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**POSSE DE POTENTIA ORDINATA/ ABSOLUTA DEI: A
PHILOSOPHICAL RECONSIDERATION**

These attributions first intrigued me — for all the wrong reasons — when I was reading 14th and 15th century texts. Like others, I came to note not only a specific, dialectical distinction, but an identifiable pattern of use: subsequently examining both in texts of what I judged to be a formative period for it — c.1215-1280 — under the name of the earlier medieval Power Distinction¹. On the basis of those texts (and others) I

¹ See chiefly *Divine Power: The medieval Power Distinction up to its adoption by Albert, Bonaventure and Aquinas*, Oxford U.Pr 1994, repr. 2001 (= DP1994).

To varying degrees, the present summary reconsiderations also draw on related studies. For convenience of readers who might wish to pursue points which cannot be argued for here, I list the most relevant. In intellectual history: «St Thomas Aquinas on divine power», in the Acta of the congress, *Tommaso d'Aquino nel suo VII centenario* (Rome-Naples 1974), vol. III, Naples 1977, 366-407; «Impossibility and Peter Damian», *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 62 (1980) 309-20; «Abelard's use of the *Timaeus*», *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 56 (ann.1989, pub.1990) 7-90; «Albert the Great, and some limits of scientific inquiry», in the Prof. K. Flasch *Festschrift*, B. MOJSISCH & O. PLUTA (eds.), Amsterdam 1991, vol. 2, 695-710; «Could Christ have been *simul iustus et peccator*? Kilwardby's answer», in D. BOILEAU & J. DICK (eds.), *Tradition and Renewal: Philosophical Essays Commemorating the Centennial of Louvain's Institute of Philosophy*, vol. 2, Louvain 1992, 143-54; «What is a negative theology? Albert's answer», in *Albertus Magnus. Zum Gedenken nach 800 Jahren: Neue Zugänge, Aspekte und Perspektiven*, W. SENNER et al (eds.), Akademie Verlag, [Berlin 2001], 605-18. In inquiry into conceptual or substantive questions: *Infinite God: The central issues addressed by existence-theism*, forthcoming; «Why can't God do everything?», in *New Blackfriars* 55 (1974) 555-62; «Word meaning», *Philosophy* 51 (1976) 195-207; «On dispensing with omnipotence», *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 65 (1989) 60-80; «Attributing things to God», *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 67 (1992) 86-117; «Omnipotence», in *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide to the Subject*, B. DAVIES (ed.), Cassell, [London 1998], pp. 80-85; «Theodicy and blissful

now offer a ideal type or working model of that, consisting of 1) a dialectical skeleton, 2) a core usable by theologian and secular philosopher alike, which puts metaphysical flesh on the skeleton, and a clothing of theological rhetoric, and 3) a pragmatic restriction of particular importance to Christian theologians using the core distinction.

1. In the dialectical skeleton you distinguish ways of considering things, ways expressed in contrasting *cum determinatione* assertions. In one of these ways we consider things as instantiated singulars, this pen, for example. In the other we consider them «absolutely», in their intrinsic content, prescinding from whether they are ever (to be) instantiated or not; as we might for the abstract form of being a pen, or more precisely for the integral forms which we might order in a logical construction to serve as an instantiable form of pen.

2. To put flesh on the skeleton, what things are we talking about here? And within what kind of metaphysical perspective? In my reading, the Schoolmen who developed and deployed the Power Distinction in its formative period worked regularly within an «open» metaphysics, in which

Something exists, and not everything that exists exists in some or other determinate manner.

This is not widely worked within today, on my side of the North Sea, at any rate. It is rarely even argued against. Most philosophers — or certainly most philosophers writing in English — seem to take unreflectingly for granted a «closed» metaphysics, in which

Something exists, and everything that exists exists in some or other determinate manner.

Some of the best are more reflected, and explicitly evangelise on behalf of a closed metaphysics, under the banner ‘No entity without identity’.

Within the «open» perspective you can have both determinate things, and something not in any way determinate, simply existent, strictly

freedom», *New Blackfriars* 80 (1999) 502-11; «The responsibility of theology for the question of God», in *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000) 2-15 [contains rival ‘maps’ of competing positions on God]; «Aquinas, and the number of divine persons», forthcoming in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 78 (2002) 490-96.

infinite. If you do have both, the only way in which determinate things can co-exist with something not in any way determinate is by being ultimately ordered non-necessarily towards it. If you are to be in no way determinate, after all, no co-existent logically can be said to get in your way, or in any way put up a boundary to you.

3. The things available to be considered in the two ways of considering things are the determinate things: if only something in at least some way determinate even lends itself to being an object of consideration².

Things in principle susceptible of being considered by the understanding are of two types: the determinate things of extra-mental reality, instantiated singulars; and the determinate objects of our actual, judging thoughts, «things» with *esse intentionale*, «existence in the mind», merely. Things of either of these types, however, may also be considered «absolutely», in their intrinsic content merely, and prescinding from whether they are ever (to be) instantiated or actually thought about. Considered «absolutely», as Avicennian essences³, they have no kind of determinate being, though they cannot but exist in the strictly infinite, if there is any: indistinct from it and from each other, though of course distinct from their instantiations⁴. This *consideratio absoluta*, an Avicennian notion, is central to explanations of the *de potentia absoluta* arm of the Power Distinction.

² At DP1994, 355 and elsewhere I have sometimes — like Avicenna — spoken of considering the abstract Avicennian essences of things as instantiated or not. There may be some short-term pedagogical advantages in this way of speaking, but to imagine these formal abstractions as though they were determinate entities susceptible of being considered in different ways, is just that: to imagine what cannot be, as in an Escher painting.

³ Cfr. A. DE LIBERA, «Théorie des universaux et réalisme logique chez Albert le Grand», *Rev. sc. ph. th.* 65(1981)55-77, 62, citing a passage from Albert's *Liber de praedicabilibus*, Bk 1, tr.2, ed. Bognet 1,24.

⁴ This can play a crucial part in certain theories of «predication» *secundum analogiam*, and in certain ways of obtaining surrogates for the essential predications which, in the case of something strictly infinite, cannot be had. Schoolmen who wished to provide a scientific theology of an even broadly Aristotelian type, consistently with maintaining a rigorously negative theology on the divine nature, sometimes exploited this.

4. Within the «open» metaphysical perspective, you can have an explicitly theological perspective, conditioned by it.

Within that theological perspective you identify God — object or due object or supposed object of worship — with the strictly infinite, and with nothing besides. You will then be entitled to affirm literally nothing you can understand of that infinite divine nature, and to draw no inferences from it⁵. If you are to have a putatively explanatory theology at all, a theology even broadly scientific, you will have to find some other way of grounding it: some other way of accounting for putatively explanatory terms such as ‘known by God’, ‘loved by God’, and for such putatively significant assertions as ‘God is wise’, and for that matter ‘God can save my family from the plague’.

Within this theological perspective, all that ultimately exists apart from God is the *ordinatio dei*, the created order, with creation understood as non-necessary ontological dependence on the strictly infinite, if there is any; or, in a warmer, more anthropomorphic rhetoric, willed by God.

In this rhetoric the two contrasting ways of considering things are a) concretely, as part of the *ordinatio dei*, and b) absolutely, in their intrinsic content, prescinding from whether they are (to be) part of any created order.

5. In principle — whether or not it is particularly likely nowadays — a secular philosopher could, by applying his natural capacities to the things of the natural world, come to a position of this kind, with or without the religious rhetoric. He could use this core distinction on its own to solve certain troublesome ranges of puzzle canvassed alike in modern philosophical theology and in the medieval schools.

Can a Christian theologian do likewise? Those theologians, at any rate, who developed and deployed a distinction of that sort typically and regularly used it not on its own, but only within a certain pattern of use. When (during the formative period of the distinction and its pattern of use) they used the *ordinata* arm, to say something of the form of ‘God cannot *de potentia ordinata sua* make there to be flying pigs, even though *de*

⁵ You are in effect starting where Hume concluded his *Dialogues*: having argued against his (principally Deistical) targets that the most that can be affirmed with truth on the divine nature «affords no Inference that affects human Life, or can be the Source of any Action or Forbearance» (*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Pt 12, J.V. PRICE (ed.), Oxford U.Pr. 1976, 260).

potentia absoluta sua he can', they certainly appeared to take it that they were bound as Christians to accept something over and above what was necessarily implied by the *ordinata* arm of the core distinction. To accept not only that the things of the actual *ordinatio dei*, like any thing worth the name, in any *ordinatio dei* worth the name, had to be ineluctably and punctiliously ordered so as ultimately to satisfy the providential plan; but to accept further that by God's will it was to be an order in no way ending in annihilation, or in some radical alteration to our detriment. 'God has sworn and will not repent', their Scriptures had assured them. For convenience, I call this the Immutable Decree doctrine.

6. Recognition of the Immutable Decree doctrine can be seen even in some of the earliest recorded uses, though even in relatively explicit uses from the latter part of the formative period it can rarely if ever be shown to be unambiguously there, except from the contexts. What is often ambiguous is the reference. When you read something like *manentibus decretis quae ipse constituit* (Geoffrey of Poitiers⁶) or «because the counsel and disposition of God cannot be changed in any respect» (Bonaventure⁷), is the reference to no more than the punctiliousness of execution which is required in any order willed by an infinite God, including the actual order; is it rather to the additional note of finality, irreplaceability, inamissibility, apparently required by the Immutable Decree doctrine; or is it to both, in the same formula? Even the context does not always resolve the ambiguity.

7. What difference does acceptance of the Immutable Decree doctrine make, and does it matter whether it is expressed in some pragmatic rule, rather than being built into the semantics of the *ordinata* arm of the core distinction, which might initially seem equally possible? For that matter, what would such a rule have to embody? Something like the following, perhaps:

⁶ For Geoffrey, see: Item quaeritur: U. potuerit dare omnium potentiam. ...Dico, quod de potestate absoluta potuit ei dare, ...Sed non potuit de potentia conditionali, scil. manentibus decretis quae ipse constituit. (Cit. A. LANDGRAF, *Dogmengeschichte* II/2, Ratisbon 1954, 103n., from MS Avranches, Bibl. de la ville, Cod. lat. 121, fo.137).

⁷ For Bonaventure see DP1994, 205, citing Bonaventure *In 2 Sent* d.7, Quaracchi edn 2,177a.

When your proposition is about (is true or false of) something considered concretely, as instantiated or not in extra-mental reality; then in the case where the referent is being said to be in fact instantiated you may not draw any inference implying the possibility of the supposed truthmaker's ultimate inexistence (when being considered concretely), and in the case where the supposed truthmaker is being said to be in fact not instantiated, you may not draw any inference implying the possibility of the supposed truthmaker's existence (when being considered concretely)⁸.

There is no room for the Immutable Decree doctrine in the descriptive element of the *ordinata* arm, if what it involves is what there determinately is in extra-mental reality. The doctrine adds nothing to the descriptive content, even in the way that Revealed doctrines on angels, say, or certain modes of Eucharistic presence might.

There is good reason not to accommodate it in the non-descriptive, 'willed-by-God' element, which rests on a range of tendentious but in principle arguable ways of viewing what there determinately is as related in non-necessary ontological dependency on the strictly infinite, supposing there is any. Even though tendentious, these ways can at least be argued for, as by a secular philosopher using his natural capacities on the natural features of determinate things. But none of these arguable ways of viewing things implies in addition that what there is is in addition unique and inamissible, as the Immutable Decree doctrine would seem to require.

What that doctrine gives us is a further tendentious way of viewing things which — unlike the others mentioned — is not even in principle obtainable from using our best natural powers on the most favourable «take» of the natural features of the actual order of things. It is a way of viewing things which, if grounded at all, has to be grounded literally super-naturally.

8. Does it make a difference, whether you use the core distinction on its own, or only under some pragmatic rule intended to capture what the Immutable Decree doctrine requires? A difference, if not to the range of outside possibilities, then at any rate to what we can prudently hope or fear?

You might argue that it does, along these lines. So far as a secular philosopher can know, our order of things could be run punctiliously, in

⁸ This in effect instructs the theologian to treat facts of a certain range as if they were necessities, and their absences as impossibilities: without necessarily implying that the facts in question are necessities, or their absences impossibilities.

precisely the manner due to an order willed by God, up to a certain point; and then annihilated, or supplanted by a mode of ordering greatly to our detriment. Such two-stage orderings could well be ordered uniquely by a strictly infinite God, could thus well fall within the range of what is, considered absolutely, possible to be willed by God. Not everything that is descriptively good — a virulent cancer, perhaps, or a powerful volcano, or a providence which seems kindly towards us only so far and no further — is necessarily going to seem good for us. There need be nothing contrary to descriptive goodness, in a disposition in which humans may live rather like the chicken who is fed punctiliously, lovingly even, until the day the farmer goes out and wrings its neck.

By contrast — you might continue to argue — Christian theologians, arguing under such a restriction as that mentioned, may acknowledge that, absolutely considered, a two-stage ordering in which the second stage is the annihilation of ours, or its alteration into something greatly to our detriment, is possible:

It is one thing to change one's will, another to will a change in things. For someone, with the same will immovably persisting, can will now that this should be done, and later the contrary (Aquinas, ST 1/19/7c, and cfr. DP 1994, 353-54).

So whereas any volitum of an infinite God's has to be immutable, for the sense in which a will «would be being changed if someone were to begin to will what formerly he did not will, or were to leave off willing what he had been willing» (Aquinas, same ref.), not just any volitum of his has to be free of an immutable will for first something and then the contrary. So if the Immutable Decree doctrine is telling us that nevertheless God has chosen that the actual order should not in fact be of the two-stage kind, he is still not telling us anything about its descriptive content, but something of his will for it — something of how it should be seen to stand in relation to his will — which we could not have obtained either from knowledge of the natural features of the actual order, or from knowledge of how *ordinationes dei* as such have to be understood to stand in relation to God.

9. What of the secular philosopher, if he does not have that assurance and need not be supposed to have to take it into account?

If he is using ordinarily prudent dialectical rules, he is not going to conclude 'God can make flying pigs', without restriction, unless he can affirm it in both option-neutral and option-tied power. He is not going to

assert ‘God cannot make flying pigs’, without restriction, where he does not have to deny it in both option-tied and option-neutral power.

Instead of considering the possibility of flying pigs, let us now consider the abstract possibility that humans might be in the position of the chicken on the day before the farmer wrings its neck. Like anything else absolutely considered, such a possible order of things is not accessible to us, save through the unknowable divine nature, in which all things absolutely possible exist, but unrestrictedly, and hence beyond the grasp of our understanding. If such an order were to be instantiated by God, we could not fix any references in it for our suppositions, and could not be entitled to draw any inferences about how things might or might not be, or might or might not be arranged in consequence, within such an envisaged order⁹. In particular, we could not justly assert anything about what things might or might not be possible in that option-tied power of God’s which we might imagine to be had in such an order of things, were God to decree one. We could have nothing in the way of an assertion of option-tied power possibilities, on the strength of such a piece of imagination, to conjoin with the option-neutral assertion we could justify, so as to go on to conclude without restriction, that God cannot do it; and to conclude further, that it was neither to be hoped nor feared. If, in addition, no description however complete, of our actual order of things up to now, can justify us in asserting that God cannot in option-tied power, in its ordinary sense of being tied to execution in the actual order of things, be bringing about a two-stage order in which humans may be in the position of the chicken on its second-last morning, we have no way of obtaining an option-tied assertion of the kind needed to conjoin with the option-neutral assertion we may be able to justify, so as to conclude, without restriction, that God cannot bring it about, and that it need be neither hoped nor feared. The secular philosopher, as such, can neither justify such hopes or fears, nor exclude them. If the theologian can justify them, it is on literally supernatural grounds.

10. Peeling the layers apart — skeleton, core, theologians’ restriction — provides an ideal type or model of a use of the distinction, and can show up the peculiarities of real users from their texts.

⁹ It seems to me that on account of this attributions *de potentia absoluta dei* should be seen to diverge crucially from either widely current ways of invoking «possible worlds» or even the predications *secundum imaginationem* sometimes used by natural philosophers in later medieval times.

In particular, it can make it less difficult to see just what someone objecting to another's use, is objecting to. You might, for example, object if you think all non-collapsably modal discourse rests on confusion¹⁰. or is needed only in matters where your intentions cannot be scientifically honourable. You might be objecting to *consideratio absoluta* in particular, on the grounds that it presupposes the move of formal abstraction, which in turn presupposes the notion of specific identity, which in its turn does not have a place save in a logic of second or higher order.

You might be objecting because you believe that everything which exists exists in some or other determinate manner, or because your philosophy of language from the outset does not permit any of the modes of reference or modes of expression even which the very expression of an «open» metaphysics might require.

All of these concern the core distinction, no matter how it is used. And although some of them should be seen to underlie at least some of the conflicts apparent between medieval users of the distinction, I merely note them today.

11. Two quite different objections can be in place, even where you have no objections in principle on any of the grounds just listed.

One might arise if you were to try to include, within the semantics of the *ordinata* arm of the core distinction, both the willed-by-God note characteristic of any order recognisable as willed by God, and the very different willed-by-God implication of the Immutable Decree doctrine.

To include both, in the same formulas even, is tempting: the logical difficulties they make for, if not guarded against, are essentially the same. Crudely, either can arise because anything actually willed by God is the case and in some way has to be the case, and cannot without absurdity be said to be even possible not to have been the case, unless of course you have been able to make clear that you are claiming the possibility only of something considered absolutely.

But the grounds on which the difficulties arise are importantly different. The willed-by-God characteristic of divine orders generally,

¹⁰ E.g., between \sim as a sentence-forming operator on sentences and 'materially implies' as a 2-place predicate. In $\sim(p \rightarrow q)$ the arguments are being used, in "p" materially implies "q" the predicate holds between mentions. See further W.V.O. QUINE, *Word and Object* [M.I.T., 1960] 195-200.

comes into play when, and because of, what the user of the distinction believes to be the case. Whether this is when a secular philosopher believes, for appropriate reasons, that grunting pigs are among the furniture of the world, or when a theologian believes that his Revealed sources require him to believe that angels or certain modes of Eucharistic presence are, it comes into play in essentially the same way. If you experience a difficulty, it is crucially on account of what you believe to be the case about the furniture of the world.

When the Immutable Decree doctrine comes into play, it is not from what you believe about the furniture of the world, but from a way of viewing that furniture which cannot even in principle be obtained from knowing all you could know about its descriptive characteristics. This does make room for possibly genuine charges of Pelagianism, in connexion with uses of the Power Distinction: though probably a lot less room than Bradwardine and some historians in the last century used to think.

But it can also open up wider possibilities, and may have done so historically. Once you emphasise the super-natural standing-point in such ways, you risk shifting theological disputation away from descriptive issues and philosophically arguable non-descriptive ones, towards hard swearing on interpretations of what is supposedly revealed. Away from metaphysical issues, towards emphasis on epistemological and even psychological ones; away from concern with truth and consequence, towards concern for certitude, assurance, certification of assurance... . Away from faith as submission to the economy of the Word, propositionally spelt out, towards faith as trust. But today it is enough if the reconsiderations offered have clarified both core and pattern of use, so that readers of texts in which the attributions *de potentia ordinata/absoluta dei* are being made, when examining those texts in their contexts, may be more explicitly aware of the diverse intentions and sources of conflict in principle and at least sometimes to be discovered in such texts, both in later medieval and in early modern writings.

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