Dorothy Emmett, THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CAUSES

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between being and goodness deserves to be his most celebrated doctrine concerning esse.

My misgivings about this little book are far outweighed by my admiration of it. It is what I will recommend to any non-specialist colleague or student who wants a good, brief, philosophical introduction to Aquinas.


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Emmett’s Causes is an important contribution to analytic and speculative metaphysics, and though most of her references are to analytic philosophers, she discusses several idealist philosophers and acknowledges a large debt to the middle works of A.N. Whitehead.

The first thrust of Causes is to show that the Humean analysis of causation, i.e., ‘event-causation,’ is unsatisfactory. According to event-causation the basic constituents of reality are events that occur and perish instantaneously. Consequently, the appearance of change in an enduring object and of efficient causation between objects are illusions.

Emmett argues that memory makes it impossible for us to believe this interpretation of causation. “On the model of causation as a sequence of events, a present state succeeds a past state, and that is all there is to be said. But memory suggests there is a great deal more to be said. What has happened in the past has had real effects in making us what we are . . . ” [93]. “We cannot doubt that our present life is shaped by past experiences” [91]. “Our primitive experience is of the derivation of what is going on in the present from what was going on in the immediate past” [88].

The way out of the Zeno-universe of event-causation is to start with the position that the basic constituents of reality are things, not events. Events are secondary to things, occurring because the actions of things upon one another cause transactions, impacts, operations that result in change of one sort or another, including the persistence of an object from one moment to the next.

A cause is “something on which something happening to something else depends” [87]. Emmett distinguishes two types of cause. In transeunt causation there is “a product apart from the activity of producing,” as when one thing acts upon another. In immanent causation “the product is not separable from the activity producing it,” as in a dance or a recollection. Transeunt causation depends upon immanent causation because the transeunt impact of one individual on another presupposes the persistence of each while the causal transaction takes
place and the effects are carried forward.

A person is an organism that, like all organisms, is a functioning system characterized by a pattern of development, maturation, senescence, and death. These changes are generated by immanent causation. Hence, mind and body are not different substances acting upon one another; they are "a unity with different levels of functioning which affect each other" [105].

In her final chapter Emmett asks in what sense God could be the cause of anything. God cannot be a transeunt cause because God cannot be external to anything in the appropriate sense, and nothing can be independent of God in the appropriate sense. However, God can be related to the world as immanent cause, and Emmett confesses herself to be forced by the existence of creativity to believe that there is "a basic kind of immanent causation in organisms as active systems" [108].

Emmett uses the mind-body relation to explicate the relation of God to each person. As the mind expresses itself through the body, grace expresses itself through the mind—forming and transforming it, sustaining, renewing, inspiring it. That we have such experiences of renewal, etc., cannot be doubted; nor can it be doubted that they feel as though they well up from within us from beyond us. Moreover, "If [this] transforming power comes up through deep energies of the psyche, from a root where mental and physiological are hardly distinguished, it may indeed be the working in human life of a creative power which is also efficacious at other levels of nature in whatever forms are open to them" [119].

This does not mean that the universe should be thought of as a single organism. It should be thought of as a nexus of individuals dynamically cross-related but not coordinated in an external way, as, say, the parts of a loom are coordinated by a machinist, or the interplay of the ponies, dogs, and parakeets of an animal act are coordinated by their trainer. The only teleology effected by grace is effected from within each individual. The notion of divine teleology imposed from without must be cast out along with that of divine transeunt causation.

Now I would like to raise four questions. First, on 115 Emmett rejects flatly the notion that God can be thought of as a person over against other persons. Does this mean that for her "God" is only a functional term that refers to whatever it is that forms and transforms us, renews and inspires us, a la John Dewey or H.N. Wieman?

Second, Emmett rejects classical dualism, holding that mind and body are substantially continuous with one another, and she insists that grace operates on us only immanently, as the mind operates upon the body. Does that not suggest that as mind-body is one substance, so grace-mind-body is one substance? So why does she not embrace some form of pantheism [115]?

Third, Emmett proposes that as the mind acts upon the body, so grace acts upon the mind. This seems to imply determinism because the body is ordinarily
thought to be under the control of the mind when one is acting; by analogy it would follow that the mind is under the control of grace when it is at work. Yet it seems clear that Emmett is a libertarian. Hence, she needs to explain why the parallelism that she claims regarding mind-body causation and grace-mind causation does not imply determinism—or in what respects it does and in what respects it does not.

Finally, Emmett says nothing about the problem of evil; consequently her notion of efficacious grace seems somewhat sentimentalistic. She speaks of efficacious grace as “a deep creative power which, instead of feeding a ruthless will to live, can feed a will to love, purifying the self-centeredness of the will . . . ” [118-9]. If this power is, as Emmett implies, the same one that is immanently at the base of the existence and persistence of all things, then either it must also account for physical afflictions, mental afflictions, urges to violence, etc., or there must be two powers at the base of all things—one beneficent, one demonic. Perhaps there is a better solution, but Emmett cannot on the one hand paint a picture of “a deep creative power” that encourages our will to love, and on the other hand imply that it is the same power that is immanently at the base of all things, without creating in her readers a sense of dissonance that cries out for resolution.

Emmett might reply that some of my questions are unfair, as she undertook to write only a monograph. Fair enough. Indeed, I add that she covers very well an astonishing amount of material in the space of so brief a book—including wonderfully handled issues that I have not yet mentioned, e.g., “total cause,” “cause as selective factor,” “linear and multiple causation,” “action,” and “persistence as the simplest form of change.” We are very fortunate to have these fruits of her research and reflections. I hope we will be further enriched by her answers to the questions above.