SIGER OF BRABANT AND THOMAS AQUINAS ON DIVINE POWER AND THE SEPARABILITY OF ACCIDENTS

I wish to examine an excerpt from Siger of Brabant’s *Quaestiones on the Book of causes* that has already received considerable attention on the part of scholars.¹ The text is remarkable for its criticism of Aquinas’s doctrine that God can conserve an accident independently from the substance in which it naturally inheres, as he does in the case of the Eucharist. While Siger is careful not to question the validity and indeed the absolute certainty of the Eucharist as a theological truth, he is critical about the claim that God’s being able to make accidents subsist independently from substance can be demonstrated or shown to be true by relying solely on the use of natural reason: “Some people argue fallaciously believing that they can show and demonstrate by natural reason that the first cause can make it (come to pass) that the accident can exist without the subject of that accident.”²

To understand Siger’s skepticism on this issue we must turn to his *Questions on Aristotle’s Metaphysics* where he lists six differences between theology and philosophy, the first four of which only need concern us here. The first difference concerns the methodologies, or “modes of consideration” as Siger puts it, between the two sciences. Whereas theology proceeds from principles known by divine revelation, which it applies to the conclusions of other sciences, philosophy proceeds demonstratively (*modo demonstrativo*), from principles that are known by

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² *QsLdC*, 41,54–56.
sense, memory, experience and the natural light of reason. The second difference has to do with the domain of investigation of both sciences. Philosophy is limited to objects known only through creatures, whereas theology “extends its consideration” to all objects, whether natural or supernatural, known through divine revelation. This leads to a third difference, namely that theology is a more universal science than philosophy. Finally, theology is a more certain science than philosophy. The reason for this is that the principles on which philosophy is based are fallible, whereas divine revelation on which theology is based is wholly free of error.

From the fact that theology is more certain than philosophy it follows that when a conclusion derived from premises known through the senses, memory, experience or the natural light of reason conflicts with a conclusion derived from revelation, the philosophical conclusion must yield to the theological one. It does not follow however that the theological conclusion, though true, can be demonstrated to be true, for principles of demonstration, according to Siger, must be known through the senses, memory, experience or reason. Thus, just as it would be presumptuous for the philosopher to claim to be able to make statements that were absolutely certain or universally true, so too it would be methodologically unacceptable for the theologian to assume that conclusions derived from theological premises could count as philosophically demonstrated. Such, in fact, is the tenor of Siger’s objection against Aquinas: Although Thomas, in certain passages at any rate, seems to want to provide a philosophical proof or justification of separability by invoking the authority of the Book of causes, his argument turns on the theological thesis that God can do immediately (immediate), i.e., without secondary causes, everything that is done through natural causes. Siger suggests in quaestio 2 that this

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thesis is inconsistent with the doctrine of divine causation advocated by the philosophers, and in particular by the author of the *Liber de causis*.

1. Analysis of Siger, Liber de causis

Quaestio 2 of Siger’s *Quaestiones* on the *Liber de causis* asks “whether a primary cause can naturally produce the effect of the secondary cause without the secondary cause.” Now, Siger has just shown in the first *quaestio* that contrary to appearances the first cause is a more perfect and eminent cause of the effect than is the secondary cause. So there would seem to be a good argument for answering the question in the affirmative. In fact, however, Siger’s answer will be that the first cause cannot act without the secondary cause.

First of all, citing Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, Siger holds that the philosophical evidence points against immediate causation by the first cause. In the *Physics* we find the argument that if a mover is unmoved and eternal, then what it moves must be subject to only one type of eternal motion; but given that things in the sublunar world change in various ways, there must be another mover besides the unmoved mover that accounts for their motion but that is itself moved by the unmoved mover.

Siger also mentions that one consequence that follows from the thesis of immediate divine causation is that a man could be generated from the stars and matter. But this possibility, he points out, has been refuted by Averroes in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics*.

Averroes figures prominently in Siger’s *solutio* as well. Using the latter’s commentary on the *Metaphysics*, Siger starts out by recalling the position of certain *Kalām* theologians according to whom all natural phenomena are immediately (*immediate*) caused by God. This is an absurd position according to Siger, as indeed to all scholastics. One of the arguments Siger uses to refute

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6 Ibid., 39.10–40.17.
7 Ibid., 40.21–24.
their view is taken directly from Averroes. According to this argument, things’ operations are reflective of their powers which in turn express their essences; to deny that things have proper operations would be to deprive them of their powers and essences. Another argument is that the existence of caused beings would be pointless (frustra) if they were robbed of their operations. This time, the argument is not taken from Averroes but is lifted, as it were, straight from Thomas’s *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 105. The interesting thing, however, is that Siger and Aquinas do not draw the same conclusion from the argument.

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<tr>
<th>Siger</th>
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<td>And thus it must be said that a primary cause cannot produce the effect of the secondary cause without the secondary cause.</td>
<td>Hence one must understand that God operates in things, in such a way however that things have their own operations.</td>
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Thomas’s conclusion is that God’s action does not exclude that of the secondary cause, that is, that both can act concurrently, and in fact do so act (without this detracting from the second cause’s efficacy). Siger, by contrast, contends that God cannot act without the secondary cause, that is that God and creature must act concurrently if the effect is to ensue.  

It is crucial here to be clear about what kinds of causes both authors have in mind and to remember that Aquinas, who is no more charitable in his assessment of the Muttakallimūn’s theory than Siger, is just as keen as Siger to avoid robbing creatures of their ability to cause effects. Let us first look at Thomas.

2. Aquinas on concurrence in ST I 105

The above quotation from Aquinas is taken from an article that asks if God operates in every operating thing (in omni operante). Thomas answers in the affirmative. In the solution of the article, he explains that God is operative as a first cause in every created cause according to three sorts of causes: final, agent and formal—God is obviously not a material cause. Thus, every agent acts toward some real or apparent end; but every good is such by participation in God’s goodness; God is therefore first as a final cause. God is also the first efficient cause given that in every series of ordered causes the lower cause acts in virtue of the higher cause. As the first efficient cause God sets things in motion, or, as Thomas puts it, “applies the forms and powers of things to their operation.” Finally, God also creates the forms by which agents act and

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12 “Sic igitur intelligendum est Deum operari in rebus, quod tamen ipsae res propriae habeant operationem.” Thomas Aquinas, ST Ia, q. 105, a. 5, resp. (631a23–25)
13 The same claim is made in the anonymous <Quaestiones super primum librum Physicorum>, ed. A. Zimmermann, in Ein Kommentar zur Physik des Aristoteles aus der pariser Artistenfakultät um 1273 (Berlin : Walter de Gruyter, 1968), 25.13–15: “Non oportet autem, si deus potest facere aliquem effectum mediante eius causa, causa aliqua, quae est illius forma vel materia, quod possit illum effectum facere per se.”
14 My purpose here is not to provide an account of Thomas’s doctrine but merely to bring out a very basic difference between his position and that of Siger, without going into the mechanics of the doctrine. For this purpose a cursory examination of ST I 105, art 5 is both sufficient—the relevant ideas are there—and desirable insofar as this is the very question Siger quotes in his commentary on proposition 1 of the De causis. For a recent account of Thomas’s doctrine of divine concurrence and how it stands with respect to other traditional accounts regarding the interplay between divine and created causalities, see Alfred J. Freddoso, “God’s general concurrence with Secondary causes: pitfalls and prospects” American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly 67 (1994): 131-156.
15 As we will see shortly, Siger’s discussion in quaestio 1 (QsLdC, 37.52–38.76) relies heavily on this passage.
maintains those forms in existence. So God exercises a very profound—"intimate" is Thomas’s word—causal influence on creatures, acting as it were from within.

How far does God’s agency extend? Is it so intimate as to be sufficient for bringing the cause about? Astonishingly, Thomas’s answer to this question is yes. God and creature are both sufficient (sufficienter) causes or, as Thomas had expressed the same point in earlier works, both are immediate causes of their effects.\(^\text{16}\) The answer is astonishing because it would seem to entail that the created cause is superfluous, as it would seem impossible that there be two concurrently acting sufficient causes of the same effect.\(^\text{17}\) In fact, one of the objections in the article makes this very point. Thomas, however, thinks he can both say that God is the first cause and that creatures are the proper causes of their operations. His trick, as it were, is to distinguish between orders of causality. There cannot be two sufficient causes of the same effect simultaneously acting within the same order, but two hierarchically ordered causes can simultaneously bring about the same effect.

God operates in us sufficiently in the manner of a first agent, but this does not entail that the operations of the secondary agents are superfluous.\(^\text{18}\)

3. Siger on concurrence

Now, whereas Thomas wants to say that the created cause can act with God, Siger wants to stress that both causes must act together. In quaestio 1, in a passage that relies heavily on \textit{ST}, I, q. 105, Siger distinguishes three ways in which the causal efficacy of the secondary cause can be dependent upon a primary cause, or as he puts it, “three ways in which a secondary cause can owe it to a primary cause to be the cause of its effect.”\(^\text{19}\) One way is that the primary cause is the end for which the secondary cause acts. Another way is when the secondary cause gets its form

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\(^{16}\) See \textit{ST}, Ia, q. 105, a. 5, ad 1. See also \textit{Scriptum super librum Sent.}, II, d. 1, q. 1, a. 4 co. and \textit{De pot.}, q. 3, a. 7, co.  
\(^{17}\) \textit{ST} Ia, q. 105, a. 5, arg. 1 & 2.  
\(^{18}\) "Dicendum quod Deus sufficienter operatur in nobis ad modum primi agentis, nec propter hoc superfluit operatio secundorum agentium." \textit{ST} Ia, q. 105, a. 5, ad 1m (631b28–31).  
\(^{19}\) Siger, \textit{QsLdC}, 37.52–53.
or principle of action from a primary cause. A third and final way is when a thing is applied to a particular action by the primary cause, though the primary cause did not give it the form by which it acts. Now, as Siger then explains in *quaestio* 2, it is clear that a primary cause cannot do without the secondary cause in cases where “the secondary cause does not get the form which is the principle of operation from the primary cause but only receives the “application” to the operation.”

Thus the Intelligence of a given celestial sphere is a primary cause with respect to that sphere because it applies it to act on the sublunar world although it does not produce the form by which it acts. What about the case where the secondary cause gets not only its application to action but also its form or principle of operation from the primary cause? Would one not want to say that the a primary cause possesses all the causal efficacy necessary to produce the ultimate effect? No, Siger answers, for even if the secondary cause gets its principle of operation from the primary cause, the form or power of acting of the secondary cause is not present in the primary cause according to the same mode as that in which it exists in the secondary cause, but rather according to a more excellent mode. The problem, according to Siger, is that the effect is naturally meant to be produced immediately according to the form in which it exists in the secondary cause. It follows that it cannot naturally be produced immediately by the primary cause.

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20 Ibid., 40.38–41.43. Hissette, *Enquête sur les 219 articles condamnés à Paris le 7 mars 1277*, Philosophes médiévaux 22 [Louvain: Publications universitaires, 1977], 168–169), has pointed out the similarity between these lines and proposition 198 (98) of the 1277 condemnation, to wit: “Quod in causis efficientibus causa secunda habet actionem quam non accepit a causa prima.” However, as Hissette notes, the text of the condemnation talks about a *first* cause, whereas Siger talks about a *primary* cause. The two expressions are not equivalent, and Siger carefully distinguishes them. The words ‘primary cause’ refer to any causal agent that enjoys causal priority with respect to a subordinate cause, whereas ‘first cause’ is synonymous with God. The difference is that although the first cause is a primary cause, no other primary cause is the first cause. Hissette’s point in drawing our attention to this distinction is to argue that Siger is not guilty in *quaestio* 2 of asserting that there is something in the second cause that is absent from the first cause—in the way in which something could be present in the secondary cause that was absent from the primary cause. But there might be another reason why Siger frames his discussion in terms of primary and secondary causes, and that is because of his belief that what is true of primary and secondary causes in general must be true of the first and second cause in particular. Hence, if it is impossible for primary causes in general to act without secondary causes, it must be true in particular of the first cause that it cannot produce effects without second causes.

So given then that it belongs to the nature of the effect of the secondary cause to be produced immediately from the substance of the secondary cause according to as it is in the secondary cause, and not according to its mode in the primary cause, it follows that the effect of the secondary cause will not be able to be produced from the primary cause immediately.22

Now saying that the mode of existence of the form in the first cause exists according to a more excellent mode has the advantage, of course, of enabling Siger to defuse the objection that there is something in the second cause that is absent from the first cause; to that hypothetical objection, Siger could confidently reply that the first cause “contains” all the causal power of the lower causes, a point he had stressed in the previous quaestio. The point is, though, that even if the created thing’s principle of operation exists in a more excellent fashion in the primary cause, God still can’t make the effect come to pass according to Siger, because the occurrence of the effect requires the mode of existence of the principle in the secondary cause:

    Even though the secondary cause derives the substance and nature which are the principle of operation from the primary (cause), nevertheless the primary cause need not be capable of doing alone whatever the primary cause does with the secondary (cause). But that would follow if the secondary cause derived the principle by which it operates from the primary cause and (if) that principle and the nature (that are) in the primary cause from which (the secondary cause) derives it, exist in the same way as in the secondary cause.23

22 QsLdC, 41, 48–53. See Siger’s discussion in his Questions on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, bk. V, q. 11, in Siger de Brabant. Quaestiones in Metaphysicam, ed. Dunphy, 260.52–75, where Siger shows that where ordered causes work together to produce an effect, the “lower” cause has to contribute something “determinate” distinct from the causal contribution of the higher cause.

23 “Quamquam enim causa secundaria substantiam et naturam, quae est operationis principium, accipiat a primaria, non tamen oportet quod primaria sola possit quidquid potest primaria cum secundaria. Sed hoc sequeretur si causa secundaria acciperet principium per quod operatur a causa primaria, et hoc existente illo principio et natura in causa primaria a qua accipit secundum eandem rationem secundum quam est in causa secundaria.” QsLdC, 41.66–72. A similar point is made in the anonymous <Quaestiones super primum librum Physicorum>, 25.11–13: “Substantia enim est causa materialis accidentis, et hoc modo non <est> (sc. Deus) causa accidentis.”
4. Siger versus Aquinas on Accidents

It is roughly at this point of his discussion that Siger alludes to Aquinas on accidents: Aquinas’s attempt to argue in favor of God’s making an accident subsist independently from its substance, Siger is suggesting, is simply a particular illustration of the general and erroneous thesis—according to Siger at any rate—that God must be able to do without the secondary cause what he does with it.

Some people argue fallaciously believing that they can show and demonstrate by natural reason that the first cause can make it (come to pass) that the accident can exist without the subject of that accident on account of the fact that the first cause is the cause of all the intermediate causes of the accident (located) between it and the accident, and thus that alone it can make the accident exist, in the absence of any of the other causes of the accident; hence, as the substance is a cause of the accident, it will be able to make the accident subsist without the substance. But clearly (their) reasoning is flawed according to what has been said. However, so that it might be correctly understood, it must be known that we acknowledge that the primary cause can make the accident exist without the subject of the accident. But this is not because of that argument.24

Let us try to follow Siger’s reasoning here. Siger has argued that God must act concurrently with creatures if he is to bring about certain effects, because he thinks that this is what all the philosophical evidence—in other words, evidence such as is taken from Aristotle, Averroes, the Book of Causes—points to. It follows that one cannot prove that God can make accidents exist separately from the substance. But Siger also states that he believes that God can make accidents subsist without the substance. Clearly, this position is perfectly consistent with his view that

24 “Unde sophistice quidam arguunt credentes naturali ratione ostendere et demonstrare quod causa prima possit facere quod accidens existat sine subiecto illius accidentis, propter hoc quod causa prima est causa omnium causarum mediaram accidentis inter ipsum et accidentis, et ideo sola facere possit quod existat accidens, quamquam accidenti nulla existat aliarum causarum accidentis; et cum substantia sit aliqua causa accidentis, poterit facere ut sine substantia subsistat accidentis. Ratio, ut manifeste apparat, deficit secundum ea quae prius dicta sunt. Ut tamen sane intelligitur, sciem est quod primarium causam posse facere accidens existere sine subiecto illius accidentis confitemur. Hoc tamen est non propter istam rationem…” QsLdC, 41,54–65.
some propositions can be known to be true according to the more universal science based on revelation, which cannot be shown to be true according to a less universal science that relies on the senses or the natural light of reason (which is what Aristotle et alii are taken to be doing). According to this same view, the certitude afforded by conclusions stemming from premises based on revelation is greater than the degree of certitude generated by a conclusion following logically from premises based on the senses or the natural light of reason. What remains to be seen is whether Siger is right in believing that Thomas cannot make a *philosophically plausible* case in favor of the divine conservation of accidents.

Before moving on to Thomas, however, it is important to understand the extent of the disagreement between both authors on the question of divine causation. Siger is clearly critical of Thomas’s argument that God can be an immediate cause of a created effect’s operation insofar as this would seem to preclude the efficacy of secondary causes. The problem, however, is not that Thomas, as we have just seen, denies the efficacy of secondary causes. In *ST* Ia., q. 105, a. 5, he argues that *natural* phenomena have two immediate causes: the secondary cause *and* the primary cause in virtue of which the secondary cause operates. To the extent therefore that Siger uses his rejection of Thomas’s doctrine of immediate divine causation as expounded in *ST* Ia., q. 105, a. 5 to justify his rejection of divine conservation of accidents—which certainly seems to be the case according to the above text (“But clearly (their) reasoning is flawed according to what has been said”)—Siger simply misses his target. For Thomas’s concern in *ST*, Ia, q. 105, a. 5 is not to determine what God can do without secondary causes but rather to establish that God and secondary causes can act together. The question of what God can do as sole efficient cause is raised by Thomas in an altogether different context, typically when discussing creation or when discussing divine omnipotence, that is, what God can do *praeter naturam*. Now, what is characteristic of both creative and miraculous action is that both involve the *immediate* production of the effect: creation is the immediate production of all creatures; miraculous causation the immediate production of one effect. 25

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25 *Summa contra gentiles*, 2.22 (XIII, 320):“Si enim solius Dei creare est, ab ipso immediate producta esse oportet quaecumque a sua causa produci non possunt nisi per modum creationis.” See also *In II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 3 co.; *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 4. For omnipotence as implying the ability to act immediate, see, e.g., *Summa contra gentiles*, 3.99
So, for Siger to be methodologically justified in rejecting the immediate divine conservation of accidents, it will not suffice for him to reject immediate divine concurrence as philosophically unacceptable, he will have to show that immediate creative causality or immediate miraculous production of effects is philosophically indemonstrable. Although he does not take up this task in *quaestio* 2, he does touch on the question of immediate divine creative causation in several other works in connection with his discussion of the Neo-platonic adage *ab uno non procedit nisi unum.* There are four such passages. I will look at each briefly.

(XIV, 306): “Nam agens per voluntatem statim sine medio potest producere quemcumque effectum qui suam non excedat virtutem (…) Igitur, minores effectus, qui fiunt per causa inferiora, potest (sc. Deus) facere immediate absque propriis causis.” It is notable that one of the reasons for which Thomas, in *De pot.*, q. 3, a. 4, rejects the position of the philosophers that “*ab uno non procedit nisi unum*” is that it is heretical. He does, however, advance an argument in order to justify his position: The error of the philosophers who subscribe to the principle lies in the fact that they understand creative causation as a species of natural causation, whereas Thomas conceives of God as acting according to science and intellect.

26 The idea is captured by proposition 64 (33) in the 1277 condemnation. See Piché, *La condamnation parisienne,* 101, for the text and bibliographical details.
5. Siger on the Unicity of the Immediate Effect of Divine Causality

One of the earliest discussions occurs in a disputed question on future contingents, the *De necessitate et contingentia causarum*.\(^{27}\) Siger divides the solution to the question into four parts, the first of which deals with the problem of the order of causes with respect to the effect. There, he explains, there are five ways in which causes can relate to their effects, at least according to the philosophers (*secundum intentionem philosophorum*).\(^{28}\) The first is the way in which the first cause causes the first intelligence: the causation is necessary and immediate; cause and effect are simultaneous. But once again, Siger is careful to add that this is only true according to the philosophers (*et hoc dico secundum intentionem philosophorum*).\(^{29}\) The second way is the way in which the first cause causes “separate Intelligences, the celestial orbs and their motions, and generally speaking all ingenerables.”\(^{30}\) As with the first type of cause the first cause in this second case is also necessary and simultaneous with the effect, however “it falls short of the first order because the first cause is the cause of the aforementioned (beings) only according to a certain order: it is not an immediate (cause) of all of them, given that from something simple (being) only one thing can proceed immediately, not many unless by means of a certain order.”\(^{31}\)

Another brief reference to the same problem is found in Siger’s treatise on the *Eternity of the World* which dates from the same period as the *De necessitate*.\(^{32}\) The object of the treatise is to determine whether the human species has a beginning in time. Chapter one asks in what way the human species was caused. Siger’s starts out by saying that according to the philosophers, the human species was caused by generation. He adds that this does not mean that the human species

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\(^{27}\) The question is edited by J. J. Duin, *La doctrine de la providence dans les écrits de Siger de Brabant*, Philosophes médiévaux 3 (Louvain: Éditions de l’Institut supérieur de philosophie, 1954), 14–44. According to F. Van Steenberghe’s chronology in *Maitre Siger de Brabant*, 432–433, which I follow, the *De necessitate* was written around 1272.

\(^{28}\) Siger, *De necessitate*, 19.29.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 20.32.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 20.48–50.

\(^{31}\) “Sed in hoc deficit iste ordo a priori, quod Causa Prima non est causa praedictorum nisi secundum quodam ordine, et non omnium illorum immediata, cum ab uno simplici non procedat nisi unum immediate et non multa nisi quodam ordine…” Ibid., 21.53–57.

does not also proceed from God, although it does mean that it did not proceed from God immediately.  

A much more detailed discussion is found in Book V of Siger’s Questions on Aristotle’s Metaphysics, a slightly later work than the two already mentioned. The issue here is whether the essence of matter depends on that of form. Siger is concerned to show that matter cannot exist without form and adduces several arguments to this end, mostly derived from Aristotle. One argument involves showing that matter cannot be made to exist without form by the first cause; it is the philosopher’s answer to the theologian’s argument to the contrary from divine omnipotence. As Siger puts it: “matter from the point of view of its essence cannot be the immediate effect of the first cause, for that effect is unique, as Avicenna demonstrates.” A few lines later, Siger claims to find the demonstration of the same point in Book VIII of Aristotle’s Metaphysics.

The last explicit reference to the question of immediate divine creation occurs in the so-called “Lisbon Quaestiones naturales.” Question six of this work asks whether many things can be immediately caused by the first cause. Siger now answers that he does not have a demonstration either way. However, he does say that he thinks Avicenna’s demonstration to which he had referred in the Questions on the Metaphysics is not valid.

Scholars have been puzzled by what they perceived as a change of heart on Siger’s part on the issue of an immediate production of a plurality of effects. According to some writers, after initially subscribing to the view Siger changed his mind at the time he wrote the Natural

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33 Ibid., 115.8–9.
35 “Item, non potest materia secundum essentiam suam esse effectus immediatus Causae primae, quoniam ille effectus est unus tautum, sicut probat Avicenna.” Siger, Quaestiones in Metaphysicam, 207.57–59.
Questions. However, as B. Bazán has argued, one need see no inconsistency between the various passages we have discussed; indeed we may see them as expressing three distinct but entirely compatible attitudes on Siger’s part: that of the exegete, that of the philosopher and that of the Christian.\textsuperscript{38} In the three texts prior to the Lisbon Quaestiones Naturales Siger is trying as best he can to explicate the position of the philosophers without expressing his personal preference or assessing the soundness of the arguments: he is writing as a scholar—this is what Bazán calls attitude d’exégète. This is in contrast with the philosophical attitude displayed in the Quaestiones Naturales where Siger is concerned with questions of proof and validity, and he acknowledges that he—not the philosophers—cannot demonstrate the truth or the falsity of the Avicennian thesis. These two attitudes in turn must be distinguished from Siger’s beliefs as a Christian. Indeed we have already seen an illustration of this in connection with the Eucharist: Siger “acknowledges” the truth of the Eucharist while holding that that belief could not be demonstrated. It is therefore quite likely that Siger believed in immediate divine causation of a plurality of effects in the same sense in which he believed in the Eucharist, without holding that the doctrine was demonstrably true. The import of the foregoing for our assessment of Siger’s procedure in quaestio 2 should be clear: Siger disagrees not only with Thomas’s theory of divine concurrence but with the belief in the demonstrability of direct divine causation. And because he believes it to be indemonstrable, he also believes the immediate sustaining of accidents to be indemonstrable. On to Thomas.

6. Aquinas on Transubstantiation and divine Power

As is the case with other scholastics, Thomas’s doctrine of transubstantiation is an attempt, using the philosophical terminology of Aristotle, to provide a conceptually plausible account of how the consecrated bread and wine can be changed into the body and blood of Christ while conserving the appearance of bread and wine. Thomas does not aim to prove transubstantiation philosophically; he holds this to be impossible;\textsuperscript{39} what he claims to be able to show however, is that transubstantiation is at least possible, i.e., that it entails no contradiction

\textsuperscript{38} See B. Bazán, Siger de Brabant. Écrits de logique, de morale et de physique, 32.
\textsuperscript{39} See ST IIIa, q. 75, a. 1, resp.
with universally valid rational principles. Key concepts in this regard are those of form and matter, substance and accident. When we talk of the bread and wine as being changed in the body and blood of Christ what we mean, in the technically rigorous sense Aquinas and his fellow Scholastics are interested in, is that the substance of the bread and wine have been wholly converted into the body and blood of Christ. The accidents of the bread and wine—their color, shape, texture—, however, remain. The problem, of course, is that according to Aristotle accidents must inhere in substances. However, after consecration not only is it the case that the accidents of the bread and wine no longer inhere in the substance of the bread and wine—for this, we are told, is directly contradicted by the words of institution (ST IIIa, q. 75, a. 2)—they no longer inhere in any substance period.

Thomas is aware of the oddity involved in the idea of subject-less accidents. The idea is undoubtedly counter-intuitive, he holds, but it is not self-contradictory; indeed it is something God can bring about by His unlimited power:

We are left to conclude that the accidents in this sacrament remain without a subject. God’s power is able to bring this about. Given that effects depend more on the first cause than on the secondary cause, God, who is the first cause of the substance and the accident, by his infinite power, is able to conserve an accident in being even when the substance by which it was conserved in being as by its proper cause is removed. In the same way he is also able to produce the other effects of natural causes without natural causes as when he formed a human body in the Virgin’s womb without male seed.

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40 The position is attributed to Aristotle by all scholastics, and while it is implied in several passages—e.g., Metaphysics, 7.1.1028a13–b2; Physics, 1.2.185a20—the clearest statement occurs in Categories, 2.1a24–25.
41 Thomas will actually say the other accidents inhere in the accident of quantity.
42 See Imbach’s “Le traité de l’eucharistie,” 180–184, on how Thomas redefines the concept “accident.”
43 “Et ideo reliquitur quod accidentia in hoc sacramento manent sine subjecto. Quod quidem virtute divina fieri potest. Cum enim effectus magis dependeat a causa prima quam a causa secunda, Deus, qui est prima causa substantiae et accidentis, per suam infinitam virtutem conservare potest in esse accidentis, subtracta substantia per quam conservabatur in esse sicut per propriam causam; sicut etiam alios effectus naturalium causarum potest producere sine naturalibus causis, sicut humanum corpus formavit in utero Virginis sine virili semine.” ST IIIa, q. 77, a. 1 (2959b35-48).
The argument is as follows: Because God created substances and accidents to start with, he can suspend the natural order of things and immediately produce the accidents without the substance which is, by divine institution, the natural immediate cause. Making accidents subsist without a substance is therefore something an infinitely powerful God can do by exercising the same causal power he exercises at creation. It would seem then that all Thomas needs in order to draw the required conclusion is the premise of God’s omnipotence.

But Thomas does more than just appeal to divine omnipotence in *ST* IIIa, q. 77, a. 1. He writes as if to suggest that the reason why God can exercise his omnipotence is that “all effects depend more on the first cause than on secondary causes,” a clear reference to *De causis* I, 1 (“Every primary cause infuses its effect more powerfully than does a universal second cause”). We must assume that when Siger refers to an attempt to “demonstrate by natural reason” that God can conserve accidents, he is referring to this very point of Thomas’s argument, that is, to Thomas’s apparent belief that God’s power to produce effects without secondary causes can somehow be thought of as a particular application or illustration of a widely accepted philosophical principle, one derivable from the *De causis*. In order to see this we will need to turn to two earlier texts, where Thomas’s use of the *Book of Causes* is most explicit and his interpretation of the doctrines of the *De causis* most in evidence: *Quodlibetal question* IX, q. 3, and *In IV Sent.*, d. 12, a. 1, a. 1, qa. 1. I shall start with the *Quodlibetal question*.

Thomas starts out by reminding the reader that the Philosopher has said in the *Book of Causes* (I, 1, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 17 & 18) that in a series of ordered causes the first cause

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45 This is the sole assumption used by Aquinas in *De rationibus fidei*, chapter 8.
47 See C. Vansteenkiste O.P., “Il Liber de Causis negli scritti di San Tommaso,” *Angelicum* 35 (1958): 325–374, for a list of all the explicit quotations from the *De causis* in Aquinas’ works.
impresses itself more “powerfully” in the effect of the secondary cause than the secondary cause. It follows—another clear reference to the *Book of Causes*, this time to I, 5—that the first cause does not withdraw its operation from the effect, even when the secondary cause has withdrawn. But God’s relation to substance and accident is that of a universal first cause in a series terminating in the accident; it follows that certain accidents depend ontologically on the substance, i.e., that they are “produced” by the substance, just as the substance depends on God. Saying that the accidents depend on God means that they cannot, in the ordered series of causes, exist without the substance, their proximate cause; but this, Thomas contends, does not prevent the accident from being preserved in being by the remote cause, which is what happens in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

One must consider that in all ordered causes, according to the Philosopher in the *Book of causes*, the first cause impresses itself more powerfully in the effect of the secondary cause than even the secondary cause does, so that the first cause does not withdraw its operation from the effect, even after the secondary cause has withdrawn it, as it is said in the commentary thereto. Thus the universal and first cause of all beings is God, not only of substances but also of accidents, for he is the creator of substance and accident. But beings proceed from him in virtue of a certain order, for accidents are produced by means of the principles of the substance. Thus, according to the order of nature, accidents depend on the principles of the substance, such that they cannot exist without a subject. Yet that does not preclude God as first cause from being able to conserve accidents in being without the substance. And in this way accidents are present miraculously in the sacrament of the altar without a subject, that is, through God’s power which sustains it in being.  

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48 *Quodl*. IX, q. 3, a. unicus. Latin: “… hinc considerandum est quod in omnibus causis ordinatis, secundum Philosophum in Libro de causis, vehementius inprimit in causatum cause secunde causa prima quam etiam causa secunda, unde fit ut causa prima non retrahat operationem suam ab effectu, etiam postquam causa secunda retraxerit, ut dicitur ibidem in commento. Vniversalis autem causa et prima omnium entium Deus est, non solum substanciarum, set etiam accidencium : ipse enim est creator substantie et accidentis. Set entia prodeunt ex eo quodam ordine : nam mediantibus substance principii accidencia producentur; unde secundum naturae ordinem accidencia a principii substance dependent, ut sine subiecro esse non possint. Tamen per hoc non excluditur quin Deus quasi causa prima possit accidencia in esse conservare, substantia remota. Et per hunc modum accidencia miraculose sunt in sacramento altaris sine subiecro, uirtute scilicet divina ea tenente in esse.” (XXV, 1.98,45–99,61).
Clearly if Thomas has gone through the trouble of appealing to two propositions of the Book of Causes at the beginning of his respondeo, it must be because he thinks that they support the conclusion that God can directly sustain the accident. But as we will now see they don’t.\footnote{Pace Calma, “Siger de Brabant et Thomas,” 128.}

Certainly the proposition that the first cause impresses itself more powerfully on the effect of the secondary cause will not do, unless we can show that “more powerful” means for the author of the Book of Causes that the primary cause can do everything the secondary cause can, in other words that it can produce the very same effects, e.g., sustain (=cause) the \textit{numerically same} accident as that which is caused by the substance. Aquinas apparently assumes it means that, but he doesn’t try to show it, and as we will see shortly the evidence seems to suggest strongly that the author of the Book of Causes did not take “more powerful” as meaning or implying that the first cause can literally do everything the secondary cause can.

The second proposition—that the first cause does not withdraw its action from the effect even when the secondary cause has withdrawn (= Book of Causes, I, 2)—will not get the job done either. Saying that the Primary Cause recedes later from the effect than the secondary cause shows that it is “prior” to it, and therefore, in some sense, “more important” than the secondary cause. But we need more than that to get to the desired conclusion that it can produce the \textit{very same effect} as that produced by its proximate cause without the concurrence of the proximate cause or any other causes in the series.

Arguably the proposition that would give the strongest support to Thomas’s assumption that \textit{De causis} I, 1 entails God’s being able to do whatever the secondary cause can is the first part of I, 14 which reads as follows:
I, 14: The first cause aids the second cause in its activity, because the first cause also effects every activity that the second cause effects, [although it effects it in another way (which) is higher and more sublime].

I, 14 seems to give the strongest support in favor of Thomas’s position because it says that the first cause effects every activity the secondary cause does. It seems to say that everything the secondary cause does the first cause does as well (so that if the secondary cause is withdrawn, the first cause can operate the same effect on its own). Now, we know that for Siger the passage in square brackets saying that the first cause effects every activity the second cause nowise implies that it could bring about the effect on its own if the secondary cause were removed. Our task here is to see if there is anything else in the Book of Causes that might give support to Thomas’s view that the first cause can so act.

Let us turn to I, 11. There, illustrating his thesis that when the secondary cause recedes from the effect the first cause does not recede from it (I, 2; 5), the author of the De causis explains that an example is found in being, living, and man, for it is necessary that something be first of all being, next a living thing, and afterward a man. (…) Being then is more powerfully the cause of man than is living, because it is the cause of living, which is the cause of man. Likewise, when you assert rationality to be the cause of man, being is more powerfully the cause of man than is rationality, because it is the cause of his cause. The indication of this is that, when you remove the rational power from a man, a man does not remain, but living, breathing, and sensible remain.

Take away the secondary cause, the author is telling us, and what you have left is living and being; that is the “indication” that they are more powerful causes. In other words, they were there all along and remain after the secondary cause has receded. But that means that if we take away

the secondary cause of man—rationality—"what we have left is no longer a man." In other words, being can be more causally powerful according to the author of *Book of Causes* without this meaning that it produces exactly the same effect the subordinate causes effect.

Thomas is of course familiar with *Book of Causes* I, 11; in fact he sometimes invokes it explicitly in support of his doctrine of immediate divine causation of created effects, as in the following lines from the *Scriptum* on the *Sentences*:

> Thus when the secondary cause has withdrawn its influence from the effect, the influence of the first cause in the effect can remain, just as (*sic ut*) living remains when rationality has been withdrawn, and being (*esse*) remains when it (living) has been withdrawn. Since then God is the first cause of accidents and of everything that exists, whereas the secondary cause of the accidents is the substance, since the accidents are caused from the principles of the substance, God will be able to conserve accidents in existence (*in esse*), if the secondary cause, i.e., the substance, has been removed.  

Let us look carefully at this passage. The first sentence uses both *Book of Causes* I, 2 (“Now when a universal second cause removes its power from a thing, the universal first cause does not withdraw its power from it”) and *Book of Causes* I, 11, and is quite unobjectionable. The trouble is with the next sentence (“Since then God …”). Thomas wants us to think of the God/substance/accident relation as a particular instantiation of the first cause/second cause/effect

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52 This is pointed out by Dietrich of Freiberg in his *De accidentibus*, 23, where he writes the following about Thomas’s reading of the *De causis*: “Item deficit ratio inducta quantum ad hoc, quod intentio auctoris in auctoritate allegata non est, quod remota causa secunda a suo effectu maneat effectus idem numero vel specie, sicut patet in exemplo, quod inducit, scilicet quod remoto rationali non remaneat homo idem numero vel specie. Sed in proposito dicunt quantitatem vel qualitatem eandem non solum specie, sed numero remarere.” Dietrich of Freiberg, *De accidentibus*, ed. M. R. Pagnoni-Sturlese, vol. 3 of *Opera omnia* (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1985), 86, 25–30. Dietrich’s charge seems all the more justified given that Thomas interprets the *De causis* correctly in other passages, as in *ST*, IaIae, q. 67, a. 5, ad 1 (1065b32–35), where he writes that “remoto rationali non remanet vivum idem numero, sed idem genere, ut ex dictis patet.”

relation, and this seems innocuous enough on the face of it, but if we were then to use I, 2 and I, 11 to measure the degree of independence of each cause with respect to the others, all we would be entitled to say is that the substance can remain in existence when the accident has been removed (by appeal to I, 2), whereas Aquinas wants to conclude that the accident can remain once the substance has been removed. Now the only proposition that would motivate that conclusion in the above passage is the proposition that “God is the cause of accidents and of everything that exists” provided, of course, it were understood as implying the thesis that God can produce any created effect immediately, without the “help” of intermediate causes, an assumption we now know Siger believes is philosophically unjustified. Aquinas, then, is perfectly entitled to draw the conclusion that God could sustain the accident without the substance by appealing solely to his theologian’s understanding of God’s creative ability as the ability to create effects immediately; the point is, the conclusion emphatically does not follow from the propositions of the Book of Causes to which he has appealed.

We might think of Thomas’s theological argument in favor of the immediate conservation of accidents as involving three connected propositions. The first proposition is that God is the creator of all things, that is, he immediately produces substances and accidents (Summa contra gentiles II, 22). The second proposition is that in creating he also institutes an order (Summa contra gentiles III, 99; Quodlibet IX, q. 3), whereby substances produce accidents qua immediate (or proper or proximate) causes, though God continues to act as an immediate concurrent cause (ST Ia, q. 105, a. 5; De pot., q. 3, a. 8). Finally, because God is omnipotent, he retains the power exercised in creation to immediately conserve the accident (Summa contra gentiles III, 99). These are the propositions that underlie Thomas’s procedure in most of the passages where he argues for separability. It is through and through a theological procedure and as such unobjectionable on the part of Siger. However, in the two passages we have been

54 See also ST, IIIa, 75, q. 5 ad 1. The principle that underpins the whole of De causis I is aptly summarized by Thomas in the commentary on the Sentences (II, d. 41, q. 1, a. 2, sol.): subtracto posteriori remanet prius—For more texts, see Vansteenkiste, “Il Liber de Causis,” 352. But in Quodlibet IX and in In IV Sent. IV, d. 12, Thomas appeals to the converse principle subtracto priori remanet posterius.

55 Summa contra gentiles, IV, c. 65 (XV, 209a14–27); De ratio fidei, ch. 9; I ad corinthios, XI, 24 (n. 663).

56 It might be helpful in order to appreciate the theological character of Thomas’s various discussions of the separability of accidents to read them on the backdrop of the first constitution of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215
concerned with above and to a lesser extent in *ST*, III, q. 77, a. 1, Thomas enlists the help of the *De causis* making it seem as if he thought his conclusion could somehow be deduced from a philosophical principle. This is not to say that the reference to the *De causis* necessarily plays a vital rôle in Thomas’s theory of accidents or his doctrine of transubstantiation: it does not. The fact remains, however, that the *De causis* says the opposite of what Thomas says it does, and this is significant because it shows Siger to be right in his belief that immediate sustaining of accident cannot be brought into line with philosophical teaching.

**Final remarks**

I would like to conclude with two brief remarks. Although Siger might very well be right in disputing Thomas’s application of the *De causis* to discussions on the Eucharist, the fact is that Thomas does have an argument that would count as philosophical in Siger’s eye in favor of the immediate creation of a plurality of effects, but it is one that Siger does not address. The argument hinges on the distinction between a natural cause and an intellectual one, the claim being, in *De pot.*, q. 3, a. 4, that an *intellectual*, but not a natural, cause, can produce a plurality of effects. Why does Siger not respond to it? Probably because of his narrow understanding of what is or is not to count as philosophical. What is philosophical for Siger is a thesis that can be derived from the teachings of authoritative philosophers. It is true, as we saw at the outset of this
article, that Siger often insists that philosophy is based on “sense, memory, experience and the natural light of reason,” but he is often content, when wanting to argue for the philosophical nature of a particular thesis, with showing how it can be traced back to Aristotelian origins—or failing that to Procline, Averroistic or Avicennian origins.

The second remark has to do with the posterity of Siger’s critique. Because Siger was the representative of what was to be a short-lived movement within the medieval university, that of radical Aristotelianism at the Faculty of Arts in the 1260s and 70s, scholars have not given much thought to how his ideas might have lived on in later medieval philosophy. Certainly, as an Aristotelian, Siger was very much a man of his age and could hardly be thought of as a precursor of many of the more prominent philosophical innovations of Late Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century philosophy. However Siger’s critique of Aquinas on separability and his agnostic attitude with respect to the provability of omnipotence, understood as the ability to produce any created effect immediate, do very much foreshadow future developments in medieval thought, in particular the increasing fideism of medieval thinkers regarding theological issues. I will mention just one example, that of Duns Scotus, but it is a particularly important one, in view of Scotus’s influence on so much of later scholastic thought.⁵⁷

Scotus believed that divine omnipotence, understood as the ability on God’s part to produce on his own any effect he does with a secondary cause, was something that was true neither by definition nor by the light of natural reason but only believed.⁵⁸ In so far as ‘omnipotent’ refers to the efficiency of the first cause “it extends to all the effects it can produce as a proximate or a remote cause”; reason, Scotus maintained, can prove that such a first efficient cause exists. But ‘omnipotent’ can also be understood theologice. An agent is omnipotent in this sense if it is capable of producing anything that is possible as an immediate cause “without the cooperation of any other cause.” That God is omnipotent in this sense, Scotus assures us, cannot

⁵⁸ “Ex hoc apparat quod haec propositio ‘quidquid potest causa effective prima cum causa secunda, potest per se immediate’ non est nota ex terminis, neque ratione naturali, sed est tantum credita…” Ordinatio I, dist. 42, q. unica, vol. VI of Opera omnia (Civitas Vaticana: Typis polyglottis Vaticanis, 1963), 346.4–7.
be proved but only believed. We can say that the first efficient cause is *more eminent* than any other cause, but that is as far as unaided reason will take us. What we would need to show in order to prove divine omnipotence in the theological sense is that an agent possessing a more eminent mode of causation is able to produce immediately the immediate effect of the secondary cause. But this is precisely what philosophers cannot prove. Siger would have concurred.