Omnipotence and Promise:
The Legacy of the Scholastic Distinction
of Powers

by

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1 March 2002

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Focusing, as I plan to, on the legacy of medieval scholasticism which in its time spawned so many creative and exceedingly refined distinctions, my concern, appropriately enough, will be with one of them. It is a distinction, admittedly, that it would be easy enough to dismiss as a typical scholastic cliché. And while such a dismissal would, I am convinced, be unwarranted, about the categorization itself I am not disposed to wrangle. Cliché it surely was, echoed in such early neo-scholastic manuals as that of Joseph Kleutgen who, in 1881, acknowledged it in passing to be something of a commonplace "among [as he put it] the Catholic doctors."[1] But that notwithstanding, it will be my purpose to claim that, if it was indeed a cliché, it was one with a future–not only in the theology of redemption, where it first appeared, but also in natural or philosophical theology, in epistemology, in natural philosophy, in ethics, in legal philosophy. And it will be my purpose also, in the brief time at my disposal, to try to persuade you that during the first half-millennium at least of its long career, it was a cliché that exerted a truly profound influence over the course of European intellectual history. And especially so in the (perhaps unexpected) realms of early-modern scientific and legal thinking. It did so because it helped facilitate a shift to a vision or understanding of the underlying order of things–natural, moral, salvational, legal–vastly different from what had gone before. Not a quasi-necessary order embedded in a Lovejoyesque great chain of being and emanating from the very natures or essences of things, but one instead that was radically contingent, possessed itself of no luminous intelligibility, but grounded, rather, in will, covenant and promise.

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[1] Joseph Kleutgen, *Institutiones Theologiae in usum scholarum*: I *De ipso dei* (Ratisbon, 1881), pp. 384-86 [Paris I, lib. 1, qu. 3, cap. 4, art. 4]. John Inglis, *Spheres of Philosophical Inquiry and the Historiography of Medieval Philosophy* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 62-105, 137-67, comments interestingly on Kleutgen's role as one of the pioneer historians of medieval philosophy.

The distinction in question was, at once, both fundamental and recondite. Fundamental, because it concerned nothing less than the very power of God himself. Recondite, because in order to grasp its pivotal nature, we have to make a stern effort to recognize how very much we have come to take for granted the particular trajectory of our own intellectual tradition. In particular, we have so to exert ourselves that we can somehow grasp afresh the truly singular nature of the conception of the divine with which medieval scholastics and early-modern thinkers were fated alike to grapple.

There can, after all, be few developments in the history of philosophy more complex, more tangled, more dramatic, than the movement of ideas in late antiquity that had culminated by the fourth century of the Christian era in the Neoplatonic pattern of thought which St. Augustine was to encounter in what he called "the books of the Platonists."[2] Reflecting, among other things, a persistent tendency to understand the mysterious Demiurgos of Plato's *Timaeus* not as some sort of mythic symbol but, literally, as a World Maker, it went on to conflate him with the transcendent Unmoved Mover of Aristotle's *Metaphysics–the* final and highest good which he himself calls "god"–, and then to interpret Plato's eternally subsistent Forms, Essences or Ideas no longer as independent entities but rather as thoughts or ideas or archetypes in the mind of the supreme God produced by that macrocosmic conflation. Thus emerged the notion of a transcendent God, at once the Highest Good to which all things aspire, the First Cause from which all things derive their being, the Supreme Reason to which all things owe their order and intelligibility, and, increasingly (Neoplatonism being a path of salvation as well as a philosophy) the object of a real devotional sentiment.

Less complex, perhaps, but surely more startling, was the additional move by a whole series of religious thinkers, from Philo Judaeus in the first century of the Christian era to St. Augustine in the fifth, to achieve in a manner that proved to be definitive for Latin Christian philosophy (and in the early-modern centuries as well as the medieval) the further conflation of the Neoplatonic God–the God of the ancient philosophers, as it were, in its final

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[2] E.g., *Confessiones*, VII, 9, 20, 21.

and most developed form – with the biblical God of might and power, who not only transcends the universe but also created it out of nothing, the providential God, moreover, from whose omniscient purview not even the fall of a sparrow escapes and against whose omnipotent intervention not even the might of a Nebuchadnezzar was proof. By agreeing with Philo, the Neoplatonists, and many of his Christian predecessors that the divine creative act was indeed an intelligent one, guided by Ideas of the Platonic type but ideas located now in the divine mind, Augustine responded to the Greek concern to vindicate philosophically the order and intelligibility of the world. And, by virtue of his authority, he secured for the crucial doctrine of the divine ideas an enduring place in Christian theology and philosophy.

That very doctrine, however, itself witnessed to the severe internal tensions that the extraordinary accommodation which produced it involved and which were evident already in Philo, tensions between the biblically-inspired notion of an omnipotent and transcendent creator-God and the persistent tendency of the Greek philosophers to identify the divine instead with the immanent and necessary order of an external, self-subsistent cosmos. Those tensions were to mount in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when Augustine's treaty had, as it were, to be renegotiated, and a far more difficult accommodation arrived at with full-scale philosophical systems of Arab-Aristotelian amalgam in which the eternity and necessity of the world were in many ways foregrounded. And if there was a single, great stumbling-block in the way of any such accommodation, it was surely the doctrine of the divine omnipotence, classically understood as affirming God's ability to do all things, and often connoting a *virtual* capacity to do all things as opposed to a power exercised in actuality.

As many a twentieth-century philosopher working in the Anglo-American analytical tradition has discovered – from Kenny and Keane to Dummett, Mackie, Plantinga and Geach–, omnipotence can turn out to be something of an ungrateful notion, inviting unrestrained speculation about hypothetical divine action and generating a veritable cats-cradle of philosophical conundrums concerning the relationship of God's power to his will, wisdom, goodness and justice. And if, over the past fifty years, the efforts of those philosophers to grapple with such questions have punctuated

the pages of *Mind*, *Philosophy*, the *Philosophical Review* and even the B.B.C.'s *Listener* magazine, we should not think that there is anything novel about the questions themselves.[3] Instead, they are venerable conundrums with which, already in the mid-eleventh century, in his own pivotal broodings about omnipotence, St. Peter Damiani had begun to grapple, which were to bring Peter Abelard to grief a half-century later, and which were pressing enough in the mid-twelfth century to induce Peter Lombard to devote to them a crucial and influential section of his *Liber sententiarum*–whether God of his omnipotence could have made or arranged things other than he had, whether he could have created a world better than he did, or whether, even, he could undo the past–that is, so act that an actual historical event should not have occurred (this last akin to the spectre that has beckoned unnervingly from the dreams or nightmares of many a twentieth-century science fiction writer).[4]

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[3] The pertinent periodical literature has now become too voluminous to list here. Gijsbert van den Brink, *Almighty God: A Study of the Doctrine of Divine Omnipotence* (Kempen, 1993), p. 134, notes that between 1955 and 1990 over a hundred journal articles or chapters and sections of books were devoted to problems pivoting on the concept of omnipotence. See, for example, J. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind*, 64 (1955), 200-12; G. B. Keene, "A Simpler Solution to the Paradox of Omnipotence," ibid., 69 (1960), 74-78; Michael Dummett, "Bringing about the Past," *Philosophical Review*, 73 (1964), 338-59; P. T. Geach, "Omnipotence," *Philosophy*, 48 (1973), 7-20; Alvin Plantinga, "Possible Worlds," *The Listener* (13 May, 1976), 604-606;) Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford, 1979), esp. pp. 100-115; M. McBeath, "Geach on Omnipotence and Virginity, *Philosophy*, 62 (1988), 395-400.

[4] For the pertinent references to Damiani, Abelard and Lombard, see Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz* (Ithaca and London, 1984), pp. 42-47. I draw in this lecture on my previous studies touching on the distinction and closely related matters. In addition to *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order*, see my "Christian Theology and the Newtonian Science: The Rise of the Concept of the Laws of Nature," *Church History*, 30 (1961), 433-57; "Jacobean Political Theology: The Absolute and Ordinary Powers of the King," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 29 (1968), 323-46; "The Hidden and Revealed Wills of James I: More Political Theology," *Studia Gratiana*, 15 (1972), 363-75; "Lovejoy's Unexplored Option," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 48 (1987), 231-45; "Locke, Natural Law, and

Lombard's *Sentences* being surely the most successful theological textbook of all time (I can recall seeing a copy that had been printed in the seventeenth century in Peru), these questions, to which he devoted distinctions 42, 43 and 44 of the first book, became part of the required university agenda for successive generations of theologians down into the early-modern era, to be inherited after the waning of scholasticism by a range of thinkers of widely differing intellectual temperaments, but thinkers whom we have been accustomed to regard as being, in their characteristic pre-occupations, somewhat more secular than in fact they were – people like René Descartes, King James I of England, Marin Mersenne, Pierre Gassendi, John Locke, Robert Boyle and Sir Isaac Newton himself.

It was in their efforts to grapple with these problems and, in effect, to "manage" the threat to intelligibility that the concept of omnipotence could all too easily pose, that medieval scholastic thinkers were led to make, and to deploy across a broad array of theological and philosophical subfields, the distinction upon which I propose to focus–namely that between, if you wish, God's capacity and his volition,[5] between, that is, what God of his omnipotence can do, speaking hypothetically and *in abstracto*, and what he can do but taking now into account the orders of nature, morality and grace he has actually willed or ordained to establish, between, in effect, and using the terminology that came in the early years of the thirteenth century to be standard, God's power considered as *absolute* and that power considered as *ordained* (*potentia dei absoluta et ordinata*).[6]

God – Again," *History of Political Thought*, 18 (1997), 1-28; "The Absolute and Ordained Power of God in Sixteenth-and Seventeenth-Century Theology," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 59 (1998), 437-61; "The Absolute and Ordained Power of God and King in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Philosophy, Science and Law," ibid., 669-90.

[5] "This the title of William J. Courtenay's book on the *subject–Capacity and Volition: A History of the Distinction of Absolute and Ordained Power* (Bergamo, 1990).

[6] For a classic formulation see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* , Ia, qu. 25, art. 25; trans. Thomas Gilby, *Summa theologiae* (59 vols., New York, 1964-76), V, 123. The distinction has been the focus of a considerable body of work, including four books in the past eighteen years

In framing that distinction what the scholastics were doing–if you will permit me to invoke a terrestrial image to which I have become attached–was so positioning themselves–in this like architects of buildings in earthquake-prone areas–that they could cope with those outbursts of threatening seismic activity prone to occur along the profound geologic fault that runs right across the conflicted landscape of our Western intellectual tradition, the half-forgotten line of troubled intersection between separate tectonic plates of rival Greek and biblical origin. And the distinction in its developed form made its appearance not only at an understandable site but also at an appropriate moment, right at the start of the age of universities when the historic reception of the corpus of Aristotelian writings, while far from complete, was already well under way.

It made its appearance, too, before the rise to prominence on the university scene of members of the mendicant orders of Dominicans and Franciscans. I mention this particular fact because of the traditional disposition to view the distinction, usually disapprovingly, as a quintessentially Ockhamist or nominalist gambit, and one favored characteristically by Franciscan thinkers. For the picture which has emerged from the scholarly labours of the past quarter-century does not support such a view. Far from having been a monopoly of the nominalists or the Franciscans, it also enjoyed widespread currency among secular theologians and their Dominican colleagues. First invoked by university theologians in connection with issues pertaining to the order of salvation–as, for example, whether God of his omnipotence could have chosen a means for our redemption other than Christ's incarnation, suffering

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alone: Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order* (1984); Eugenio Randi, *Il sovrano e l'orologiaio. Due immagini di Dio nel dibattito sulla "potentia absoluta" fra XIII e XIV secolo* (Florence, 1987); Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition* (1990); Lawrence Moonan, *Divine Power: The Medieval Power Distinction up to its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure and Aquinas* (Oxford, 1994). The distinction also looms large in Angela Vitesse ed., *Sopra la volta del mondo: onnipotenza e potenza assoluta di Dio tra Medioevo e eta Moderna* (Bergamo, 1986), Van den Brink, *Almighty God* (1993), and Guido Canziani et al. ed., *Potentia dei: L'onnipotenza divina nel pensiero dei secoli XVI e XVII* (Milan, 2000).

and death[7]–it was discussed at the start in specialized academic treatises addressed to fellow theologians. But it speedily found its way into Faculty of Arts circles, where it assumed a broad role in connection with issues pertaining to natural or philosophical theology and natural philosophy. By the mid-thirteenth century, moreover, the great decretalist Hostiensis had introduced it by analogy into canonistic argumentation, where, referring explicitly to the theological usage of *potentia dei absoluta et ordinata*, he invoked it in an attempt to elucidate what the pope, in the absoluteness of his plenitude of power, could do that was not open for him to do when acting in accordance with his merely ordained or ordinary power.[8]

By the time of Aquinas's death in 1274, then, those employing the distinction were already easing it into the familiar and prominent role it was to play during the fourteenth century and beyond. That role was to extend to matters pertaining to epistemology, philosophical theology, natural philosophy, ethics and civil law, no less than to canon law, sacramental theology and the theology of justification. In that later phase the *potentia dei absoluta* was invoked to assert the possibility of our having intuitions of non-existing objects, to facilitate the scientific pursuit of speculative possibilities or thought-experiments pertaining to the notions of infinity, the void, and the plurality of worlds, to underline the utter dependence of moral norms on the mandates of the divine will, and, by analogy, to make the point that while the prince (royal and imperial as well as papal) should indeed live and discharge his duties within the limits set by the law, he was not bound to do so by necessity. Instead, he did so out of benevolence, that is to say, by freely choosing so to bind himself in the normal or ordinary exercise of his power, while retaining, of his absolute power, the

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[7] Moonan, *Divine Power*, pp. 48-100.

[8] Appearing to use those adjectives interchangeably, Hostiensis ascribes to the pope the ability in virtue of his absolute power to act, for reason and in extraordinary situations, outside his normal jurisdictional competence or above the law to which, of his ordinary or ordained power, he has bound himself. See Hostiensis (Henricus de Segusia), *Lecture in Quinque Decretalium Gregorianarum Libros* (Paris, 1512), at X, 5, 31, 8 *in v*. Ita and at X, 3, 35, 6 *in v*. nec summus Pontifex, fols. LXXI r and CXXX r. See also the interesting comment in Moonan, *Divine Power*, pp. 298-304.

prerogative of being able to act above or aside from the law–just as God does in the case of miracles.[9] Similarly, and long before the thirteenth century was over, the distinction had begun to break out from the restricted academic circles in which it had been nurtured, and was heading out towards the homiletic, humanist, and even vernacular literary settings into which it was later to find its way.[10]

All of this is clear enough. Or, rather, the scholarly labors of the past quarter-century have finally succeeded in making it clear enough. That was hardly the case earlier on. Gilson himself, of course, was well aware of the distinction's existence. In his first book, indeed, he had drawn attention to its appropriation by Descartes.[11] But like other leading historians of medieval philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century, he himself appears to have paid little attention to it. It would be easy enough, in fact, to come away from a reading of what he, or Maurice de Wulf, or Frederick Copleston had to say on Thomas Aquinas or William of Ockham, innocent of any suspicion that the former invoked the distinction at all (he did so, in fact, on some thirty or more occasions) or that it played so prominent a role in the latter's thinking.[12] Indeed, and down in effect to the third quarter of the twentieth century, it was largely scholars with interests in medieval *theology* rather than philosophy who tended to focus on it. And when they did so–I think, for example, of Carl Feckes, Erwin Iserloh, Gordon Leff, perhaps also Werner Dettloff–they focused somewhat obsessively, certainly disproportionately, on the absolute wing of the absolute/ordained dyad, inclining, accordingly to take a distinctly jaundiced view of its impact.

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[9] For the pertinent references, see Oakley, "The Absolute and Ordained Power of God in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Theology," 442-43 nn. 19, 20, 21, and 22.

[10] Ibid., 443 n. 23, and Moonan, *Divine Power*, pp. 319-26.

[11] Etienne Gilson, *Index Scholastico–Cartésien* (2nd rev. ed., Paris, 1979) pp. 88-89, 250-51.

[12] See Maurice de Wulf, *Histoire de la philosophie médiévale*, 6th ed. (3 vols., Paris, 1947), III; Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1955); idem, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York, 1956); F. C. Copleston, *Aquinas* (Harmondsworth, Middlx., 1955); idem, *A History of Philosophy* (9 vols., New York 1943-75), II and III.

Characteristically understanding God's absolute power, not in hypothetical terms, but as an operationalized or presently-active power, they understood it as involving also an ever-present and threatening potential for cutting across or running counter to the order–natural, moral, salvational–currently established by his ordained power (*de potentia ordinata*). They inclined, as a result, to view the distinction's manifest popularity in the later Middle Ages as symptom of the incipient collapse of all that had been achieved by the delicate philosophico-theological diplomacy of centuries, the whole mighty endeavor to achieve a stable harmony between the ancient philosophical legacy and the biblical vision of things. Ockham in particular and the late-medieval nominalists in general these scholars characteristically represented as wielding the power distinction with skeptical, even mischievous, intent– despite glib assurances to the contrary collapsing the ordained into the absolute power, transforming "the entire foundation of ... [God's] ordained law" into "the most fleeting of contingencies ever liable to be dispensed with," "throwing all certainty, morality, and indeed probability into the melting pot," creating a mere "as-if" theology prone to marginalizing the divine assurances revealed to us in the Scriptures and handed down by tradition, calling into question, even, under the looming shadow of the divine omnipotence, the very necessity of church, priesthood and sacraments.[13]

At this somewhat fraught and overheated juncture, however, it may be wise to step back a little and seek some perspective from the remarks of a well-informed contemporary medieval figure,

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[13] Carl Feckes, *Die Rechtfertigungslehre des Gabriel Biel und ibre Stellung innerhalb der nominalistischen Schule* (Münster, 1925). Erwin Iserloh, *Gnade und Eucharistie in der philosophichen Theologie des Wilhelm von Ockham* (Wiesbaden, 1956), pp. 67-79; Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 132, and idem, *Medieval Thought from St. Augustine to Ockham* (Harmondsworth, Middlx., 1958), p. 289; Werner Dettloff, *Die Entwicklung der Akzeptations–und Verdienstlehre von Duns Scotus bis Luther* (Münster, 1963), pp. 363-65. Leff has since distanced himself from Iserloh's interpretation and has indicated his wish now to distinguish the use made of the distinction by Ockham himself from the more radical use to which his "followers and successors" put it–see his *William of Ockham: The Metamorphosis of Scholastic Discourse* (Manchester, 1975), esp. pp. 15-16, 450, 470-71.

none other than William of Ockham himself. About the status of the distinction he made two, somewhat countervailing, comments. First, he took rueful note of the misunderstanding surrounding it already in his own day and warned of the ease with which anyone who "has not been excellently instructed in logic and theology" could fall into error on the matter. At the same time, and second, he insisted that this "common distinction of the theologians" when "sensibly understood, is in harmony with the orthodox faith."[14] *Sensibly* understood. Now it is currently the consensus among scholars that those who, writing on the history of theology in mid-twentieth century, took so dim a view of the distinction's import were not in fact understanding it *sensibly*. But there has not proved to be quite the same degree of happy consensus either about what precisely constitutes a truly sensible understanding or about why the earlier historians in question should have misunderstood it quite so egregiously.

Thirty years ago, William J. Courtenay, to whom we owe so much for our current knowledge and understanding of the distinction, made a forceful attempt to resolve both issues by insisting, not only that the older, negative view of its import was misleading, but that equally mistaken was *any* reading of the *potentia absoluta* which took it to denote a presently-active or operationalized divine power whereby God might in fact intervene to change or contradict the order of things which, by his ordained power, he had established. All such readings, he said, merely reflected straightforward "historiographic error." What we have firmly to grasp is that by the *potentia dei absoluta*–and here Aquinas's formulation is classical– medieval thinkers simply meant God's power *in abstracto*, his ability, that is, to do many things that he does not in fact choose to do. Or, put in (admittedly problematic) temporal terms, it refers to "the total possibilities *initially* open to God, some of which were realized by creating the established order" with "the unrealized possibilities now [therefore] only hypothetically possible."[15]

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[14] Ockham,*Opus nonaginta dierum*, cap. 95, in R. F. Bennett and H. Offler eds., *Guillelmi de Ockham*: *Opera politica* (3 vols., Manchester, 1940-56), II, 728; *Tractatus contra Benedictum*, Lib. III, cap. 3, in ibid., III, 230, 234.

[15] William J. Courtenay, "Nominalism and late Medieval Religion," in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, eds.

In the years that followed, however, it became increasingly clear that many a medieval thinker had in fact understood the absolute power in precisely such an operationalized or presently-active sense (and especially so in relation to divine miraculous action). As a result, though still hewing to the claim that the understanding of the distinction to be found in such as Albertus Magnus, Alexander of Hales, Thomas Aquinas and, indeed, William of Ockham was the original, "classical" understanding dominant among medieval thinkers–while still claiming that, Courtenay was obliged in 1990 to speculate that the alternative interpretation of the absolute power as a presently-active one may have eventuated from a *late-medieval* misreading of the earlier classical usage, one that had the further unfortunate effect of betraying twentieth-century historians into a similarly unfortunate misreading.[16]

Already by that time, however, the continuing flow of scholarly discovery, and especially the contributions of the late Eugenio Randi and of Katherine Tachau (herself a former student of Courtenay's) had begun to undermine the foundations even of such a modified, fall-back position.[17] For it had made two things abundantly clear. First, that far from being a later-medieval development, "the tendency [among theologians] to interpret *potentia absoluta* as a type of action rather than a neutral sphere of unconditioned possibility had its roots in the same [early-thirteenth century generation as the formulators" of the classical definition.[18] Second,

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Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden, 1974), 29-39; cf. his subsequent commentary in *Capacity and Volition*, pp. 18-20.

[16] Courtenay, *Capacity and Volition*, pp. 20-21.

[17] Eugenio Randi, "La Vergine e il papa, *Potentia Dei absoluta* e *plenitudo potestatis* papale nel xiv secolo," *History of Political Thought*, 5 (1984), 425-45; idem, "Ockham, John XXII and the Absolute Power of God," *Franciscan Studies*, 46 (1986), 205-16; idem, "A Scotistic Way of Distinguishing Between God's Aboslute and Ordained Powers," in *From Ockham to Wyclif*, ed. A. Hudson and M. Wilks (Oxford, 1987), 43-50; idem, *Il sovrano e l'oroligiaio*, pp. 51-105; Katherine H. Tachau, "Robert Holcot on Contingency and Divine Deception," in *Filosofia e Teologia nel Trecento: Studi in ricordo di Eugenio Randi* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1994), 157-96; idem, "Logic's God and the Natural Order in Late Medieval Oxford: The Teaching of Robert Holcot," *Annals of Science*, 53 (1996), 235-67.

[18] Tachau, "Logic's God and the Natural Order," 242, referring speci-

that no more than a century later that same tendency had come to be widely prevalent among the disciples of Scotus and among such "nominalist" figures as Robert Holcot and Adam Wodeham. Holcot, indeed, himself attested to the fact that in the Oxford circles of his day the understanding of the absolute power as a presently-active one involving an overriding of the order established *de potentia ordinata* was, rather than the classical version, the way in which the distinction was usually understood.[19] Small wonder, then, that by 1375-76, when Pierre d'Ailly came to comment at Paris on Lombard's *Sentences*, both understandings of the distinction were so well-established that he felt it necessary to allude to both. His own opinion, moreover, was that the "more appropriate" usage was the one that understood God's absolute power as a power of extraordinary, supernatural or miraculous action, whereby he can contravene (and, on occasion, has so contravened) "the common course of nature" and the order established in general *de potentia ordinata*.[20]

Both understandings or usages were subsequently to endure side by side, and when, in the early-seventeenth century, Francisco Suarez came to discuss the distinction, he also took note of both, labeling d'Ailly's "more appropriate" usage as now the "more common" one, sometimes using the term *potentia ordinaria* rather than

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fically to the *Sentences* commentary (1230-39) of Hugh of St. Cher.

[19] See the works of Randi cited above, n. 17, and Katherine H. Tauchau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham*: *Optics, Epistemology, and the Foundation of Semantics* (Leiden, 1988), pp. 284-88, 294-95, and the texts cited therein. Idem., "Logic's God and the Natural Order," 255, and "Robert Holcot on Contingency," 170-73, 195-96.

[20] Pierre d'Ailly, *Quaestiones super I, III et IV Sententiarum* (Lyons, 1500) I, qu. 13, art. 1, C-D, fols. 159r-159v. This is the crucial text, but it should be understood in the context of d'Ailly's employment of the distinction in the full *corpus* of his writings. See esp. *Sent*. I, qu. 9, art. 2, M. fol. 120v; *Sent*. IV, qu. 1, art. 2, J-N, fol. 187r-188r; *Sent*. I, qu. 1, art. 2, JJ, fol. 56r; *De Trinitate*, in Jean Gerson, *Opera omnia*, ed. Louis Ellies Dupin (5 vols., Antwerp, 1706) I, 619; *De libertate creaturae rationalis*, ibid., 632; *Tractatus de anima*, cap. 11, pars 4; ed. Olaf Pluta, in his *De philosophische Psychologie des Peter von Ailly* (Amsterdam, 1987), p. 68 (of the edited text), where what is possible *naturaliter* is contrasted with what may happen *de supernaturali et absoluta potentia dei*.

ordinata to denote God's power as it operates "in accord with the common laws and causes which he has established in the universe," and understanding the absolute power, accordingly, less as a matter of abstract or hypothetical possibility than as an extraordinary power of miraculous interposition, whereby God can indeed act *de facto* "aside from" the ordinary power.[21] And in this he was to be followed by Kleutgen in the late-nineteenth century who, while acknowledging the currency of both usages among those whom he called "the orthodox theologians" of his day, insisted that the operationalized understanding of the absolute power as a presently-active one was by far the more common, and concluded, therefore, that it would be more accurate to call the "ordained" power the "ordinary" power.[22]

After several decades of fruitful disagreement, then, most commentators would now, I believe, concur in this general appraisal of the scholarly state of play. More important than that most, though certainly not all, would also agree that even if one has in mind thinkers who understood the absolute power as a presently-active one, the portrayal of the distinction as being employed for negative, destructive, or even mischievous purposes really misconstrues its nature and the purpose for which it was deployed. In particular, such a portrayal fails to take into account the dialectical character of the absolute/ordained dyad. Neither term of the distinction, that is to say, was intended to be understood in isolation from the other. We should recognize, therefore, that its impact was two-fold. If the postulation of the absolute power erected a stout bulwark against any form of Greek necessitarianism, affirming the utter freedom of God and the concomitant contingency of the entire created order of nature, morality and grace, the juxtaposition with it of the ordained power served at the same time to

[21] Francisco Suarez, *Metaphysicarum Disputationum*, Disp. XXX, sect. 17, §§xxxii-xxxiii, (2 vols., Mainz, 1600), II, 150-51; also Disp. XXXIII, sect. 7, II, 289, where he uses the phrase "de potentia absoluta, seu interveniente aliquo miraculo." Cf. his *De Legibus ac Deo Legislatore*, Lib. II, cap. 2, in *Selections from Three Works of Francis Suarez S.J.* (2 vols., Oxford, 1944), I, 104, where he equates "secundum legem ordinariam" with "secundum potentiam ordinatam."

[22] Kleutgen, *Institutiones theologicae in usum scholarum*, I, Pars I, Lib. 1, qu. 3, cap. 4, art. 4, pp. 384-85.

affirm the de facto stability and reliability of that contingent, will-based order. And if that impact was indeed two-fold, it was so precisely because the distinction, while vindicating dramatically the Old Testament vision of Yahweh as a God of might and power, responded also to another fundamentally biblical theme concerning God's relationship with his creation–namely, that of his self-commitment, covenant and promise. The only force capable of binding omnipotence without denying it is, after all, the omnipotent will itself. Conversely, if that will were somehow incapable of binding itself it could hardly be regarded as truly omnipotent.

While the omnipotent God, then, cannot be said to be bound by the natures of created things, the chains of natural causality or the canons of any merely human reason or justice, he is certainly capable of his own free decision of binding himself to follow a certain pattern in dealing with his creation–a pattern established, in effect, by "the ordinary law" which Suarez, for example, described God as having imposed "upon himself."[23] Just as an absolute monarch, to evoke the analogy that was so obvious as to have entered theological discourse before the thirteenth century was out and to have resurfaced seven centuries later right at the outset of the twentieth-century philosophical debate concerning omnipotence–just as an absolute monarch can bind himself in his dealings with his subjects.[24] So that the biblical God who knows, of course, no absolute necessity has freely chosen to bind himself by what the scholastics called a hypothetical or conditional necessity (*necessitas ex suppositione; necessitas consequentiae*), what Chaucer in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* accurately designated as a "necessitee condicionel,"–an "unfailing necessity appropriate to God," as Robert Hol

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[23] Francisco Suarez, *De Legibus ac Deo Legislatore*, Lib. II, cap. 2, in *Selections from Three Works of Francis Suarez*, I, 104.

[24] For this covenantal/dialectical theme, see esp. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge, MA., 1963), pp. 30-56; Martin Greschat, "Der Bundesgedanke in der Theologie des späten Mittelalters" *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 81 (1970), 44-63; William J. Courtenay, *Covenant and Causality in Medieval Thought* (London, 1984); Bernd Hamm, *Promissio, Pactum, Ordinatio: Freiheit und Selbstbindung Gottes in der Scholastischen Gnadenlehre* (Tübingen, 1972); Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant and Order*. For the contemporary instance, see Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 211-12.

cot put it, "because of his promise, that is, his covenant, or established law."[25]

To the growing prevalence of this "covenantal" way of thinking the currency of the distinction between the absolute and ordained power at once both witnessed and contributed. And perhaps the most important thing to be said about the distinction's survival beyond the age of scholasticism is that it was to serve as a continuing carrier and disseminator of that covenantal, non-essentialist understanding of the nature of order, whether in the moral, salvational or physical realm. Among later medieval theologians, certainly (though we still have much to learn about a host of minor figures, and especially so in the fifteenth century), it loomed large in their anxious efforts to elucidate the functioning of churchly sacrament and divine grace in the process of justification in such a way as to emphasize the freely-willed, chosen, covenantal nature of the whole machinery of salvation, and to avoid falling into the trap of "entangling the divine will in the secondary causation of church, priests, sacraments and accidental forms of grace."[26] In that context, it proved too important and too useful to fall victim either to Luther's ambivalence or Calvin's hostility. Instead, it found a continuing home, not only in Catholic circles but also in the writings of such seventeenth-century representatives of a burgeoning Lutheran scholasticism as Johann Gerhard, Abraham Calovi and Johann Quenstedt, of such contemporaneous exponents of the Reformed theology as Francis Turretino, Amandus Polanus and Johann Alsted, and, not least of all, in the highly influential manuals produced by the Puritan "federal" theologians in the Netherlands and Old and New England, from Dudley Fenner, William Perkins and William Ames in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, to Increase Mather and Samuel Willard in the late-

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[25] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Nonne Preestes Tale*, in *The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford and London, 1906), p. 259; Robert Holcot, *Super libros Sapientiae* (Hagenau, 1494), lect. 145 B; translation (which I am citing here) in Heiko A. Oberman ed., *Forerunners of the Reformation*: *The Shape of Late Medieval Thought* (New York, 1966), p. 259.

[26] Citing here Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1350: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, 1980), p. 33.

seventeenth and early-eighteenth.[27]

Given the centrality of issues pertaining to the theology of justification to the great, divisive confessional debates of the Reformation era, I am tempted to dwell on the use to which such early-modern theologians put this distinction between the *potentia dei absoluta et ordinata*. Contemplating further the role the distinction played in the post-scholastic era, I am almost equally tempted to pause to trace the powerful harmonics it generated in the legal and constitutional thinking of the period, whether in relation to the pope, or to the emperor, or to the prerogatives claimed by the kings of France and England. Not least of all because those harmonics resounded almost as often to the ordinary frequencies of constitutional restraint as to those of untrammeled absolute power. And especially, if perhaps unexpectedly so, in what has to be called the political *theology* of James I of England himself.

In a series of convoluted, well-meaning but much misunderstood attempts to vindicate what he called "the absolute prerogative of the Crowne," while at the same time affirming his own robust commitment, as he put it, "to rule my actions according to my Lawes," James drew an intriguing series of direct parallelisms between Kings and God.[28] In so doing, he conflated the *potentia dei absoluta/ordinata* distinction with an even older scholastic distinction between the *voluntas dei beneplaciti et signi*, or, in the terminology of the Protestant Reformers, between God's secret or hidden will and his will revealed in the Scriptures. So that, while in one speech to Parliament he alarmed his listeners by saying that kings "have power to exalt low things, and abase high things, and make

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[27] Following here Oakley, "The Absolute and Ordained Power of God in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Theology," 449-61, to which reference may be made for the pertinent texts.

[28] The statements in question and from which I cite in what follows are his "A Speach to the Lords and Commons of the Parliament at White-Hall ... Anno 1609," in Charles Howard McIlwain ed., *The Political Works of James I* (Cambridge, Mass., 1918), 307-10; "A Speech in the Starre-Chamber ... Anno 1616," ibid., 333; his letter to the judges in the case of *commendams*, in *Acts of the Privy Council, 1615-16* (London, 1925), 601. For a full discussion of these texts, their context, and various modern interpretations of them, see Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order*, pp. 93-118.

of their subjects like men at the Chesse; A pawne to take a Bishop or a Knight, and to cry up, or downe to any of their subjects as they do their money," he was also prone to affirming, in a manner certainly familiar to the prerogative lawyers of the day, that he was in fact possessed of "a doble prerogative," an absolute "supreame and imperiall power and soveraignte," which, like the absolute power of God was not "lawfull to be disputed," but also an "ordin-ary" power that was "every day disputed in Westminster Hall." And he was also prone to placing the emphasis, in a way that seems to have eluded his contemporaries no less than many a modern com-mentator, on the degree to which his loyal subjects could in fact rely on "the King's ... will" revealed "in his Law," on the expression, that is, of his "ordinary prerogative." Just as God, who, he said, had originally spoken "by Oracles, and wrought by Miracles" has since "governed his people and the Church within the limits of his reveiled will," so, too, "settled Kings and Monarches ... in civill Kingdomes," by a "paction" with their people analogous to the covenant which God made with Noah after the flood, had also committed themselves to rule in conformity with the will they have revealed to us in their laws.

Intriguing enough and reflective, certainly, of a fairly wide-spread willingness in the early-seventeenth century to transfer the *potentia dei absoluta/ordinata* distinction from the more rarified realm of theological discourse to the grittier realities of English and French prerogative law. And that willingness was in turn grounded in the traditional appropriation of the distinction over the course of the three centuries preceding–and by theologians, canonists and civilians alike–in their efforts to elucidate the reach of the mon-archical powers possessed by pope and emperor, and to identify the degree to which those rulers were bound by the mandates of canon and civil law. Thus Giles of Rome, Jacques Almain, Lambert Daneau. Thus, again, Hostiensis, Baldus de Ubaldis, Jean Bodin.[29]

With your permission, however, and in the time remaining to me, I should like to focus elsewhere, on the significance of the role which the distinction played in the thinking of the natural philo-sophers and scientists whose contributions made possible the de-

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[29] See Oakley, "The Absolute and Ordained Power of God and King in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century," 679-86.

velopment at the end of the seventeenth century of the classical or Newtonian physical science. It is, I think, a matter particularly worthy of attention because it has been the focus of increasing scholarly interest over the past decade and a half. So much so, indeed, that more than one historian of science has now been moved to sympathize with the claim made in 1991 by the Newton scholar, Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs, that "the theological framework of *potentia dei absoluta et ordinata* [actually] guided Newton and many of his contemporaries when they inquired into the relationship between God and the world."[30]

Whether or not that claim can quite be vindicated in relation to Newton himself, let me affirm that it is certainly true of a whole series of predecessors from Descartes and Mersenne to Pierre Gassendi (who fashioned a Christianized version of Epicurean atomism), Walter Charleton (who did so much to naturalize Gassendi's atomism on English soil), and, above all, Robert Boyle. The Boyle of Boyle's Law, a man traditionally (if somewhat optimistically) referred to as the founder of modern chemistry, and, more recently and accurately, as "the great father figure of British natural philosophy in his time."[31] "None," he said, "is more willing [than I] to acknowledge and venerate Divine Omnipotence,"[32] and, reading some stretches of the works he devoted to what he and other contemporaries called "physico-theology," it is tempting to think that he must actually have been commenting on Book I, Distinctions 42 to 44 of Lombard's *Sentences*, a book which he owned and may even conceivably have read.[33] Standing on this conflicted terrain,

[30] B.J.T. Dobbs, *The Janus faces of genius: The role of alchemy in Newton's thought* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 110-13, and the pertinent works she cites in nn. 45 and 46. Cf. James E. Force, "Newton's God of Dominion," in *Essays on the Context, Nature and Influence of Newton's Theology*, eds. James E. Force and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht, 1990), 75-102; J.E. McGuire, *Tradition and Innovation: Newton's Metaphysics of Nature* (Dordrecht-Boston-London, 1995), pp. 214-27.

[31] Thus J.G. McGuire, "Boyle's Conception of Nature," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33 (1972), 523-42 (at 524).

[32] Boyle, A *Defense of the Doctrine touching the Spring and Weight of the Air* ..., in *The Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle*, ed. Thomas Birch (6 vols., London, 1772), I, 149.

[33] See the description of Boyle's library in John T. Harwood ed., *The*

moreover, and reverting to the geologic image, it is also tempting to imagine that one can actually feel beneath one's feet the bumping, the grinding, the subduction of those great tectonic plates of disparate Greek and biblical origin which long ago collided to form the unstable continent of our *mentalité.*

In order to grasp why this might be so, one has to recognize that while the great ideological upheaval of the Reformation era certainly inserted marked discontinuities into the realm of *revealed* theology–especially sacramental theology and the theology of justification–, it entailed no great intellectual shift in the realm of natural or philosophical theology. There, though cast into the shadows by the distractions of confessional strife and the fashionable proclivity for derogating the scholastic past, the continuities linking the medieval centuries with the seventeenth are truly significant. And the questions once central to the natural theologizing of the medieval scholastics–the nature of God, his several attributes and especially his omnipotence, the relation of his power to the order evident in the world of physical nature, and so on–all of these continued to loom large in the thinking of the great natural philosophers and physical scientists of the seventeenth century, from Descartes on to the great Newton himself.

Glancing back to the historic reception in Western Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of the entire corpus of Aristotelian writings, let me recall that that process had begun with their communication largely in Arabic form, confusingly interwoven with the paraphrases and commentaries of such great Arab philosophers as Avicenna and Averroës (Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd). The somewhat occluded Aristotle with whom, therefore, the scholastics had had first to cope, and the Aristotle whom the ecclesiastical authorities at Paris had moved nervously to condemn, was one who appeared to teach not only the eternity of the world but also its necessity. His world, that is to say, was not a *created* world presupposing the free decision of a divine will, but a world that eternally and necessarily flowed from the divine principle on the analogy of a stream flowing from its source or a logical conclusion proceeding from its premise. As such, it was a determined world in

Early Essays and Ethics of Robert Boyle (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1991), pp. 249-81 (at 273, No. 509).

which everything had to be what it was and in which there was no room either for the providence of God or the free will of man. Nor did the eventually successful effort to penetrate the veil of commentary and to isolate the authentic teaching of Aristotle himself necessarily make the successful reconciliation of his views with Christian belief by any means a trouble-free enterprise.

That the late-medieval natural philosophers in the faculty of arts, no less than their colleagues in the faculty of theology were forced to recognize. And given the heightened emphasis from the late-thirteenth century onwards in both theological affirmation and ecclesiastical condemnation on the centrality of the doctrine of divine omnipotence, as well as the concomitant insistence that the physical world is contingent on the divine will no less for its nature and mode of operation than for its very existence, one might well have expected the "medieval natural philosophers to have recognized [also] that the behavior of a contingent world cannot be inferred with certainty from any known set of first principles, and, therefore, to have set out to develop empirical methodologies" and to commit themselves to a natural science clearly dependent on observation and experiment.[34] But that, of course, despite shifts in theory and the criticism and questioning of this or that point of detail in the Aristotelian physics they had inherited, they did not do. Instead, as one historian of science has put it, these "natural philosophers and theologians continued to believe that the world and the proper method for exploring it were more or less as Aristotle had described them."[35]

That said, I would emphasize that that "more or less" represents a significant qualification. For what, willy-nilly, these late-medieval thinkers were led to do was to encapsulate Aristotle's vision of the world within a larger (and ultimately incompatible) religious framework which stripped that world of its eternity and necessity. As a result, they were led also to provincialize the Aristotelian natural   philosophy in such a way as ultimately to preclude its claim to be able to deliver a knowledge that was certain via chains of demonstrative syllogistic reasoning. They did so for the-

[34] David C. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, 600 B.C. to A.D. 1450* (Chicago and London, 1992), p.243.

[35] Ibid.

ological reasons, conscious of the possibility that God could have fashioned vastly different worlds, and confining the Aristotelian prescriptions to the particular world he had actually willed to create, treating them, therefore, as valid only *ex suppositione* for the present dispensation of things established *de potentia ordinata*, and, even then, rejecting them outright when they appeared to impose profane limits on the reach of the *potentia dei absoluta*. As, for example, did Aristotle's claim that the existence of a vacuum is simply impossible, or his insistence that the world is eternal. In relation to the latter issue, indeed, Edward Grant has said that with respect to the relations between religion and science, "what the Copernican heliocentric theory was in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the Darwinian theory of evolution in the nineteenth and twentieth," that the issue of the eternity of the world was in the Middle Ages.[36]

But not, it should now be added, in the Middle Ages alone. If the seventeenth-century scientific *virtuosi* found it helpful to make use of the distinction between the absolute and ordained power which had played so significant a role in the thinking of the late-medieval theologians and natural philosophers, let me suggest that they did so precisely because they still shared in common with those medieval predecessors a marked preoccupation with the om-nipotence of God. They shared also a concomitant concern to banish from the world which he had created any lingering trace of the necessity and determinism that were part and parcel of the Aristotelian natural philosophy as the scholastics had first received it, and, to a stern critic like Boyle, still part and parcel of "the Peripatetick philosophy" of his own day which, interestingly enough, he viewed as having taken so "deep [a] rooting" as still to be an "advantaged" doctrine and by no means so far gone in decay as some scientists of the day imagined.[37] So that in his *Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly* [i.e. *commonly*] *receiv'd Notion of Nature* (1686), having cited the Aristotelian denial to God of both the creation and providential governance of the world, he himself took "divers of

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[36] Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their religious, institutional, and intellectual contexts* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 74.

[37] Boyle, *The Origins of Forms and Qualities*, in *Works*, ed. Birch, III, 10.

Aristotle's opinions relating to religion to be more unfriendly, not to say pernicious to it, than those of several other heathen philoso-phers"–prominent among them, it seems clear, the atomistic views of those he called the "Epicurean and other corpuscularian infidels" and to a Christianized version of which he, following in this Gassendi and Charleton, appears to have committed himself.[38]

It was, then, appropriately enough, in his enormous commen-tary on Genesis (1623) that Marin Mersenne was led to contrast the *potentia absoluta* (or *extraordinaria*) with the *potentia ordinaria*, appearing to align the latter with God's action in accord with the order of nature and the common course of things and insisting on the contingent nature of that willed course of things. For by his absolute power (which reaches to everything that does not involve a formal contradiction), God could have chosen to do things other than those he actually preordained to come about, even to the ex-tent of making worlds better than he did.[39] Descartes' concern to vindicate the divine freedom and omnipotence went, moreover, much further than that–too far, indeed, to permit him to hedge in the absoluteness of God's power even by so modest a limitation as that constituted by the law of non-contradiction. In common with so many of the other physical scientists of his day, he viewed the laws of nature not as immanent in the very natures of things but as imposed on the physical world as it were from the outside by God, just as (he says) "a king establishes laws in his kingdom." Unlike those other scientists, however, and unlike Mersenne to whom he made the point in two celebrated letters of 1630, he insisted that God's supreme legislative power extends not merely to the laws of motion and inertia upon which the mechanistic physics rested but, more startlingly, to the laws of mathematics and logic. To argue otherwise, he said, would be to make of God no more than a Jupiter or a Saturn, subject to the Fates. Thus, of those immutable and eternal truths within which the laws of nature are embedded God is also the author and legislator–so much so (though the very thought defies our merely human comprehension) that he was free so to act from all eternity that not all the lines from the center of

[38] Boyle, *A Free Enquiry*, in *Works*, ed. Birch, V, 158-254 (at 163-64).

[39] Marin, Mersenne, *Quaestiones celeberrimae in Genesim* (Paris, 1623), cols. 329-33.

a circle to its circumference would be equal or that twice four should not make eight.[40]

The mechanical philosophers who wrote after Descartes–I think especially of Gassendi, Charleton and Boyle–did not go quite that far. Had they done so, indeed, the natural philosophies they developed would have been vastly different than they turned out, in fact, to be. As John Locke was later to put it, it was precisely because the laws governing matter and motion and possessing a "constant and regular connexion, in the ordinary course of Things" lacked the absolute necessity pertaining to mathematical propositions that they had to be attributed to "nothing else, but the arbitrary Determination [or arbitrary Will and Good Pleasure] of that All-Wise [divine] Agent, who has made them to be, and to operate as they do."[41] Unlike Descartes' version of the mechanical philosophy, then, Pierre Gassendi's shies clear of the former's insistence on an immutable physics grounded in the immutability of God's will. Instead, his position reflects the convergence between a voluntarist theology, a nominalist epistemology, and a commitment to empirical methods as the only means of access to knowledge in a radically contingent world. The dialectic between the *potentia dei absoluta et ordinata*, accordingly (thus Margaret Osler), "provided the conceptual background for his voluntarist theology," and he was committed to the view that God, who can do anything that does not involve a contradiction, "is not necessarily bound by the laws of nature which he has constituted by his own free will." He was led, then, to emphasize the contingency of "the course of nature" or "General Order of Causes and Effects" that God has "ordained and instituted from all eternity," as also to insist that

> if some of the natures [of things were] ... immutable and eternal
> and could not be otherwise than they are, God would not have
> existed before them. ... The thrice-great God is not, as Jupiter of

[40] René Descartes, Letters to Mersenne, April 15 and May 27, 1630, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (11 vols., Paris, 1964-74), I, 145, 151-52; also *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, Resp. ad sextas objectiones, ibid., VII, 436. Cf. his Letter to Mesland, May 2, 1644, in ibid., IV, 118-19.

[41] John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, iii, 28-29, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), pp. 559-60.

the poets is to the fates, bound by things created by him, but can by virtue of his absolute power destroy anything he has established.[42]

Even clearer, if anything, in his ascription to God of a presently-active absolute power is Walter Charleton, another member with Descartes of the Mersenne circle in Paris. Himself emphatic about the continuing importance of the scholastic heritage and insistent on the overriding omnipotence of God, he affirmed (in medieval fashion) the fact that God, whose prerogative it is to know no impossibility, could have created had he so wished a plurality of worlds. That he had chosen not to do. But although in the world he has actually willed into being, he has "ordained, enrolled and enacted by the counsel of an infinite Wisdome" the "immutable Tenor, or settled course" which "all things observe," nevertheless, like an "absolute Monarch" he has not failed "to reserve to himself an absolute superiority or capacity, at pleasure to infringe, transcend, or pervert" to "the causation of some extraordinary effect" those "ordinary and established Laws of Nature." To think otherwise, he said, would be nothing less heinous than "blasphemously" invading "the cardinal Prerogative of Divinity, *Omnipotence*, by denying ... [God] .. a reserved power of infringing, or altering any one of those laws which [He] Himself ordained and enacted, and chaining up his armes in the adamantine fetters of Destiny."[43]

Finally, and even clearer still, Charleton's fellow admirer of Gassendi's work, Robert Boyle. "According to our doctrine," he said,

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[42] Margaret J. Osler, *Divine will and the mechanical philosophy: Gassendi and Descartes on contingency and necessity in the created world* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 56; cf. pp. 153-67, Pierre Gassendi, *Disquisitio metaphysica seu dubitationes et instantiae adversus Renatus Cartesii metaphysicam et responsa*, [1644] ed. and trans. Bernard Rochat (Paris, 1962), p. 481. I reproduce Osler's translation of this passage–*Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy*, pp. 153-65.

[43] Walter Charleton, *Physiologica–Epicuro–Gassendo–Charletoniana, or A Fabrick of Science Natural, Upon the Hypothesis of Atoms* (London, 1654), pp. 11-14; idem, *The Darknes of Atheism Dispelled by the Light of Nature: A Physico-Theologicall Treatise* (London, 1652), pp. 129, 136-37, 329; cf. pp. 70-71, 125-26, 217, 237.

> God is a most free agent [who] … created the world, not out of
> necessity, but voluntarily, having framed it, as He pleased and
> thought fit, at the beginning of things, when there was no sub-
> stance but Himself, and consequently no creature to which He
> could be obliged, or by which he could be limited.[44]

Taking thus his stand on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, he was
necessarily moved to reject, not only Plato's picture of a demiurgic
figure laboring to frame an ordered universe from recalcitrant
preexisting matter, but also Aristotle's notion of an eternal universe.
Recognizing only two limits on omnipotence–the law of non-
contradiction and a choice on God's part to oblige himself by cov-
enant, promise or pact–he did not hesitate, then, to vindicate God's
power in relation to the moral order by affirming that "by his right
of dominion" and "without any violation of the laws of justice," he
could have "annihilated Adam and Eve" even "before they had
eaten of the forbidden fruit" or had "been commanded to abstain
from it." And, in relation to the natural physical order, by insisting
that however "admirable [a] piece of workmanship … this world of
ours is," "it will not follow that [God] … could not have bettered
it."[45]

Like Gassendi and Charleton before him, then, Boyle was led to
exploit what I have called the operationalized version of the *potentia
dei absoluta/ordinata* distinction which understood the exercise of
the absolute power not as a hypothetical possibility but as a present
actuality. Hence the battery of overlapping contrasts he draws in a
whole series of works between the extraordinary and ordinary
providence of God, between God's "absolute and supernatural
power," the "irresistible power" he exercises as "supreme and
absolute Lord," and that "ordinary and upholding concourse [by
which he] … maintains the order of nature," "the ordinary and usual
course of things," the "established course of things," "the present
state or course of things," or, simply, "the instituted order." When
the scientific *virtuosi* went about their business, he insists, their
concern was not with what God, of his absolute power and as
"supreme and absolute Lord" could do, but with what *de facto* he

[44] Boyle, *A Free Enquiry*, in *Works*, ed. Birch, V, 251.

[45] Boyle, *Some Considerations about the Reconcilableness of Reason and
Religion*, in *Works*, ed. Birch, IV, 162; *A Free Enquiry*, ibid., V, 195-96.

has actually *chosen* to do.[46] Precisely because of that, no metaphysical certainty attaches to the sort of knowledge of the natural world to which scientists attain, for their conclusions "generally suppose, he says, "the present fabric of the world and the laws of nature," by free divine volition, "settled in it." Or, put differently, the only certainty they possess is a "certainty upon supposition, that the principles of physick be true."[47] To those laws God, who is "most absolute and free," is no more bound by absolute necessity than he was bound in the first place to create "the present fabric of the world." The laws of motion or laws of nature which he imposed on the brute matter he had himself created he had instituted freely, indeed "arbitrarily" (Boyle's term), and, if he so chose, or, if he so chooses, he could and can, as "supreme and absolute Lord" and by an exercise of his "irresistible power," "override," "suspend," or "control" those "settled laws of nature," or "ordinary and settled course of nature," or "ordinary course of things." As, indeed, he actually did when he miraculously delivered Mishach, Shadrach and Abednego from the cruel flames in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. This last, of course, a classic trope with a history in absolute/ordained power discourse stretching across the long years dividing Giles of Rome in the thirteenth century from Increase Mather in the seventeenth.[48]

Clearly, then, as the latter century drew to a close, and after no less than half a millennium of currency, the old scholastic distinction between the *potentia dei absoluta et ordinata* was alive and well and betraying unambiguous signs of vitality in the thinking of the scientific *virtuosi*. And what might one conclude from that? More

[46] Boyle, *Some Considerations*, in *Works*, ed. Birch, IV, 159, 161-63; *The Excellency of Theology*, ibid., 12-13; *Advices on judging things said to transcend reason*, ibid; 462-63; *A Free Enquiry*, ibid., V, 162-64, 170, 197, 211, 216, 223; *A Disquisition about the Final Causes of Natural Things,* ibid., V, 412-14.

[47] I.e. only a "physical" not a "metaphysical" certainty. See Boyle, *The Excellency of Theology*, in *Works*, ed. Birch, IV, 41-42; *Of the High Veneration Man's Intellect owes to God ...* , ibid., V, 149-50.

[48] See the texts cited above in n. 46. Also, for further invocations of the Nebuchadnezzar episode, Boyle, *Some physico-theological considerations about the possibility of the Resurrection*, in *Works*, ed. Birch, IV, 201-202, and *Greatness of Mind Promoted by Christianity*, ibid. V, 559-60.

than one thing, of course, but let me simply focus on the one that will serve to bring us back to Etienne Gilson. In the last of the splendid series of Gifford Lectures he delivered in 1931and 1932 and addressing the very spirit of medieval philosophy, Gilson advanced the claims that while

> the debt of the Middle Ages to the Greeks was immense, and is fully recognized, ... the debt of Hellenism to the Middle Ages is as great, and nothing is less appreciated; for even from medieval religion Greek philosophy had something to learn. Christianity communicated to it some share of its own vitality and enabled it to enter on a new career.[49]

In that statement, I believe, lies the seed of what a distinguished predecessor in this lectureship dubbed as "one of Gilson's most strongly defended positions, the need to grasp both the theology and the philosophy" of the scholastic thinkers "if one is to understand not only their solutions but also their mind-sets and points of departure."[50]

The same, I would now suggest, is true also of some of the leading natural philosophers and physical scientists of the seventeenth century, and it is evidenced by the vigor and enthusiasm with which they deploy the old scholastic distinction on which it has been my purpose to dwell. In common with their medieval predecessors, they, too, it seems increasingly clear, could benefit from the interpretative attentions of their own Gilson.

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[49] Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. A H.C. Downes (London, 1936; repr. 1950), p. 424.

[50] Marcia L. Colish, *Remapping Scholasticism*, The Etienne Gilson Series 21 (Toronto, 2000), p. 11.