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Tradition and Novelty in Early Modern Scholasticism: The Case of Nicolás Martínez and Leonard Lessius

INTRODUCTION

Comparisons between late scholastic authors and seventeenth-century philosophers belonging to the “modern” camp are often limited to the analysis of their respective ideas either in terms of continuity and discontinuity or, in a more sociological vein, in relation to their methodology, social background and even the media with which they conveyed the message.¹ In this article I will approach the comparison from a different angle, arguing that the differences between the early modern writers who work in the scholastic tradition and their “modern” counterparts can be highlighted by their respective relation to the past in general and to certain authorities in particular. This thesis aims to convey something more than the platitude that scholastic writers tend to indulge in uncritical respect for authorities whereas Descartes and his coterie have the courage to free themselves from the burden of the past. After many decades of research into the relationship between late scholasticism and early modern thought, this view must either be completely rejected or relegated to the mythology of modernity.² I argue that the microstructure of argumentation in many late scholastic writers is shaped by a tension between two opposing efforts: to reform certain aspects of traditional wisdom and to maintain it by incorporating new elements rather than adding them as new perspectives.

One aspect of this attitude has been intensely studied. The highly sophisticated scholastic system of doxastic obligations and theories about degrees of commitment, issues arising from medieval scholasticism, have been explored because of their historical links with the modern theory of probability.³ I fo-

¹ See for example the case studies presented in chapter VI. 4. in Leinsle 1995. 328 ff.

² More than a hundred years after the publication of Gilson 1913, this point hardly needs extensive argumentation. Since Gilson’s pioneering work, a large number of studies have confirmed that Descartes is indebted to figures of scholasticism in many ways. One of the best surveys of the outcome is still Ariew 1999. Also see Secada 2000.

³ For an overview, see Schussler 2014.

cus on another side of the story, employing certain interpretive techniques to consider the late scholastic attempt to align new ideas with authoritative views transmitted by tradition. I will advance two closely related historical cases, each of which represents a particular strategy for combining respect for the past with experimentation in unexplored intellectual fields. While relying on inherited knowledge and trying untrodden paths are inherent to creative thinking in all ages, a strong sense of doctrinal unity, coupled with an institutional *esprit de corps* and an aversion to what scholastic thinkers call *novitas*, are particular marks of post-Tridentine sensitivity in the Roman Catholic Church.

The case-studies address two different topics: the metaphysics of possibility and that of free will. These have been chosen as typical of the complex attitude to which, for the sake of brevity, I will refer as “techniques of alignment.” These techniques are advancing rational arguments for a position while showing that the thesis in question was implicit in the authoritative texts of the past already. The authors chosen for this study, Nicolás Martínez and Leonard Lessius, can be used to illustrate tensions within the scholastic tradition, for they both belong to the Society of Jesus whose members – despite the particular weight they gave to doctrinal unity and strict personal obedience – have often earned the title of *novatores* in the eyes of their more traditional-minded colleagues.

1. NICOLÁS MARTÍNEZ ON CREATED ESSENCES

The first case to analyze with an eye towards the techniques of alignment comes from a typical seventeenth-century treatise, *Deus sciens sive de scientia Dei* by a Jesuit professor at the Collegio Romano, Nicolás Martínez (1617–1676).⁴ One of the chapters of this *opus magnum* deals with the question of the necessary connection between God and the *possibility* of creatures. So much is clear from the outset that no necessary connection exists between God and creatures, for creation is not an automatic emanation of the divine essence. As this thesis is

⁴ Nicolás Martínez was born in Seville on January 21, 1617 and entered the Society of Jesus in 1629. He taught grammar, rhetoric, philosophy and theology in different institutions. Having taken his fourth vow in 1650, he held one of the two chairs of scholastic theology at Collegio Romano in Rome between 1659 and 1675 (see the *Elenco dei professori* in Villoslada 1954. 222.). He died in Ecija on September 30, 1676. Sommervogel 1893–1894. V. 634. mentions three published works by Martínez, the second of which is of particular interest to us. This is the *Deus sciens, sive De scientia Dei controversiae quatuor scholasticae*, first published posthumously in 1678 (Martínez 1678) and reedited in 1738 (Martínez 1738). On his unpublished manuscripts, see the Scholasticon homepage (https://scholasticon.msh-lse.fr/Database/Scholastiques_fr.php?ID=877) For the texts preserved in the *Fondo Curia* (Rome), see the analysis by Carla d’Agata at <https://archiviopug.org/2011/06/03/nicolas-martinez-s-j-1617-1676-analisi-codicologica-carla-dagata/> (accessed: 20. 10. 2020.). Many studies are available for general information on this subject. Let me refer to only two, one oriented towards theology and one providing a philosophical framework: Mondin 1996. 284. ff.; Sleight et alii 1998. 1195–1206.

de fide, that is, it serves as one of the traditional pillars of Christian doctrine, the question posed by Martínez does not concern the relationship between God and actual creation, but only addresses the *possibility* of creatures. He asks if the logical possibility of creaturely essences is given in a necessary manner by the essence of God.

One of the traditional answers to this question was provided by Thomas Aquinas. He held that possible creatures cannot be separated from the divine being, for their essences are nothing but potential participations or potential limitations of divine perfection, so once the divine being is given, possible modes of participation are also given.⁵ The truth of this explanation was hotly debated among late scholastic thinkers. This is how Martínez sums up one of the most important objections to Aquinas' view:

Others, on the contrary, consider that God – internally and by himself – is so independent of the intrinsic possibility of creatures just explained [that is, their logical possibility defined in terms of the non-contradictory character of their components], that they say that God would remain the same, and would retain the same power as he now enjoys, even if all possibilities of creatures had turned into impossibility or all their impossibilities into possibility.⁶

Presenting the arguments of those who challenge Thomas Aquinas on the grounds that no change in the modality of creatures would result in a real change

⁵ Cf. 1ST q. 15. a. 2. resp.: “Ipse enim essentiam suam perfecte cognoscit, unde cognoscit eam secundum omnem modum quo cognoscibilis est. Potest autem cognosci non solum secundum quod in se est, sed secundum quod est participabilis secundum aliquem modum similitudinis a creaturis. Unaquaeque autem creatura habet propriam speciem, secundum quod aliquo modo participat divinae essentiae similitudinem. Sic igitur inquantum Deus cognoscit suam essentiam ut sic imitabilem a tali creatura, cognoscit eam ut propriam rationem et ideam huius creaturae.” (4:202a.) Cf. “Propria enim natura uniuscuiusque consistit, secundum quod per aliquem modum divinam perfectionem participat” (1ST q. 14. a. 6. resp., 4:176b.); and *ibid.* ad 3.: “[Divina essentia] potest accipi ut propria ratio uniuscuiusque, secundum quod diversimode est participabilis vel imitabilis a diversis creaturis.” (4:177b.) Because *participation* and *imitability* are, as the last quote highlights, equivalents, the first is often replaced by *similarity* in the appropriate context: “Cum enim [Deus] sciat alia a se per essentiam suam, inquantum est similitudo rerum velut principium activum earum, necesse est quod essentia sua sit principium sufficiens cognoscendi omnia quae per ipsum fiunt, non solum in universali, sed etiam in singulari.” (1ST q. 14. a. 11. resp., 4:183b.) Cf. *Summa contra gentiles* I. 49, 13:142a.

⁶ Nicolás Martínez: *Deus sciens sive de scientia Dei controversiae quatuor scholasticae*, controversia 2. disp. 4. s. 1., p. 87a. (References are made to the Venice edition: Martínez 1738.) “Alii contra Deum concipiunt adeo ex se et ab intrinseco inconnexum cum creaturarum possibilitate intrinseca explicata, ut dicant eundem Deum futurum et eandem potentiam habiturum ac nunc habet, sive omnia possibilea impossibilia fiant, sive impossibilia possibilea.” The opposite, Thomist view is this: “Aliqui enim existimant Deum ex se et ab intrinseco esse connexum cum possibilitate intrinseca, seu non repugnantia creaturarum possibileum, et cum impossibilitate seu repugnantia impossibileum adeo ut si creatura possibile mutaretur in impossibileum, aut impossibile in possibileum, Dei quoque perfectio mutaretur et esset necessarium ponere alium Deum.” (*Ibid.*)

in God, Martínez points to one of the main sources of opposition to Thomist metaphysics in the early modern age. The intention behind this anti-Thomist argument, Martínez continues, is to bring out divine transcendence more effectively by severing the logical links not only between the divine substance and the created world as it exists after the act of creation, but also between God and the *mere possibility* of the creature, too.⁷ In accordance with a more general concern that permeates early modern metaphysics, the main purpose behind this objection is to put additional weight on the “greatness” of God by emphasizing his absolute independence from all finite beings, even from possible essences. From this perspective, the argument seems to be in line with early modern attempts to transform God into some sort of “Absolute.”

Let us dwell for a moment on the strange thought experiment presented in the above passage. It is an idea which could be regarded as the reverse of the famous supposition made by Hugo Grotius, who, in the Preface of his *De iure belli et pacis*, famously claimed that the fundamental principles of his work would be true “even if God did not exist” (*etiamsi daretur...*).⁸ It has often been noted since the publication of the book in 1625 that Grotius owed this *suppositio impossibilis* to certain late scholastic authors.⁹ The thought experiment Martínez refers to seems to be the opposite of Grotius’ idea, for what Aquinas’ opponents are asserting in this summary is not that finite essences would remain the same even without God, but conversely that God would be what he is even if no creature existed or was possible at all.

What is Martínez’s judgment on this approach, which claims to defend divine transcendence by loosening the links between God’s holiness and the possibility of creatures? At first glance, one might think that the Jesuit author – in accordance with the official regulations of his order – sided with Aquinas, but a closer examination of the details highlights some puzzling points in his arguments. Before solemnly announcing that Aquinas’s doctrine is correct, Martínez refutes all the arguments supporting St. Thomas’s position one by one. As a result, there seems to be a tension between his final statement and the argumentative part of his work which, strangely enough, appears to provide a thoroughgoing rebuttal of the Thomist position. I argue that despite these puzzling aspects of his reasoning, Martínez’s procedure is not contradictory. If one is prepared to make an

⁷ On the Scotist background of this much debated development, see Normore 2003. To the early modern debates Coombs 1993 provides an excellent introduction to the early modern debates.

⁸ *De Jure belli et pacis, Prolegomena* 11. §: “Et haec quidem quae jam diximus, locum aliquem habent, etiamsi daremus, quod sine summo scelere dari nequit, non esse Deum...” (Grotius 1853. xlvi). “And indeed, all we have now said would take place, though we should even grant, what without the greatest Wickedness cannot be granted, that there is no God...” (The Preliminary Discourse, Grotius 2005. 89).

⁹ A number of studies have documented the scholastic antecedents of the *etiamsi daretur*. See, for instance, St Leger 1962 and Crowe 1977. 223 ff. (chapter IX).

effort to dispel this seeming confusion in his work, one can detect some intriguing aspects of early modern scholastic thought concerning doctrinal authorities.

Martínez's reasoning unfolds in four stages. First, he presents the Thomist argument, the essence of which can be summarized in a few words: it is generally accepted that one of the divine attributes is God's perfect identity with himself (*summa identitas*). A self-identical being cannot be the subject of contradictory predicates at the same time and in the same respect, so for instance the same thing cannot be simultaneously white and not white. Now, if the modal value of a given possibility were to change according to the hypothesis stated above – were, for instance, the nature of light to become impossible (the result of which would be a *lux chimerica*) –, we would conclude that God had changed his nature and ceased to be the same as he was. The reason for this conclusion is that, having accepted that God coexists (or is “compossible”) with light, we must admit after the change that the same God is also compossible with the impossibility of the light. But this would be disastrous for divine self-identity: as essences belong eternally to God, a God who coexists with the possibility of light cannot be the same being as the one who coexists with its impossibility. The result of the Thomist argument, concludes Martínez, is that changing the modality would jeopardize the divine essence.

How convincing is this reasoning? Here is Martínez's judgment: “There are arguments that, when put on paper, make people laugh but surprise those who face them unexpectedly. These arguments are of this kind...”¹⁰ The reason, he continues, is that in the aforementioned example the contradiction lies in the object, namely, in the light, not in God. On the assumption that Peter is both white and non-white, the coexistence of God with such a person would lead to a contradiction, it is true, but the source of the contradiction in that case would be Peter and not the divine essence.¹¹ In light of this, Martínez proposes a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic contradiction. If Peter's nature involves contradiction, any other substance's coexistence with him would also be contradictory. However, from the perspective of the other substance, the contradiction would come from without. Martínez therefore concludes that, with regard to the metaphysical possibility of an object, the question of whether the object can be put into contradictory *external* relations is completely irrelevant:

My answer is that the self-identity of a being does not require in itself and intrinsically that no externally contradictory propositions be made about it. For even though extrinsic contradictions [*contradictoria extrinseca*] cannot be true about the same thing,

¹⁰ Martínez, *loc. cit.* 87b: “Aliqua sunt argumenta quae in charta risum in voce admirationem pariunt iis quibus improvisa adveniunt, eiusmodi est argumentum praesens [in quo nihil video acuminis, ut tanti habeatur].”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Martínez 1738. 88b.

this comes from the nature and the essence of these predicates – in the same way as two contradictory propositions cannot be true at the same time not because the nature of time excludes that light and dark exist together, but on account of the nature of light and dark.¹²

This is the second step in Martínez's reasoning. He argues against the Thomist doctrine, pointing out that the change of modality in a created essence would have no effect at all on the nature of God. "For me," he adds, "to coexist with a chimera, it is not my nature but that of the chimera that must be changed and made existent."¹³

Having presented and rejected the Thomist view, Martínez approaches the same question from a different angle, and this is the third step in his reasoning. The question he wants to explore concerns the degrees of necessity: he asks if divine perfection is more necessary than the possibility of creatures. He refers to two widely shared positions in this regard. The first comes from Francisco Suárez, who maintains that there is no difference in degree between the different types of necessity, so the intrinsic possibility of a creature, defined in terms of the non-contradiction of its essence, is as necessary as the existence of the divine attributes, say the omnipotence of God. From this modal equality it follows that, according to Suárez, no creature can be deprived of its intrinsic possibility without preventing God from producing it, which would harm divine omnipotence and destroy the very possibility of God.¹⁴ It can be seen that by endorsing the equality-thesis Suárez sided with the Thomists: the modality of the creator and the modality of the creature are of the same type and are linked to each other. The second point of view Martínez alludes to is the opinion of Gábriel Vázquez (1549–1604) who admitted different degrees of necessity and argued that changing a creature's nature from possible to impossible would not imply the impossibility of God.¹⁵ This is how Martínez sums up the opposing views:

The difference between these two opinions is that the latter [Vázquez's position] accepts the principle under discussion, namely, that divine perfection enjoys a higher degree of necessity [...], in order to defend that God bears no relation to the non-con-

¹² *Ibid.*, Martínez 1738. 89a: "Respondeo identitatem rei secum ipsa non petere ex se et ab intrinseco quod de illa non possint verificari contradictoria extrinseca, licet enim de eadem re non possint dici contradictoria extrinseca, id provenit ex natura et quidditate illorum praedicatorum, sicut licet in eodem tempore non possint verificari duo contradictoria, id provenit non quia tempus exigit essentialiter quod lux et tenebrae sint impossibilia, sed ex natura ipsa lucis et tenebrarum."

¹³ *Ibid.*: "Ut ego sim coexistens chymerae, non est necessarium mutare meam naturam, sed mutare naturam chymerae, et reddere illam existentem."

¹⁴ Francisco Suárez: *De trinitate personarum*, 9. cp. 6. n. 19–21 (Suarez 1856–1878. I. 739b–740a).

¹⁵ 1a q. 25. disp. 104. cp. 6 (Vázquez 1600. 803b ff.)

tradictory nature of the creature. By contrast, the first opinion, defending that God is connected with creaturely non-contradiction, must fight, by necessity as it were, for the view that divine perfection is no more necessary than this non-contradiction [in the creature].¹⁶

The debate between Suárez and Vázquez is closely connected to the question under consideration, i.e., the relationship between God and the metaphysical possibility of the creature. Suárez, as far as he finds this relationship necessary, comes close to the Thomist position, but the price to pay for the agreement with Aquinas is that he must commit himself to a common modal order encompassing both God and the creatures.¹⁷ Vázquez, on the other hand, wanting to preserve the hierarchical difference in necessity between God and the creature, rejects modal community and denies that the possibility of God and the possibility of the creature stand or fall together. Hence he needs to admit that neither would the impossibility of God imply any intrinsic contradiction in the creature (which would be Grotius' famous idea), nor would the impossibility of the creature entail the impossibility of God (which would be the reverse case mentioned above).

Before moving on in following Martínez's reasoning, let us pause for a moment to come to a partial conclusion. In this debate we can see the split of something that once formed a unitary whole: Suárez can only maintain the ontological asymmetry between the creator and the creature (a sort of Platonic hierarchy) by abandoning their modal difference, while Vázquez prefers to give up the ontological hierarchy to save modal asymmetry. In other words, at a point where the Platonic hierarchy of beings used to posit a broad difference between the creator and the creature, we find ourselves at a crossroads: either we join Vázquez arguing that the possibility of God does not depend on the possibility of the creature, an argument that jeopardies the ontological dependence of essences, or we agree with Suárez in saying that created essences necessarily depend on God, although this move makes them (the essences as mere possibilities) share the modal status of God. The choice is either – or.

Having shown all the pros and cons of the Thomist arguments, Martínez finally comes to the conclusion that the necessity of God is greater than the necessity of the creature's essence, because God, an infinitely perfect being, does

¹⁶ Martínez, *op.cit.*, controversia 2., disp. 4. s. 2., 90a: "Inter utramque sententiam haec est differentia quod secunda, ut defendat Deum esse inconnexum cum non repugnantia creaturarum, assumit hoc principium, videlicet, quod divina perfectio est magis necessaria quam illa non repugnantia. Prima vero sententia ut defendat Deum esse connexum cum illa non repugnantia creaturarum, quasi necessaria consequentiae lege defendit non esse maiorem necessitatem divinae perfectionis quam illius non repugnantiae."

¹⁷ As far as the concept of *possibility* is concerned, however, this account ends up moving away from the Thomist mainstream to such an extent that Jacob Schmutz sees Suárez's theory as one of the main challenges to the standard scholastic view. Cf. Schmutz 2002. 190.

not need anything else for him to exist. By contrast, the necessity of a created essence implies only a possible existence, which makes it much inferior to divine nature. This is Vázquez's view which, although it looks like a final conclusion, does not represent the last step in Martínez's reasoning. After bringing the point home, he adds one last step. "But once," he says, "something more necessary is connected to something less necessary, the former assimilates the latter to itself extrinsically."¹⁸ This sounds technical enough to hide the message. What Martínez is pleading for at this last stage is that although created essences are less necessary than God in principle, the fact that they are "implemented" or subsist in him – a relation which is external to their nature – confers on them the same necessity as possessed by God, *ex post facto* so to speak. At this fourth stage, Martínez seems to rehabilitate the authority of the Thomistic principle he has just ruined. By saying that the essences which, by their intrinsic nature, enjoy a certain logical independence participate in the perfections of God, Martínez stresses the role of the *external* relationship that binds them to God. Giving back thereby to Thomas Aquinas his original standing as an *auctoritas*, Martínez brings his doctrine back in line with the official teaching but does not restore the force of the Thomistic arguments. For in Martínez the relation between God and the essences is not the intimate relation supposed by Aquinas, but an extrinsic relation between the creator and the essences which subsist (one could say: happen to subsist) in the divine essence. In short, essences do not subsist in God as forms of participation, but as autonomous possibilities which, for some ontological reasons which remain external to their intrinsic nature, are incapable of possessing a real existence elsewhere than in God. Still more briefly put, essences depend on God but the basis of this relationship is not participation but *implementation*.

We can see a strange maneuver in Martínez's doctrine. While echoing Aquinas' teaching, the explanation he attaches to it runs counter to the Thomist doctrine and ultimately amounts to denying it. Or, more precisely, by applying the fundamental *distinction* between internal and external factors in the modal nature of essences, Martínez succeeded in making room for Thomist insights from an external point of view, while denying their relevance from another, internal perspective. This form of traditionalism resembles those renovated historic buildings where the precious façade is preserved, but the interior living quarters are completely demolished and rebuilt.

¹⁸ Martínez, *op.cit.*, controversia 2, disp. 4. s. 3, Martínez 1738. 92b: "Magis necessarium connexum cum minus necessario illud reddit aequaliter sibi necessarium extrinsice."

2. LEONARD LESSIUS AND THE CREATURE'S DEPENDENCE ON GOD

Similar methods can be observed in the writings of Leonard Lessius (Lenaert Leys, 1554–1623),¹⁹ a famous Flemish Jesuit, who, besides his main work in moral theology, was also a well-known expert on economic questions of his time. Furthermore, he was one of the first theologians to adopt a more radical form of libertarianism in response to the Protestant challenge. According to the libertarians (later called Molinists),²⁰ a voluntary act is free when it cannot be deduced from any previous temporal, logical or metaphysical description of the world.²¹ In other words, the knowledge of a free decision cannot be derived from antecedent causes, the content of the will can only be known through the knowledge of the decision itself. It is well known that this concept of free will poses serious difficulties for the Augustinian-Thomist account of providence: based on this hypothesis even God is incapable of knowing free decisions through the metaphysical dependence of all beings on him as the first cause of all creatures.²² In light of this, it is not surprising that Lessius seeks to prove that God's knowledge of created events does not rest entirely on the creature's causal dependence on the creator but is realized, partly at least, through the cognitive (or noetic) supereminence of God over all possibilities.²³

¹⁹ Lessius' biography is much better known than the life of Martínez. See Sommervogel 1893–1894. IV. 1726–1751 and Ram 1861. Lessius was born in Brecht on October 1, 1554. Having entered the Jesuit order in 1572, he completed his studies in Rome under Francisco Suárez and Roberto Bellarmino. Between 1585–1600 he was professor of theology at the Jesuit College of Louvain, where his arguments against Michael De Bay (Baius) against predestination and grace raised a bitter quarrel with his Augustinian colleagues at the university. He died in Louvain, 15 January 1623. (For a concise bibliography, see the *Scholasticon* homepage: https://scholasticon.msh-lse.fr/Database/Scholastiques_fr.php?ID=795, accessed: 20. 10. 2020.)

²⁰ From the vast secondary literature on Molinism I suggest some recent presentations: Cruz 2013; Marschler 2016. Chapter 2.3. (Molinism); Gerace 2019.

²¹ Cf. with the definition of free will given by Molina: „Quo pacto illud agens liberum dicitur quod positus omnibus requisitis ad agendum potest agere et non agere aut ita agere unum ut contrarium etiam agere possit.” *Concordia*, pars 1, disp. 2, n. 3., Molina 1953. 14. (In Alfred J. Freddoso's translation: “That agent is called ‘free’ who, with all the prerequisites for acting having been posited, is able to act and is able not to act, or is able to do one thing in such a way that he is also able to do some contrary thing,” Freddoso 1998. 463.)

²² This raises concerns for the interpretation of divine providence, as it runs counter to the famous principle by Aquinas: “Cum ergo nihil aliud sit Dei providentia quam ratio ordinis rerum in finem, ut dictum est, necesse est omnia, in quantum participant esse, intantum subdi divinae providentiae” (1ST q. 22. a. 2. resp., 4:265a).

²³ By the terms *cognitive* or *noetic supereminence* I am referring to a group of similar theses that attempt to reconcile divine foreknowledge with human freedom by putting the *ratio cognitionis* exclusively in the divine essence or, more specifically, in the epistemic perfection of the divine intellect. Therefore, in using these terms, I want to cover all versions distinguished by Matava 2016. 148 ff. The most famous variant of these theories, which significantly differs from the solutions presented by Lessius and Suárez, is the theory of *supercomprehension*

According to Lessius' critics, the noetic supereminence in the above reasoning may lead theologians to deny the Christian tradition, because it invites them to abandon the age-old truth that creatures exist more perfectly and – by implication – in a more intelligible manner in the First Cause than in themselves.²⁴ The charge against Lessius, Molina and their fellow-Jesuits is that they degrade divine perfection, as, by saying that the decision of free will does not preexist eminently in God, they are admitting that the act of free will is a metaphysically perfect and independent being (like God). The final verdict is that Lessius' view is injurious to Christian metaphysics, since it denies the principle that the closer things come to the source of their being in God, the more real and self-identical they become.²⁵

Given these criticisms, it may be surprising that the first authority Lessius chooses to cite in support of his views is Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, one of the founding fathers of the tradition from which he appears to be drifting away. He quotes *The Divine Names* in arguing against the traditional understanding of divine knowledge:

For the Mind of God gains not Its knowledge of things from those things; but of Itself and in Itself It possesses, and hath conceived beforehand in a causal manner, the cognizance and the knowledge and the being of them all. And It doth not perceive each class specifically, but in one embracing causality It knows and maintains all things – even as Light possesses beforehand in itself a causal knowledge of the darkness, not knowing the darkness in any other way than from the Light.²⁶

attributed to Molina based on the textual evidence found in his *Concordia* pars IV. q. 14. a. 13. disp. 53. Here, Molina characterizes 'middle knowledge' as stemming *ex altissima et inscrutabili comprehensione cuiusque liberi arbitrii* (n. 9., Molina 1953. 340.) For the theory of supercomprehension see Freddoso 1988.

²⁴ In Aquinas' phrasing: "Alia autem a se videt non in ipsis, sed in seipso, in quantum essentia sua continet similitudinem aliorum ab ipso" (1ST q. 14. a. 5. resp., 4:172a).

²⁵ See the Báñezian position summarized by Alfred J. Freddoso: "Bañezians have no special problem here: God knows conditional future contingents in the same way He knows absolute future contingents, namely, in and through His decreeing that they obtain" (Freddoso 1988. 51).

²⁶ *De divinis nominibus* 7. 2: Οὐ γὰρ ἐκ τῶν ὄντων τὰ ὄντα μανθάνων οἶδεν ὁ θεῖος νοῦς, ἀλλ' ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἐν ἑαυτῷ κατ' αἰτίαν τὴν πάντων εἰδησιν καὶ γνώσιν καὶ οὐσίαν προέχει καὶ προσυνείληφεν οὐ κατ' ἰδίαν ἐκάστοις ἐπιβάλλων, ἀλλὰ κατὰ μίαν τῆς αἰτίας περιοχὴν τὰ πάντα εἰδῶς καὶ συνέχων ὥσπερ καὶ τὸ φῶς κατ' αἰτίαν ἐν ἑαυτῷ τὴν εἰδησιν τοῦ σκότους προείληφεν οὐκ ἄλλοθεν εἰδῶς τὸ σκότος ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ φωτός. (Migne PG 3:869AB–870B; Dionysius 1990. 196–197.) In this 1620 work Lessius uses the translation to be reproduced in Migne, prepared by a Belgian Jesuit, Balthasar Cordier (1592–1650), long before its publication in 1634. (Or did the translator include in his edition of 1634 the rendering of such an excellent classical scholar as Lessius? Cf. note 19 below.) "Non enim ex rebus ipsis res discens novit eas divina mens, sed ex se ipsa et in se ipsa, secundum causam omnium scientiam et notionem et essentiam praehabet, et ante comprehendit, non singulis secundum cuiusque speciem intendens, sed secundum unicam causae complexionem cuncta sciens et continens; sicut et lux secundum causam tenebrarum

To read this passage in Lessius as a citation in favor of his point is confusing because one would be hard-pressed to find a better summary of the position which he wants to challenge, as we can see from the tenor of the passage taken from the *Corpus Dionysiacum*. The Areopagite claims that the divine knowledge of created things does not derive from the things themselves, but comes from God and exists in him as in their cause (ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἐν ἑαυτῷ κατ' αἰτίαν). Lessius, after having outlined, as it were, the structure of the traditional truth by quoting Dionysius, goes on to indicate some reasons for raising doubts about it.

Some will make this objection: how can God know all things by knowing his own essence when there are many truths which are not caused by him? Such are all the connections of free will with sinful acts in human beings and in evil spirits, for example the fact that Peter will deny Christ, Judas will betray him, the Antichrist will persecute the Church and extoll himself as an object of worship. These complex situations and proposals do not come from him. How then can he know them in himself as in their cause?²⁷

The objection is straightforward: the causal account of divine knowledge cannot explain how God comes to know the outcome of a free decision tending to something wrong. For the sake of simplicity, and hopefully without distorting Lessius' reasoning, I bypass the complications arising from the fact that the objection does not directly address the problem of free will but appeals to the widely shared principle that God cannot cause evil. Lessius' subsequent argumentation shows that, rather than focusing narrowly on evil deeds, his worry concerns free decision in general. As regards this more sweeping point, Lessius admits the difficulty raised by the objector and agrees that the phenomenon of free will poses insurmountable obstacles to the causal account. Lessius' follow-up argument is very instructive, for what he does after admitting the objection is not to repudiate the original Dionysian formulae but to offer a number of distinctions attesting to the polysemy of the text and the resulting tradition.²⁸

Accordingly, in the next step, Lessius submits that the Dionysian principle transmitted through the ages by a long and respectable tradition of commentary

notionem anticipat, non aliunde quam ex luce tenebras noseens." Leonardus Lessius: *De perfectionibus moribusque divinis* VI. 1. 3 (Lessius 1620. 71). English translation: Dionysius 1979. 150. [Instead of *casuality*, I wrote *causality* in accordance with the original.]

²⁷ *Ibid.* VI. 1. 5, Lessius 1620. 72: "Dicet aliquis, quomodo Deus cognoscit omne verum in essentia sua seu ex vi cogitationis suae essentiae, cum plurima sint vera quorum ipse non est causa: ut sunt omnes complexiones liberi arbitrii cum peccato in hominibus et daemonibus, ut quod Petrus negabit Christum, quod Iudas illum prodet, quod Antichristus persequetur ecclesiam, et faciet se adorari. Talium enim coniunctionum et complexarum veritatum ipse non est auctor. Quomodo ergo cognoscit eas in se tamquam in causa?"

²⁸ Lessius' interpretation is referred to, approvingly it seems, in the commentary to the 1634 Latin translation of the *Divine names* by Balthasar Cordier (Cordier 1634. 754ab).

can be formulated as follows: (P) *God knows all things by knowing himself as a cause*, where “all things” refers to the existence of anything God decided to create. Having summed up the idea of Dionysus’ thesis in this way, Lessius goes on to argue that (P) can have four meanings according to the four different meanings of the term *cause*.

(P1) God knows all things by knowing himself as a *necessary* cause.

(P2) God knows all things by knowing himself as a *free* cause.

(P3) *God knows all things by knowing* himself as a *free* cause that permits everything it has to.

(P4) God knows all things by knowing himself as a *partly necessary, partly free* cause.

These different renderings of (P) refer to four different theories about the causal role God is supposed to play in the universe. What makes the situation remarkable is that all can be expressed through the same time-honored formula (P). Lessius’ point is that if rendered as (P1) or (P2) the statement is false, but if rendered as (P3) or (P4) it is flawless. Let us take a closer look at the first two options. On reading (P1), it becomes apparent that the thesis is wrong, because the created world is not an automatic emanation of the divine essence. As created events do not flow necessarily from God’s eternal nature, God cannot know them in himself as if knowing their necessary cause. The central point in Lessius’ reasoning is the rejection of (P2). The claim that God knows all existent beings (all contingent things or events) in *himself as in their free cause* seems to be in accordance with the opinion of Duns Scotus and the scholastic mainstream.²⁹ From this perspective, God has always been free to create or not to create, but after he has decided to create he is able to know the contingent events of the world by consulting his own will which never remains without causal efficacy. Despite the consensus of so many theologians about this doctrine,³⁰ Lessius argues to abandon (P2) on the grounds that, taken at face value, it has negative consequences either for human beings or for God. If the will of God cannot be thwarted by the creature, (P2) is detrimental to human freedom, for in this case divine will would prevail over everything that happens by acting as inevitable fate.³¹ If, on the contrary, free will can counter divine volitions, they cannot serve as a source of certain knowledge for God, and the result can at best yield

²⁹ For Scotus’ view (with references), see Cross 1999. 52–55.

³⁰ See the position to which Lessius alludes in order to criticize it in the second chapter of his *De gratia efficaci, decretis divinis, libertate arbitrii et praescientia Dei conditionata disputatio apologetica* (1610): “Cognoscit igitur Deus affectus liberos in suis causis determinantis, cum universas causas creatas in sua essentia cognoscat, prout est prima causa omnibus causis esse conferens, virtutem communicans et determinationem praefigens ad operandum, cui moventi nihil valet resistere.” (Lessius 1610. 5.)

³¹ Cf. *De gratia efficaci...*, cp. 3. n. 11 and 21, Lessius 1610. 13 ff. and 20, see esp. 13: “Hinc sequi videtur primo vitam humanam perpetuo fato alligatam esse, nec posse nos plura aut

probable knowledge. Needless to say, in this case (P2) would annihilate divine omniscience.

The rejection of (P1) and (P2) is perfectly understandable in the light of Lessius' concern that creaturely free acts cannot be known to God as a result of his knowing his own divine will. The truth value of propositions about free events, Lessius insists, must be independent of the divine will. On the other hand, he maintains that God knows the future from all eternity, that is, the eternal intellect of God has a precise knowledge of the truth value of each pair of propositions expressing free alternatives about the future. But let us repeat the crucial point, that the medium in which God comes to know them cannot be his own will, it must rather be something prevolitional, because the divine intellect is cognizant of all the acts of a free creature *prior to* his making – and, consequently, knowing – any decisions. (Note that the priority at hand is the logical priority of the cause over the effect, so what we have here is the so-called “priority of nature” and not a temporal priority.)³² The fact that free decisions cannot be known through the divine will is motivated by the nature of freedom, a power which cannot be put into action by anything other than itself, so the prevolitional knowledge of human decisions in God is a *sine qua non* condition for saving the idea of Providence.

Thus the way out from the labyrinth for Lessius is to assert that before making any decision to create, God already knows all the decisions that any human being would make without constraint in all possible situations (that is, in any situation that would come true if it pleased God to produce it). In other words, before creation, God not only knows all logically possible worlds and all their possible combinations, but – and this is the central point of Lessius' reasoning – he knows how free agents would actually decide (independently of God) in any possible situation they could face.³³ For Eternal Wisdom knows “not only what things he would be able to produce, but even what they [i.e., free creatures] actually produce on each supposition and under each condition.”³⁴

pauciora facere quam facimus, nec alia, nec aliis temporibus vel momentis, nec aliis locis, nec alio modo vel ordine, nec circa alia obiecta, nec ob alios fines...”

³² On the concept of “priority of nature” or “instants of nature” in Scotus see Normore 2003. 133 ff.

³³ Lessius' arguments rely on the doctrine of *scientia media* that he shares with Molinism. Lessius' account of grace became widely known during his clash with the Faculty of Theology of Leuven in 1587–1588, the time of which almost coincided with the publication of Molina's *Concordia* (1588). Though their views, probably developed in parallel and without influencing one another, differ on certain points, they overlap considerably. For the historical relationship between the two Jesuit theologians see the dissertation of Eleonora Rai, who states that “i due teologi avevano sviluppato riflessioni analoghe, ma senza influenzarsi reciprocamente” (Rai 2012–2013. ch. 2, esp. 142). See also her rich and informative article Rai 2020.

³⁴ *Op. cit.* VI. 2. n. 18, Lessius 1620. 77. “...non solum quae fieri possunt a singulis, sed etiam quae re ipsa fierent a singulis quavis hypothese facta, quavis occasione proposita...”

Given these requirements, it is not surprising that at this juncture Lessius also seems to resort to the noetic excellence of God:

...God sees all of these things in the most distinct and perfect way, and what is more, He also grasps [in advance] with the greatest clarity what my free choice will embrace and do out of all the possibilities.³⁵

To sum up, what God foreknows about the outcome of a creature's free decision in a certain situation is not only a pair of alternatives (either *this* or *that*), but the definite truth of one of them through the noetic perfection of the divine intellect. This account, stemming from the distinctions applied to (P), results in a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of the time-sanctioned Dionysian formula. On the one hand, Lessius subscribes to the traditional thesis that *God knows all things through the knowledge of his own essence*. On the other hand, however, it is not the causal role of the divine essence that is of interest to him, but God's noetic excellence, because this is the medium through which his knowledge reaches everything. Divine knowledge, Lessius explains, "issues from the infinite efficacy of the eyes of God (*ex infinita efficacitate*) the rays of which extend to the fullness of time, attain and reach everything that exists at any moment."³⁶ Lessius' words may remind us of the Baroque iconography of the eye of God. The image refers not only to the Judge who "searches the reins and hearts" (*Revelation 2:23*), but also to the infinite penetration of the divine sight, a power that, according to Lessius and other *neoterici*, works independently of the causal order stemming from God.

As in the case of Martínez, Lessius' method also has its ambiguities. On the one hand, he clearly shows great respect for the tradition of metaphysics when he attempts to "shed more light on the subject"³⁷ by introducing a number of new distinctions. At the same time, however, one may wonder whether in doing so he ends up, perhaps *malgré lui*, raising questions about the strength of the whole edifice. Thus, the situation comes close to the one observed in Martínez's work. The authority of Pseudo-Dionysius is reaffirmed here in the same way as the *auctoritas* of Thomas Aquinas is reestablished in his Andalusian colleague's work. Both resort to metaphysical distinctions which are alien to the original context of the texts to which they apply them. New patterns of thought

³⁵ *Ibid.*: "Deus autem omnes illas distinctissime et perfectissime videt, et simul ulterius penetrat quidnam in singulis libertas mea esset amplexura, quid factura."

³⁶ *Op.cit.* VI. 2. n. 23., Lessius 1620. 79: "...id provenire ex infinita efficacitate oculi divini cuius radius se extendit per totum tempus, tangens et incurrens in omnia quae in aliqua parte temporis existunt." Cf. *In D. Thomam de beatudine, de incarnatione verbi...* (*In III. partem Thomae de incarnatione Verbi*) q. 11. a. 1. dub. 5. n. 14, Lessius 1648. 407b, where having rejected all alternative explanations, Lessius asserts that Jesus Christ was able to foresee future contingents "ex efficaciatia luminis" communicated to him by God (*ex peculiari influxu divino*).

³⁷ *Op.cit.* VI. 1. n. 7., Lessius 1620. 72: "maioris explicationis gratia."

that point toward some foundational values of modernity loom behind these moves. In Lessius, the Molinist account of freedom differs from corresponding medieval theories in significant ways. Similarly, in Martínez one can discern the contours of an approach which, without going so far as to divorce finite essences from God, gives them more autonomy by seeing them conceivable in themselves and independently of their causal origin.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As stated at the outset, the aim of this study has not been to analyze of basic philosophical and theological questions about free will and finite essences as discussed by Martínez and Lessius, since in recent decades these questions have been the subjects of intense scholarly interest. Rather, our attention was focused on how late scholastic writers relate to the Patristic and medieval heritage when using authoritative texts. While this broad question cannot be addressed in depth in a single article, even our two case studies have highlighted some points of interest that may contribute to an answer. In early modern scholasticism, ecclesiastical *auctoritas* continues to serve as the basis for theological argumentation and, when needed, various techniques of alignment are employed to fulfil the need for some kind of conformity. The crucial step in Martínez's and Lessius' arguments is to make distinctions between the various meanings allegedly implicit in the traditional doctrine.

Let me finish with a few more general remarks. The effort to integrate new elements into the scholastic tradition gives the impression that relevant initiatives cannot come from the outside, but must flow from within the tradition. Hence the main task of a theologian is not to modify the heritage, let alone to take issue with it, but to spell out its hidden aspects. One of the driving forces behind this methodology is a strong intellectual commitment to doctrinal unity which, coupled with institutional constraints, functions as a creative force shaping both ideas and texts throughout this period. The growing number of new distinctions that make room for different strategies of accommodation demonstrates the strength of this ideal. But, ironically, these efforts led to the opposite effect in the long run. Wanting to present new perspectives by stretching the interpretation of received opinions rather than judging them erroneous *tout court*, often helped to expose the equivocity of the tradition. So the interpretative efforts and the attempts at integration can be considered symptoms of a process which diversifies the tradition through the very effort to safeguard it.

Our findings, however, need some caveats. Note, in the first place, that in speaking of *integration* I do not envisage a two-phase process in which the creative work of knowledge-production is followed by tactical moves. Even though tactical adjustments may have occurred here and there, there is every indication

that the efforts for alignment were not a supplement to, but a fundamental feature of productive thinking. Advancing rational arguments for a position and showing that the position in question was implicit in the authoritative texts of the past were two interwoven aspects of one method. Secondly, the struggle for integrity did not exclude diversity. Scholarly work tolerated much more doubt and many more minority positions than the solemn announcements of the ecclesial authorities would suggest. Despite some post-Tridentine claims to the contrary, bitter controversies and theological debates were ubiquitous. Different factions and schools flourished, and an enormous number of texts were published with meticulous philological care, but despite the hard work devoted to translation, interpretation and publication, the observer could hardly avoid the impression that the dream of political and spiritual unity of the Church was over. The more the means of control became effective in an era marked by a denser network of communication, the more difficult it was to harmonize the dream of unity with the reality of divisions created by multiple meanings and irredeemable ambiguities. But however one assesses the situation, the techniques of alignment deserve to be studied as sources of impressive intellectual richness. Shaping religious self-identity in the face of confessional diversity, these techniques reflect theological reactions to the changing intellectual climate; they can be seen as attempts to forge a more thoughtful and reflective relationship with the past while responding to the challenges that arise from the new perspectives at a time of dramatic transformation.³⁸

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