CHAPTER FIVE

POWER AND POSSIBILITY IN THOMAS AQUINAS

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Introduction

Those who are realists regarding modal claims are bound to say something about what it is that makes these claims true—what their ‘truth-maker’ is. Today there are two major competing theories about the truth-maker of modal claims. One of them is David Lewis’ theory according to which modal claims are made true by possible worlds, with possible worlds being taken to be ‘big concrete particulars’ that all share the same ontological status, none of them being marked out as the actual world in some absolute way: any possible world is the actual one for its inhabitants and for them only.\(^1\) The other theory is that adopted by Alvin Plantinga and others, who consider possible worlds not as concrete particulars but as abstract entities, viz. maximally compossible sets of propositions or states of affairs, one of which is the actual world in an absolute sense.\(^2\)

There is however a third possibility that has gained much less attention: the Aristotelian theory according to which modal claims are made true by the powers of concrete (actual) substances.\(^3\) That is to say, some non-actual states of affairs are possible due to actual properties of substances, namely due to their power to initiate a causal chain leading to the non-actual state of affairs. Here are some examples to illustrate this: I could stop writing this paper now. This is true because I have the power to do so. I could have become a knife grinder. Again, this is true because I had the power to initiate a causal chain leading to being a knife grinder now. And certainly I could have not existed. This is true, because my parents had the power not to conceive me. Such a theory has at least the benefit of ontological parsimony because it does not

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1 Lewis, “Attitudes De Dicto and De Se”, p. 148.
2 See Plantinga, The Nature of Necessity, pp. 44f.
commit us to the existence of such weird things as concrete possible worlds or abstract entities.

There is, however, a serious problem: it is difficult for the Aristotelian theory to account for global counterfactual statements such as ‘The world (as a whole) could have not existed’. Obviously, the truth of this claim cannot be based on powers pertaining to the world or to some of its parts. So the array of possibilities that can be based on the powers of actual particulars seems to be more limited than the array of possibilities in general. It therefore seems necessary to introduce a distinction between what is logically possible and what is ‘really’ possible, and admit that even if claims about ‘real’ possibilities are perhaps made true by substances and their powers, the truth about logical possibilities cannot be accounted for in this way. Aristotle himself points out that we need to distinguish between one sort of possibility that makes reference to powers and another sort of possibility that makes no such reference, viz. logical possibility. For a theist, however, there is still an option left: one could draw on God’s power and suggest that logically possible is whatever God has the power to do.

In the following I want to argue that such a modal theory is indeed to be found in Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). In the first part I will explore the question in what sense power can be attributed to God at all, in the second part I will try to show that for Aquinas logical possibilities are ontologically grounded in God’s omnipotence. The third part is devoted to some objections to this theory. In the fourth and final part I will discuss another objection concerning the contingency of the world that was, at least for Duns Scotus, so serious that he felt compelled to abandon the modal theory of Thomas Aquinas and to develop an alternative that avoids the appeal to divine powers and paves the way for a theory of possible worlds as entities sui generis.

4 “[...℄ ta dunata ou kata dunamin” (Metaphysica V, 12; 1019b34f).

5 A similar theory has recently been put forward by Brian Leftow (“Aquinas on God and Modal Truth”). However, for Leftow this is only the first step in a more complex argument, and he is more interested in Aquinas’ claim that God’s power is identical to his (simple) essence, leading to the problem how a simple God can be the truth-maker for a multiplicity of different modal claims. Actually, Leftow does not give much textual evidence for his claim that Aquinas wants to base logical possibility on God’s power, and Jeffrey Brower criticizes him (in “Aquinas’s Metaphysics of Modality: A Reply to Leftow”) for resting his case on one single passage, viz. The Summa Theologica I, q. 75, art. 6, ad 2. I think, however, that the textual basis for Leftow’s thesis is much stronger than he suggests. See also Brian Leftow’s answer to Brower in “Power, Possibilia and Non-Contradiction”.

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