of decision used to be named „self-determination”, for by means of it the person determines the horizon of their own action with regard to the good-goal. In the phase of executing this decision the human being is intentionally (through intellect and will and by the power of the act of choice) united with the good, although as yet only at the point of striving for it. Through acts of decision human beings either advance towards or move away from the ultimate end of their existence. And at the same time they shape their humanity.

S. Kowalczyk, following J. Maritain, indicates a fundamental distinction between freedom as self-determination (freedom in the ontological sense) and freedom as self-autonomy (psycho-moral freedom).³ The former consists in the relative independence of the will from inner or outer constraints and in the possibility of choosing from among many alternatives. The latter in turn results from the personal choice to use freedom only for realizing the good, which is the effect of a long inner effort to act in accordance with one's own cognition. The human being shaped in this way by decisional acts is autonomous, i.e. independent from doing evil consciously and freely as well as from external influences. Freedom as autonomy is, then, assigned to people as a task, for this freedom constitutes the indispensable space for self-realization – a space of a normative character.

Since freedom is on the one hand given, and on the other hand – assigned to human beings, one may of course ask the question, what is the reason for this. The answer is given by indicating that human beings are persons who in the world actualize potentialities that they possess *qua* persons. In the case of action, the object through which the will determines and perfects itself is the good.⁴ The motive power behind actions undertaken by the subject or person is the need to unite with a desired good, which fulfills the desire-love directed to that object and perfects the person. Actions are directed

² See: M.A. Krapiec, „Natura ludzkiej wolności” [„The Nature of Human Freedom”], in: *Człowiek w kulturze* [„Man in Culture”], 9/1997, ed. Fundacja *Lubelska Szkoła Filozofii Chrześcijańskiej*, p. 26.

³ S. Kowalczyk, *Wolność naturą i prawem człowieka* [*Freedom – Man's Nature and his Right*], ed. Wydawnictwo Diecezjalne, Sandomierz 2000, p. 18.

⁴ The good is analogously understood as being itself when it becomes the motive for the occurrence of an action and at the same time the aim of that action.

towards some partial goods and intentionally – to the ultimate end of life. As the realization of the good both in the individual and social (common good) dimensions action is the real and dynamic way of fulfilling freedom. Through properly formed activity originating in freedom human beings are able to execute the providential care of themselves and the reality subject to them – or in short – to become providence.

The fact of human providence

Human providence is connected to two basic phenomena: care and predicting. The ability to predict a course of events and to grasp the future as future is a distinctive feature that differentiates human beings from the world of nature. Predicting is present in all human activities: cognition, action, art, and religion. Without it one can hardly imagine any organized human cognition, as cognition is quite often grounded in probabilistic reasoning applied to not yet existing but possibly occurring states of reality. Similarly, in art a certain intentional work of the artist is realized in matter by the application of some rules proper to the given domain of art. Here also it is difficult to imagine that no predicting takes place. Religion in turn aims by its very nature at the future union of the human person with the Absolute. However, as Aquinas rightly stresses, one can talk about providential predicting only in the practical sphere, i.e. in action. The task of providence is to predict – while taking into account the decision of the subject with regard to the content of action – both morally acceptable and efficient means to achieve the end of action. Considered under this aspect providence belongs to the scope of the cardinal virtue which is called prudence, for it has the same subject (practical reason), the same object (finding and applying means for a practical aim indicated by a person's theoretical reason), and the same goal (the good of the person). This is why St. Thomas considers providence as the most important part of prudence.⁵

Providence does not exhaust itself in predicting but it also includes care for the world of persons and of other beings. Human care embraces the whole of reality and includes all aspects of human existence. In comparison to beings belonging to the world of nature it has a much broader scope – both vertically and horizontally – and has first of all a conscious character. However, it cannot be real care if it is not accompanied by proportional

⁵ See: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 2-2, q. 49, a. 7, in: *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita*, v. 4-12, Roma 1888-1903.

prediction – if it does not look ahead. In providence we see, then, a peculiar fusion of practical predicting and personal care.⁶ The fact that providence includes care makes itself obvious when we notice that providence is not just passive predicting what means are suitable for a chosen aim. For its task is also to employ those means actively in order to achieve the good chosen in the act of decision and to do so in the context of the ultimate end of human life. Thus, providence cannot work without prudence and its particular parts which may generally be identified as the remembrance of the past and the understanding of the present.

It was St. Thomas who showed this double character of human providence: predicting and realizing predictions. According to Aquinas providence is the reason of things ordered towards their ends.⁷ In this explanation Thomas shows the structure of providence as a peculiar relation which at the point of departure obtains between a subject endowed with intellect and a goal to be achieved. For in the case of human providence, before a given action starts one must recognize reality (a concrete situation in which an action is to take place) and find the means which will lead to the achievement of a determined goal or good.⁸ Intellect is at that moment already disposed towards action, but in this initial phase of providence it makes a judgement concerning a certain object as a suitable and attainable aim.

The step, in providence, from the stage of cognition and planning to that of acting is made by the decision of the will which terminates the analyzing of possibilities and determines the one to be realized. In this moment the subject becomes a source of real causation, i.e. he starts a chain of events which are to bring about the desired end. Thomas shows that this consists in the subject's directing things to ends.⁹ In human care for the reality subject to persons there occurs a governance which should be analogously understood (*gubernatio*). It should be seen as the active execution of the virtue of provi-

⁶ The care here considered is seen as having a personal, dynamic, creative character. This sense is connected to the understanding of the human person as a potential being who cares for himself and the surrounding reality. Thus, this type of care is different from the Heideggerian one understood as the *Angst* before existential destruction which is manifested in the fact that humans are beings-towards-death (*Sein zum Tode*). See: M. Heidegger, *Bycie i czas* [Being and Time], ed. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2004.

⁷ See: STh, I, q. 22, art. 1, c. This sense includes both God's providence and human providence.

⁸ See: Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputate. De veritate*, q. 5, a. 1, c, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, in: *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita*, v. 22, Roma 1970-1976.

⁹ *Ibid.*, q. 5, a. 4, ad. 6.

dence (*executio ordinis*).¹⁰ Now, accepting Thomas' idea that providence is a part of the virtue of prudence, we may formulate the following definition: providence is the care – belonging to the cardinal virtue of prudence – for the world of persons and of the things subject to human rationality and freedom, and that care directs things to their ends in a way that is correct in predicting as well as morally acceptable and efficient in acting.

The above definition, because of the role which providence plays in the spiritual actualization of the subject, should still be supplemented by the following claim: providence constitutes one of the fundamental attributes of persons; it reveals the person's perfection and dignity and consists in the rational and free governance from within of oneself and of the reality subject to the person in order to actualize potentialities of oneself and others in the context of the ultimate goal of existence.

The above claim complements the definition formulated earlier, for it explicitly indicates the goal of acting as the way of personal self-fulfillment and stresses the ultimate dimension of providence. And providence is then seen as the essential attribute of the person who is capable not only of using things but also of governing life in a rational way. This is why we may consider providence as a dynamic way of the self-realization of the being of the person.

The horizontal and vertical dimensions of human providence

As the essential way through which people form themselves, human providence arises at once on a few planes which – mutually intertwined – constitute the person's active field of care. Generally speaking providence is to be realized in its horizontal and vertical dimensions.

The form of providence considered horizontally may be different according to its accepted scope; and then different properties, restrictions and postulates are revealed. The basic condition for realizing any kind of providence – individual or collective, directed to persons or things, total or partial, immediate or ultimate – is the remembrance of the past related to experience as well as the correct understanding of reality along the axis subject-object.

Taken in its individual dimension providence depends on the understanding of human freedom and the moral responsibility stemming from it.

¹⁰ See: STh. I, q. 22, a. 1, c. Cf. *Scriptum super sententiis magistri Petri Lombardi*, d. 39, q. 2, a. 1, ad. 1, ed. Lethielleux, v. 1-4, Paris 1929-1947.

The necessary condition for realizing providence, which the subject must fulfil, is the affirmation of the good of the beings embraced by providence and of their freedom if, of course, they possess it.¹¹ Taken in its social dimension the possibility of realizing one's own providence depends on the model of society: whether it is collectivistic, individualistic, or personalistic. In a collectivistic system, formed on the basis of any utopia which gives priority to the state over individuals (as happened in Plato, Marx, Comte), that aprioristic model of social life essentially restricts or even makes impossible the realization of self-providence seen as the way of realizing one's nature. The overaccentuation of individualism brings in turn the understanding of providence as the struggle of individual egoisms; thus considering freedom and efficiency the human being would have to abandon the realization of personal good in the context of social life (Hobbes). Only in the personalistic system may we expect a well balanced and integral realization of human providence, where family providence serves individual providence, and social providence serves the two (Thomas).

One more dimension should be mentioned. The broadest cultural-civilizational system creates a peculiar paradigm which determines the way of organizing the social life and within it the life of individual people. Koneczny calls this system „the method of social life”.¹² Providence fulfills itself in civilizations. Recognizing the plurality and cultural achievements of civilizations we should however remember that each of them determines a certain field for realizing individual providence. Those fields are not the same, for they differently specify the way and goal of human life. This is why – Koneczny claims – civilizations are antagonistic by nature.¹³ Following Koneczny we could claim that it is the Latin civilization (personalistic) which opens the greatest possibilities for realizing personal providence but any detailed argumentation for this claim goes beyond the topic of this paper.

Human providence seen as a fact reveals also the subject's autonomy with regard to the biological world. It does not however evade the providential activity of the First Being, first of all because of the existence and order of the first principles.¹⁴ Moreover, human cognition aims at fullness

¹¹ Both the world of persons and of things may be an object of providential care; however, the latter is an object of providence only because of its role in the life of persons.

¹² See: F. Koneczny, *O ład w historii* [*Order in History*], ed. Wydawnictwo Nortom, Wrocław 1999, pp. 8-9.

¹³ Koneczny claims that no person can be civilized in two or more ways. Cf. pp. 7-23.

¹⁴ What is at stake here is the recognition of the transcendental properties of beings – being as being, the thing, unity, individuality, truth, good, and beauty as well as the recog-

which begins in the worldly life of persons; and the same remark refers to the achieving of good by human beings. The beings which we encounter in this world do not fulfil our cognitive-appetitive ends. Religion shows that only the Absolute as Truth and Good can be the adequate object of human personal acts. And to Him as to the ultimate goal of life human beings direct their providence. In this context the Absolute not only justifies providence as the sufficient reason of the order of reality and of the relations obtaining in it, but He himself becomes the good and end towards which providential acting is directed. This ultimate perspective defends human providence against any attempts to give to the state power over it. For it shows that the ultimate end of providential care can only be the person and her good. Thus, even if providence works with respect to things it must always take into account the good of the person who is directed to the ultimate end. This in turn presupposes taking into account the ultimate order.

From the ontic perspective the Absolute's governance of the world has a priority (because of the First Being's perfection) over human providence and never misses the end. It follows that human providence participates – maintaining its autonomy – in the First Being's providence operating in the world. The latter does not make human providence unnecessary. On the contrary, it makes human providence necessary in the sense that this providence is inscribed into the order of governance that the Absolute executes over the world. It is so even if human activities take a degenerated form contrary to the virtues, or when one brings evil into the world because of one's errors.

The dignity of the human person

Human providence suffers from various shortcomings and deficiencies. Since it involves the cooperation of various powers of the soul (reason, will, and some lower ones), it exhibits also all the deficiencies of those powers, as well as deficiencies occurring because of some inept coordination between their activities. Deficiencies and shortcomings may occur in the phase of predicting, of planning, of deciding (the form a decision takes may be erroneous), and of executing a decision. The accumulation of deficiencies not seldom results in the fact that the employed means or causes, even in rather simple activities, miss the end. Reality itself gives us many

 nition that being is governed by the principle of identity, of non-contradiction, of excluded middle, of sufficient reasons, and of finality.

examples of obvious constraints which the realization of self-providence may encounter. Human beings are designed to live in society, for a long time no human being is able to survive and act by themselves, and even in adult life no one is fully self-sufficient. This shows evidently that the deficiencies of human providence follow from the ontic structure of human being. This is why, as Aquinas states, our predictions are restricted to only a few things, namely those concerning human affairs and what happens in human life.¹⁵ In spite of those various deficiencies it must however be stressed that there is no personal life without the realizing of providence. And usually there, where deficiencies in the realization of providence occur, the natural, and sometimes the legally regulated solidarity of providence also arises. If one being is unable to realize providence in a certain aspect, other beings or a society replace it.¹⁶

Providence in its practical dimension takes the form of the imperative that arises from the understanding of reality and becomes a peculiar appeal to act. It is not the appeal to act for the sake of activity itself or to engage unreasonably in some transformation of reality as contemporary culture often suggests. Providence is the realization of the imperative of perfecting oneself; it stems from human freedom and aims at achieving the subject's perfection and ultimately at achieving the ultimate goal of the subject's existence. And seen from another side providence is an active, dynamic and perfect – by the measure of the human subject – governance of reality.

In providence human beings manifest in a twofold way their similitude to God. First, through providential action they unite their acts of cognition and love thereby perfecting themselves to that fullness which can be achieved in this worldly life. Thereby they also manifest their perfection as subjects (which, of course, must be analogously understood taking into account all the differences between necessary and contingent beings). Secondly, human beings truly govern reality. Thus, thanks to providence they can consciously, actively and affirmatively join the governance of the world which the Absolute executes. The existence of deficiencies limits human providence which is such as the possibilities of the human person as to cognition and influencing the world permit. Yet, following Aquinas, we should stress that this fact does not lower the worth of human providence.

¹⁵ Cf. *De veritate*, q. 5, a. 8, c.

¹⁶ Any considerations concerning the problem of limits and conditions of such a replacement fall beyond the scope of this paper. However, it should be noticed that the possibility of replacement depends on many various factors: civilizational, cultural, moral, legal, and those factors work within society, nation, or state. Each of them brings its own determinations and from various sides reveals both tasks and ways of realizing providence.

For providence is linked to living as a person – and this life is its creative and driving force. Thus, regardless of the deficiencies that occur in human providence, the very ability to perform providential actions indicates the essential dignity of the human being, a dignity which belongs to the person and not to things.

Human activity finds its fullest measure in the situation of directing human personal acts to the Absolute. Providence indicates and realizes the necessary means to that ultimate end. This is also the way of realizing in practice one's own potentialities. This also allows us to see why providence becomes the place where all of the person's fundamental attributes are joined: cognition, freedom, and love, which raise the human person above the natural world, as well as the dignity, completeness and being subject to law that manifest the personal, and therefore more perfect, way of existence which the human being possesses in comparison to society, classically understood as the network of interpersonal relations.

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