

Article

Does God Intervene in Our Lives? Special Divine Action in Aquinas

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Abstract: Does God intervene in our lives? In this paper, I respond “yes” and work out a Thomistic account of special divine action in human life. I argue that God intensifies His action in moments that are particularly significant for our salvation. In such moments, God intervenes in a contingent mode and reorients our lives for the sake of our final good. First, I present Aquinas’ terminological choice of *specialis* and *intervenire* and address concerns expressed in the contemporary divine action debate against the term “intervention”. Second, I discuss the special divine action as a subtype of the special providence that rules over human beings. The special providence mirrors the special place of humans in the created order on account of their reason and freedom. Third, I show that divine interventions occur through irregular contingency. I refer to several interventions: test, habitual grace, God’s moving of the will, God’s enlightenment of the intellect, and punishment. Since it occurs contingently, the special divine action can be known through interpreting signs (a kind of conjectural knowledge). Fourth, I show that not all contingencies are divine interventions. To differentiate between them, I introduce an orientational criterion of interpretation: the transfiguration of a person’s life toward her final good.

Keywords: special divine action; Thomas Aquinas; Moses Maimonides; providence; contingency; freedom; conjectural knowledge



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1. Introduction

Does God intervene in our lives? One might object that “intervention” is redundant because God permanently acts in our lives. God is the first cause of all our actions and all events that happen to us. Since He exercises His providence at every moment, it makes no sense to differentiate between “permanent” and “special” divine action. Nevertheless, numerous Biblical passages indicate that God intensifies His action at certain moments to help or punish human beings. I defend this distinction with Aquinas’ philosophical tools, focusing on God’s non-miraculous interventions, which received less attention in the scholarship. I argue that the special divine action occurs in particular moments of our life, in unusual circumstances, through contingent causality, and for the sake of the person’s good. I start by presenting Aquinas’ terminological choice of *specialis* and *intervenire* and showing that his interventionist vocabulary circumvents the concerns expressed in the contemporary divine action debate against the term “intervention”. In the second section, I discuss the special divine action as a subtype of the special providence through which God rules over human beings. This special providence mirrors the special place of humans in the created order on account of their reason and freedom. Third, I show that divine interventions occur through irregular contingency. I present several interventions: test, habitual grace, God’s moving of the will, God’s enlightenment of the intellect, and punishment. Since it occurs contingently, the special divine action can be known through interpreting signs (a kind of conjectural knowledge). Fourth, I show that not all contingencies are divine interventions. To differentiate between them, I introduce an orientational criterion of interpretation: the transfiguration of a person’s life toward her final good.

2. Terminological Choices: *Specialis* and *Intervenire*

If a believer maintains that God is involved in everything that happens, it might appear superfluous to speak about divine intervention. God is always at work in His creation, “continuously active within the universe” (Silva 2022, p. 106). When He helps me in a particular moment of my life by strengthening my ability to solve a situation, He is not doing anything special. He has been by my side since my birth, and He is now simply continuing His foundational support. This concern might seem all the more justified to a Thomist, as God is the first cause of every natural thing, both in its nature and operations. In Aquinas’ view, there is no space that God does not inhabit, no God-free zone. God maintains everything into existence and orients it towards its final end, perfection, by causing its operations as a first cause. If God were to withdraw from a created thing entirely, the latter would not be able to exist anymore, let alone operate according to its nature.

However, Aquinas adds to this permanent divine action a special mode of action reserved for human beings. In human lives, God not only acts at every moment, but at some particular moments, He acts in a special way. Aquinas justifies God’s intervention with the notion of special divine providence for human beings. Unlike contemporary scholars (Russell 1998, p. 89) who use the term “special divine action” indiscriminately for God’s action in human lives and in non-human nature (for instance, in evolution), Aquinas restricts the term “special” to divine action in human lives. He talks, first, about a special providence that God deploys for human beings, distinct from His providence for all other beings. As I showed in a previous paper (Oliva 2024), this special providence delineates a particular course of life for each human person to sustain both her and humanity’s flourishing. To express this idea, Aquinas uses the terms *providentia* or *cura* (care), which he qualifies as *specialis* (Aquinas 2008, *Truth*, q. 5, a. 5; Aquinas 1989, *The Literal Exposition on Job*, 7:14–18, 14:7–13; Aquinas 1992, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 111). Second, Aquinas shows that this special divine providence entails divine interventions in particular situations that reorient a person’s life toward her salvation. The terms used in this context are interventionist and indicate the extraordinary character of some life moments that yield a strong significance for the overall life span: intervene (*intervenire*), help (*auxilium*), punishment (*poena*), circumstances out of the ordinary (*praeter consuetum modum*). For instance, the Aquinas (2020), *Commentary on the Sentences* II, d. 42, q. 1, a. 2, associates *intervenire* with divine grace: *etiam sine hoc quod gratia interveniat*.

The terminological hesitations in the contemporary divine action debate could find in Aquinas a possible resolution. Put in the context of his notion of special providence, the term “intervention,” loathed by many, avoids some concerns voiced in this debate.

In the first cluster of concerns, intervention entails a separation between moments of divine action on the one hand and moments of non-action on the other. Interventions are an irruption in the creation by a creator that is usually withdrawn from the world after He creates it. God is absent from the world, and He shows up only exceptionally to change some courses of events. Peter van Inwagen notes that “the word ‘intervention’ seems to imply that nature has some sort of native power, independent of God’s, and that in working a miracle, God has, as it were, to *overpower* some part of nature.” (Van Inwagen 1995, p. 46) This presupposition, which emerged in modern culture, is incongruous with theists’ basic belief that God remains connected with His creation in one way or another. “Intervention” runs, thus, counter to theism that is committed to a thoroughly relational worldview. This concern does not apply to Aquinas, though. For him, interventions are unthinkable apart from a framework of continuous providence. An intervention is not the exception to an otherwise inactive God but the intensification of an ongoing divine action. Aquinas’ use of *intervenire* shows that “intervention” is not a mere modern construct conditioned by a new, modern notion of a detached God. On the contrary, one can only suspect that the modern “intervention” is a secularization of medieval use. Understood in its original context, the term illuminates Biblical episodes of divine action and does justice to a life narrative in relationship with God (see also Larmer 2021, p. 191). The Bible abounds, indeed, with divine interventions. God tests Abraham and protects his son Isaac (Genesis 22), saves

Noah from the flood (Genesis 6: 14–22), and protects Joseph (Genesis 39: 21–23). God also punishes sinners: Cain for killing his brother Abel (Genesis 4: 9–16), the Egyptians for persecuting the Israelites (Genesis 11), and the builders of the tower of Babel for their vanity (Genesis 11: 1–9).

Another cluster of concerns regards determinism. For some contemporary critics, the term “intervention” presupposes that the world is deterministic. Since everything in the world occurs by necessity, through necessary causes ruled by physical laws, the only way for God to change the course of things is to intervene to break necessity. This threat lurking behind “intervention” is why, according to Alvin Plantinga, many theologians, scientists, and philosophers gathered in the massive Divine Action Project 1988–2003 were adamantly non-interventionist (Plantinga 2008). Indeed, numerous studies on divine action done through that project labeled themselves as “non-interventionist.” (see Wildman 2004; Kopf 2023, Part I; Böttigheimer 2013, p. 254) Aquinas escapes the deterministic threat because, in his view, the world contains both necessary and contingent causes (Frost 2014, p. 49). The divine intervention in human lives accords with this supple coexistence of necessity and contingency. As we will see, the special divine action mirrors the contingency of human free will and the causal openness of the world.

Finally, the last type of concern is the one I mentioned at the beginning, the most relevant to our discussion. Aquinas scholars worry that “intervention” does not do justice to the ongoing involvement of God in every creature’s nature, existence, and operations. God is the first cause of every existing thing at every step of its existence: He causes its nature, existence, and operations. Since God “already” acts on every individual created being, we must avoid duplicating His action, as Ignacio Silva warns. (Silva 2022, p. 126) Moreover, the term “intervention” fails to capture the loving presence of God in His creation, which is a fundamental trait of providence in Michael Dodds’s eyes: “His action is not called ‘intervention’ since that term fails to represent the intimacy of his presence. Every creature in its being and action is a sign of God’s continued action in the world, since none could exist or act apart from his abiding influence as the source of all being and actuality.” (Dodds 2012, p. 262).

To eschew this misunderstanding, Simon Maria Kopf proposes to understand divine action holistically, as an orchestrating of all causes, both in their individuality and relations. Appealing to Aquinas’ term *applicatio*, Kopf claims that divine action in a Thomistic context circumvents the interventionism/non-interventionism debate: “. . .divine application is not so much a divine intervention, not even a ‘non-interventionist’ one, but rather what I shall call a ‘holistic’ divine action ordering all creatures to their ends, by orchestrating them in their relation, disposition and proximity.” (Kopf 2023, p. 175). Kopf does not clarify whether his orchestra metaphor admits various degrees of intensity in divine action. My interpretation of “intervention” in Aquinas’ context accommodates this musical analogy. Like a conductor that becomes more energetic when the rhythm turns more dynamic or dramatic, divine action intensifies in certain moments while leading human life on its path. Intervention is this intensified action. Benedikt Paul Göcke offers a similar analogy: “Like a piano player whose left hand constantly plays the same chord, God’s special divine actions can be seen as his right hand adding now and then some fine tunes in order to create the overall melody of creation.” (Göcke 2015, p. 26). This musical analogy shows that interventions are seamlessly embedded in the ongoing divine providence, not detached from it.

A Thomistic paradigm of divine intervention must account for this embedding and, at the same time, maintain the unique character of special divine action. This paradigm includes both miraculous and non-miraculous divine action. While some Thomists like Emmanuel Durand believe that the term “intervention” should be reserved for miracles (Durand 2014, p. 51), I follow Aquinas’ terminology and use “intervention” also for non-miraculous divine action, the focus of this paper. In sum, I use Aquinas’ term “special providence” to indicate the permanent divine action in human life. I use “intervention”

and “special divine action” as synonyms to indicate an intensification of divine action in particular moments, thereby changing the course of life.

3. Special Providence, Reason and Freedom

Aquinas’ view of special providence relies on some significant ideas: divine goodness, human freedom, and salvation. The starting point is God’s goodness, the basis of creation and providence. God creates the world freely, out of His abundant goodness, and orients it toward His goodness as the final end (see [Kretzmann 2000](#), p. 156). God also keeps created things in existence and sustains their operations so that they can achieve the perfection of their nature. This continuous support flows from God’s goodness, too. A good creator would not abandon His creation but would keep caring for it: “For as it belongs to the best, to produce the best, it is not fitting that the supreme goodness of God should produce things without giving them their perfection. Now a thing’s ultimate perfection consists in the attainment of its end. Therefore it belongs to the Divine goodness, as it brought things into existence, so to lead them to their end: and this is to govern.” ([Aquinas 1984](#), *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 103, a. 1) Providence represents the ordering of things through God’s plan, as well as their government, that is, the execution of the plan. While God’s plan is eternal, the execution occurs through natural causes, called secondary causes, whose first cause is God.

As it supports them, divine goodness gives created things the power to act, maintains this power, and causes its deployment (as the first cause). The more it supports creatures, the more autonomy it gives them—a paradox that also accompanies Aquinas’ view on special divine action and human freedom. Indeed, granting created things their powers is a gift of God’s generosity: “Nor is it superfluous, even if God can by Himself produce all natural effects, for them to be produced by certain other causes. For this is not the result of the inadequacy of divine power, but of the immensity of His goodness, whereby He has willed to communicate His likeness to things, not only that they might exist, but also that they might be causes for other things.” (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, ch. 70; see also [Torrell 2008](#), p. 74)

This detailed support of creatures’ powers shows that the divine providence rules not only over universals but also particular things. Divine providence is minutiose, governing the large scheme of things and individual details. Aquinas assures us that the two kinds of government do not compete against each other. The providence over particular things does not undermine the providence over universals because they both compose the order that God imprinted in the diversified world: “And so He is not withdrawn from ordering the most important things because he dispenses the least important things.” ([Aquinas 2009](#), *Compendium of Theology*, ch. 131). The detailed providence rests, on the one hand, on perfect divine knowledge and, on the other hand, on the ontological dignity of particular things. First, God knows all created things immediately, as He is their first cause. It would be absurd if a creator would not know the things whose first cause He is. Second, detailed providence is equally important as universal providence, because particular things do not have a lower dignity than universals. On the contrary, they have more being than universals. The latter do not subsist in themselves but exist only in singulars. If all particular things disappeared, universals could not remain. (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 75) Particular things fall under God’s immediate providence even if, in the natural order, they are subject to secondary causes: “A first cause is said to have more influence than a second cause in so far as its effect is deeper and more permanent in what is caused than the effect of the second cause is. Nevertheless, the effect has more resemblance to the second cause, since the action of the first cause is in some way determined to this particular effect by means of the second cause.” (*Truth*, q. 5, a. 9, ad. 10; see also [Freddoso 1991](#)). Aquinas’ insistence on God’s providence over every individual being is, according to Sarah Lane Ritchie, exemplary for every theistic naturalism that strives to account for God’s presence in the world: “However, I suggested that the *sort* of thing Thomism achieves should be

the aim of all theistic naturalisms: offering an account of God's ever-present, ever-active involvement with all nature at all times." (Lane Ritchie 2019, p. 344).

After affirming God's providence over particular things, Aquinas zooms in on humans, who represent a special category thanks to their rational nature. This special place of humans in the universe entails a special providence: "And yet there must be some special kind of providence bestowed on intellectual and rational creatures in preference to others." (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 111). Aquinas borrowed this view on a special providence for humans from the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides. For Maimonides, divine providence is a rational order established by God that differs from the arbitrariness of a purely voluntaristic divinity. This intellectual element explains why providence is more intense when applied to created intellectual beings. The bond of intellectual likeness between humans and God grounds what Maimonides calls "individual providence." God takes special care of humans because they are, like Him, intellectual: "But I believe that providence is consequent upon the intellect and attached to it. For providence can only come from an intelligent being, from One who is an intellect perfect with a supreme perfection, than which there is no higher. Accordingly, everyone with whom something of this overflow is united will be reached by providence to the extent to which he is reached by the intellect." (Maimonides 1974, p. 474).

Aquinas owes Maimonides this insistence on the intellectual aspect of providence and the special care of human beings. At the same time, he does not accept Maimonides' conviction that the only individuals ruled by God are humans. As we saw earlier, the metaphysics of being and divine goodness led him to conclude that providence rules immediately over each thing in the universe, whether human or non-human. The question arises here: If God governs each particular thing, how does the special providence for human beings differ from His providence for non-human beings? The answer to the question lies in the fundamental difference between human and non-human acts. While non-human beings always follow the species' inclination, humans act freely, following their personal inclinations. The non-human realm is uniform. In contrast, the human realm is diversified by the personal characteristics of human action: "Again, whenever beings are directed in their acts, solely on the basis of what pertains to the species, the capacity to act or not to act is not present in them. For things that are associated with the species are common and natural to all individuals contained in the species. Now, natural functions are not within our power to control. So, if man were able to direct his acts only in accord to what is suitable to the species, he would not have within him the capacity to act or not to act. Rather, he would have to follow the natural inclination common to the whole species, as is the case with all irrational creatures. . . . / But many actions are evident, in the case of the rational creature, for which the inclination of the species is not enough. The mark of this is that such actions are not alike in all, but differ in various cases. Therefore, the rational creature must be directed by God in his acts, not only specifically, but also individually." (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 113). Because of this difference between the inclination of the species and the free individual act, providence governs humans both specifically and individually. God rules over non-human beings simply for the sake of the species. Aquinas gives the crude example of one particular sheep killed by one particular wolf (rather than another wolf). This is a particular order, yet it only follows the good of the species. In other words, God does not order it for any merit or demerit of this particular sheep and this particular wolf but for the good of the species, in the sense that each species has its proper food (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 7:14–18). In contrast, God rules over human beings both for the sake of the species and for the sake of the individual. The providence over human beings has an added touch. It occurs by crafting each person's unique path and following her merits and demerits.

In the case of human beings, divine action considers each human person's merits and faults. It is, thus, "customized" according to the ups and downs of human action that combines the spontaneity of free will with the contingency of events. Therefore, God intervenes in human lives to help or to punish: "Since a rational creature has, through its

free-will, control over its actions, as was said above (Q. 19, A. 10), it is subject to divine providence in an especial manner, so that something is imputed to it as a fault, or as a merit; and there is given it accordingly something by way of punishment or reward. In this way the Apostle withdraws oxen from the care of God; not, however, that individual irrational creatures escape the care of the divine providence; as was the opinion of Rabbi Moses." (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 22, a. 2). The ox receives individual care from God, but not of the sort that humans do. Humans benefit from intense interventions corresponding to their aspirations, needs, decisions, or failures. It would be absurd to expect an ox or computer to receive grace. The lack of freedom and personal trajectory of an ox or a computer (Pinsent 2015, p. 175) does not qualify them for such intense divine action. In contrast, humans need divine interventions because their lives exhibit an unpredictable decision-making process and an interaction with contingency. Consequently, these interventions act both externally and internally. They act on external events and states of affairs involved in a person's life. Furthermore, they act on a person's soul, bestowing upon her sanctifying grace, moving her will, or enlightening her intellect. Nonetheless, the divine action on a person's soul is more important than the divine adjustment of external circumstances. The mind, notes Sarah Lane Ritchie, is an important "locus of intensified God-human interaction." (Lane Ritchie 2019, p. 16). According to Justin Anderson, Aquinas fully endorsed this priority in reaction to the *Liber de bona fortuna*, a medieval compilation of Aristotelian passages about fortune: "...with the *Liber de bona fortuna* tucked underarm, Aquinas would have a clear rationale regarding the inward working of God in the human agent. This inner working would be apart from an external circumstance appointed by divine providence." (Anderson 2020, p. 98).

Because of this unique character of human lives, God's action in one human life is not replicated within another human life. In the physical world, divine action is followed by some replication. For instance, in evolution, the effect of God's action upon an individual is carried by the following individual, provided that the environmental conditions remain the same. This does not always happen in human lives, although God's action also occurs for the sake of the species, that is, humankind. For example, God's request to Abraham to sacrifice his son is not carried by Abraham's successors. They do not have to face the same kind of challenge. In this sense, Kierkegaard observes: "Abraham cannot be mediated, which can also be put by saying he cannot speak." (Kierkegaard 2003, p. 89). Abraham is doubtless a model of unconditional faith for the entire humankind. Nevertheless, one does not follow his model by killing one's son but rather by responding to God's call, whatever that might be. Abraham cannot speak because he cannot elevate his episode to universal validity: It is God's action for him alone. This is the meaning of Aquinas' notion of divine intervention that rests on the special divine providence for the human person, which creates a unique bond between her and God.

4. Special Divine Action and Contingency

As it befits human freedom and the unique path of each human life, special divine action occurs in a contingency mode. This mode is not an exception or a gap that God has to carve within an otherwise purely necessary or at least highly regular chain of patterns (Kopf 2023, p. 147). On the contrary, it corresponds to the contingent nature of human freedom and the openness of events in which it affirms itself. First, human freedom is, by nature, contingent. A person can decide A or B, A or the opposite of A, etc. Her decision is not predictable through internal determinations nor constraint by external pressures. If it were, it would not be free anymore. Second, human freedom needs to operate within a causally open space. If the future is not open, how can we be free to decide? Contingency is thus both the mode of human freedom and the mode of events and external states of affairs within which freedom operates. It comes as no surprise that the special divine action assumes this mode. Contemporary Aquinas scholars agree upon this vital role of contingency in providence in general and special divine action in particular (Dodds 2012; Durand 2014; Silva 2015, 2022; Silva and Kopf 2021; Kopf 2023).

Following Aristotle's theory of causation in *Physics* II, Aquinas distinguishes between necessity and contingency. Necessary causes produce their effects so that they cannot not happen. What comes about by necessity cannot not be. Contingent causes produce their effects so that they may or may not happen. What comes about by contingency can be or not be (*Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 67; Aquinas 1995a, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics* I, lesson 13).

There are several types of necessity. First, natural necessity pertains to an intrinsic principle, either material or formal. For instance, materially, everything composed of contraries is necessarily corruptible; formally, the three angles of a triangle must be equal to two right angles. Second, the extrinsic necessity is either the necessity of end or the necessity of coercion. In the former case, necessity regards the realization of an end. For instance, food is necessary for life; a horse is necessary for a journey. In the latter case, necessity regards the coercion exercised by an agent. For instance, somebody is forced by somebody else to do something (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 82, a. 1; Aquinas 1995b, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* II, lect. 15).

The special divine action does not occur through necessary causes. If it were so, it would constantly repeat every time the combination of necessary causes obtains. Moreover, if God would bestow upon human beings a new formal necessity, it would cancel their formal necessity, that is, their nature. For instance, if sanctifying grace were given as a substantial form, it would replace the human substantial form, that is, the soul: "And because grace is above human nature, it cannot be a substance or a substantial form, but is an accidental form of the soul. Now what is substantially in God, becomes accidental in the soul participating in divine goodness, as is clear in the case of knowledge. And thus because the soul participates in the Divine goodness imperfectly, the participation of the Divine goodness, which is grace, has its being in the soul in a less perfect way than the soul subsists in itself. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it is the expression or participation of the Divine goodness, it is nobler than the nature of the soul, though not in its mode of being." (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 110, a. 2). Divine interventions aim at helping human beings in specific moments while preserving their freedom and maintaining an open future for the latter to manifest itself. They cannot be necessarily repetitive or substitutive of human nature. They are, thus, contingent.

Contingency has, sometimes, a bad name. Aquinas acknowledges this reputation in some textual places where he associates contingently caused effects with defects and claims that God merely permits them. For instance, in *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, the chapter on contingency (chapter 72) follows the chapter on evil (chapter 71). Here, Aquinas compares God's permission of contingency to God's permission of evil: "Just as divine providence does not wholly exclude evil from things, so also it does not exclude contingency, or impose necessity on things. It has already been shown that the operation of providence, whereby God works in things, does not exclude secondary causes but, rather, is fulfilled by them in so far as they act by God's power. Now, certain effects are called necessary or contingent in regard to proximate causes but not in regard to remote causes. Indeed, the fact that a plant bears fruit is a fact contingent on a proximate cause, which is the germinative power which can be impeded and can fail, even though the remote cause, the sun, be a cause acting from necessity. So, since there are many things among proximate causes that may be defective, not all effects subject to providence will be necessary, but a good many are contingent." (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 72). If we would stop at this negative outlook, we would have to admit that God intervenes in human lives through the back door. Contingent special divine action would be just a maneuver of defects, like a hedge fund investor who speculates on a market crash. Intuitively, this does not square well with the divine goodness that grounds providence.

However, Aquinas corrects this apparent negative status of contingency and argues that God wills contingency for the sake of the perfection of the universe: "God wills some things to be done necessarily, some contingently, to the right ordering of things." (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 19). Gloria Frost notes that we must distinguish between contingently

existing effects and contingently caused effects: “An effect is contingent with respect to existence, or *contingently existing*, if it is such that the effect considered in itself could have possibly not existed. An effect is *contingently caused* if it is such that its proximate cause has the power to elicit the operation through which the effect is caused.” (Frost 2014, p. 49). The world is contingent because God creates out of love and not necessity, and thus, could have decided not to create it (see also Laughlin 2009). Within the contingently existing world, there are necessarily caused and contingently caused effects. The latter pertain to God’s distribution of degrees of perfection throughout the world. While they can fail, contingent causes contribute to movement, generation, and corruption. They compose a variegated world picture, which is beautiful in its own right (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 72). They sustain, in that sense, specific degrees of perfection throughout the world. For instance, a blooming flower can be impeded by freeze, yet its perfection and beauty are not lower than the beauty of unchanging numbers. Without contingency, the world would be less perfect because it would have a lower diversity of degrees of perfection (Te Velde 2013). Besides, it would run by blind necessity instead of being ruled by a prudential governor (Davies 2016, p. 250).

Furthermore, the contingency of human free will represents an exception from the flaw-based contingency. Unlike non-human contingency associated with a defect, freedom does not arise from a defect of human nature but, on the contrary, represents its perfection. Human free will expresses the rational nature of human beings, which makes them similar to God. It yields a diversity of outcomes that enriches the diversity of the world. For this reason, Aquinas claims, it makes sense that God preserves this human contingency even more than the non-human one: “Now, among inanimate things the contingency of causes is due to imperfection and deficiency, for by their nature they are determined to one result which they always achieve, unless there be some impediment arising either from a weakness of their power, or on the part of an external agent, or because of the unsuitability of the matter. And for this reason, natural agent causes are not capable of varied results; rather, in most cases, they produce their effect in the same way, failing to do so but rarely. Now, the fact that the will is a contingent cause arises from its perfection, for it does not have power limited to one outcome but rather has the ability to produce this effect or that; for which reason it is contingent in regard to either one or the other. Therefore, it is more pertinent to divine providence to preserve liberty of will than contingency in natural causes.” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 73).

Lastly, contingent free will interacts with external contingency. In this sense, John Bowlin shows that, for Aquinas, moral action entails a confrontation with difficult contingencies that escape the agent’s control. Virtue and achievement only arise through an effort to overcome difficulties (Bowlin 2001, p. 6; also Bradford 2015, ch. 2). We would not call somebody courageous if she had no danger to fight, no risk to take. The divine help is the counterpart of this difficult contingency: “For it appears that it is only with the assistance of God’s grace that he [Aquinas, n.n.] can imagine human virtue and happiness apart from difficulty, yearn for a life that is both human and god-like, and hope for that day when it will come.” (Bowlin 2001, p. 166).

In sum, contingency is not a second-hand tool in the hand of God but represents a causal mode important for the perfection of the universe. We could even call it, following Ignacio Silva, a providential benefit: “There is an advantage, a benefit, for the existence of randomness and chance in the universe, a benefit / . . . / that God puts to good use.” (Silva 2022, p. 1). In the case of human lives, it makes even more sense that divine interventions assume this mode, because it accords with the perfection of human freedom. As we saw in the previous section, human freedom is why God takes special care of human beings. It is appropriate that divine interventions support human perfection by interacting with human action in a similar mode (see also Schmidbauer 2003, p. 530; Matthews Grant 2021, p. 166).

There are two types of contingency: things that happen regularly, for the most part (*ut in pluribus*), and things that happen out of the ordinary or rarely (*in minori parte*) (Aquinas 1962, *Commentary on Aristotle’s On Interpretation*, lect. XIV; *Commentary on*

Aristotle's Physics, II, lect. 8; *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 74). The first type is a “regular” contingency, not much different from necessity: “Indeed, things that are contingent in most cases differ from necessary things only in this: they can fail to happen, in a few cases.” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 74) For instance, a tree’s growth is contingent because it depends on several factors (the right amount of warmth, sunlight, rain, etc.). In some cases, trees do not grow; however, in most cases, they do, following their nature.

The second type of contingency is chance or fortune in the specific case of human life. In chance, the effect is not directly caused (or intended) by any participant cause: “Now, from the concurrence of two or more causes it is possible for some chance event to occur, and thus an unintended end comes about due to this causal concurrence.” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 74; *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics* VI, lect. 3; see also Shields and Pasnau 2016, p. 185). Aquinas explains chance also in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic ends: “When things which come to be simply for the sake of something do not come to be for the sake of that which happens, but for the sake of something extrinsic, then we say that these things come to be by chance. But we say that among the things which come to be by chance, only those things which happen in those who have free choice come to be by fortune.” (*Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* II, lect. 10).

Through what type of contingency does the special divine action occur? Is it the regular contingency? If that were the case, the special divine action would be repeated constantly as long as no impeding factors intervened. Here, we face an objection similar to the one we raised against necessity. Perhaps, in this case, special divine action would be less repetitive than in the necessary scenario and would not eliminate human nature. Nonetheless, it would still be repetitive, even if to a lower degree. Moreover, it would depend on the absence of impeding factors, as if God would intervene only when impeding factors do not stay in His way.

Thus, the only viable alternative is the second type of contingency, which entails unusual circumstances. This contingency arises accidentally without a natural cause, although it occurs through a chain of natural causes. The *per se* cause of such contingent effects can only be the providence: “No natural cause can therefore have for its proper effect that a man intending to dig a grave finds a treasure./.../ What happens here by accident, both in natural things and in human affairs, is reduced to a pre-ordaining cause, which is Divine Providence.” (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 116. a. 1). Consider the example of a master who sends two servants separately to the same place. The servants do not know about each other’s tasks. Thus, the two servants’ meeting happens by chance because they did not intend to meet. Like God, the master intended their meeting because he sent them to that place (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 116).

God’s intervention occurs in the mode of irregular contingency. Aquinas defends this idea in his interpretation of the Book of Job. Job is very pious and virtuous, has a happy family, and enjoys prosperity and social prestige. Satan challenges God that Job is only pious because he did not face adversity. God allows Satan to harm Job so that his faith may become manifest to all. In Aquinas’ interpretation, Job’s hardship comes about through a divine test, even though the executor of the test is Satan. Job understands that he is experiencing a divine intervention because the circumstances of his hardship differ from ordinary conditions in which hardships occur (*praeter consuetum modum humanarum*). “Now next he shows that such adversities have been sent upon him by God from the fact that they have arrived outside the usual manner of human adversities.” (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 30:10–17). Aquinas describes in detail these conditions and underlines their unusual character, different from the usual human affairs. He calls them “signs” because they indicate special divine action. These signs pertain to the unusual magnitude and manner of Job’s adversities.

The unusual magnitude of Job’s hardship lies in its overwhelming, sudden, and holistic character. (1) First, Job did not lose his prosperity gradually, as usual in human affairs, but suddenly. Aquinas comments that such sudden loss is unlikely to happen through mere chance: “It does not seem possible that this happened by sudden disaster, but

as a result of divine ordination alone." (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 16:10–15). (2) Second, Job was ruined totally, namely lost his entire prosperity. Usually, people lose only part of their prosperity. (3) Third, his adversities occur simultaneously. Usually, adversities come progressively. But Job loses his possessions and his children and becomes sick all at once. (4) Fourth, Job cannot do anything to resist his adversities and impede them from taking hold of his life. Usually, people can do something to slow down or mitigate their hardship, either by themselves or helped by others. Yet, Job's adversities came without any possibility of resistance or remedy, which, Aquinas shows, is a sign that they arose through divine intervention: "The fourth sign is that because his trial proceeded from divine providence, it could neither be resisted nor could a remedy be applied, according to what was said above at 9:13: 'God, whose anger no one can resist. . .'" (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 16:10–15).

The unusual manner of Job's adversities is visible in the unusual dynamics of the raids he was the victim of. (1) First, the raids came from an unusual place, namely from the South. Usually, in those lands, raids came from the North, where warlike people lived. In Job's case, his afflictions began with the Sabaeans, who came from the South, taking his cater and killing his herdsmen. (2) Second, the multiplicity of the raid was different from the usual harms that only afflict an aspect or a few aspects of the person. The raids occurred with easiness, without encountering any obstacle: "Hence, he adds *They have undermined my feet*, that is, they have destroyed all my faculties, and they have done it easily and totally. Hence, he adds *and they have oppressed*, namely, my feet just mentioned, *with their paths*, as in their passing without difficulty. And he adds an example when he says *as if with waves*. For the waves of the sea both cover the land or a ship suddenly and swallow it up totally." (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 30:10–17). (3) Third, the raids were efficient and fully destroyed his life. Usually, even successful attacks still have some flaw. Job's enemies, on the contrary, succeeded in their attacks. This unusual total success indicates a special divine action: "Third, he shows from their effect that such adversities were sent by God since, namely, through them he had been left totally destitute." (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 30:10–17).

This extraordinary character of his adversities, different from the usual manner and magnitude of human hardship, leads Job to believe that God tests him through Satan. Aquinas comments: "And lest anyone should believe that Job was of the opinion that such punishments had not been inflicted on him by God, since he had said that he had been afflicted by an enemy, to exclude this belief he adds *God has shut me up with the iniquitous one*, that is, the devil, namely turning me over to his power, and *has betrayed me into the hands of impious men*, referring to those who, at the instigation of the devil, had afflicted him either by words or by deeds. For Job understands that his afflictions had been imposed upon him by the devil, of course, but with God's permission." (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 16:10–15; see also Chardonnens 1997, p. 272). The test matches the strength of Job's faith and virtue. "Nevertheless, He knows my way, and He will prove me like gold which passes through fire" (*Job* 23:10). Job understands, thus, that his virtue must be manifested to all human beings the same way in which the true nature of gold is manifested in its resistance to fire: "And just as gold does not become true gold but its genuineness is manifested to men as a result of the fire, so Job has been proved through adversity not so that his virtue might appear before God but so that it might be manifested to men." (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 16:10–15, 23:8–13). At the same time, the full extent of this test remains enigmatic since Job adds that he is confused and fears God: "For He Himself is alone, and no one can observe His reflections, and His soul has done whatever it wished since He has fulfilled His wish in me, and many other similar things are in his power; therefore, I am disturbed, and considering Him I am worried by fear. God has soften my heart and the Almighty has thrown me into confusion." (*Job* 23:13–16).

Job's test is based primarily on external contingency, namely on adversities brought against him by enemies and Satan. Other divine interventions act directly on a person's soul by granting it a special quality, enlightening the intellect, or moving the will. Sancti-

fyng (habitual) grace is an accidental form that elevates the soul to a spiritual existence, facilitating moral life, knowledge, and the relationship with God: “Grace, as a quality, is said to act upon the soul, not after the manner of an efficient cause, but after the manner of a formal cause, as whiteness makes a thing white.” (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 110, a. 2). The transfiguration of the soul occurs in an accidental mode: “In the same way, because accidents do not subsist, they do not properly have existence, but the subject is of a particular sort as a result of them. For this reason they are properly said to be ‘of a being’ rather than beings. For something to be in some category of accident, then, it does not have to be composite with a real composition, but may have only a conceptual composition from genus and differentia. Such composition is found in grace.” (*Truth*, q. 27, a. 1).

Likewise, God gives grace contingently when He moves the will or enlightens the intellect in particular moments. God moves the will to help somebody face a difficult situation or ease them into conversion: “First, inasmuch as man’s soul is moved by God to know or will or do something, and in this way the gratuitous effect in man is not a quality, but a movement of the soul.” (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 110, a. 2). God enlightens the intellect, especially regarding matters humans cannot know naturally, like future contingents. For instance, God gives the prophetic light “by way of a passion or transitory impression./.../ Hence it is that even as the air is ever in need of a fresh enlightening, so too the prophet’s mind is always in need of a fresh revelation.” (*Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 171, a. 2).

Finally, God also punishes human beings contingently. Aquinas distinguishes between three types of punishment according to three types of order violated by the person at fault: the order of one’s reason, the order of somebody else regarding spiritual and temporal matters (like the political order), and the universal order of the divine government (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 87, a. 1). When seen from the perspective of the highest and widest order of divine providence, punishment acquires aspects not found in human punishment, as Peter Koritansky shows (Koritansky 2011, p. 107). God can punish not only for an actual sin but also for the original sin, as a medicinal punishment meant to manifest divine order. Thus, Aquinas comments on the case of the blind man in *John*: “If, therefore, an infirmity occurs in order that God’s works be manifested, and God is made known through this manifestation, it is clear that such bodily infirmities occur for a good purpose.” (Aquinas 2013, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, ch. 9, lect. 1).

Furthermore, divine punishments do not necessarily follow human expectations. In this sense, Aquinas notes that some people do not become aware of divine punishments because they are too focused on objects of sense (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 146). Because they cling to temporal goods, they do not notice the withdrawal of spiritual goods: “With them, injuries of the body are deemed the greatest punishment, together with the loss of external things; whereas they regard disorder of soul, loss of virtue, and the deprivation of the divine enjoyment, in which man’s ultimate felicity consists, as of slight or no importance. Now, the result of this is that they do not think that men’s sins are punished by God, for they see many sinners enjoying bodily vigor, highly favored by external good fortune, of which goods virtuous men are sometimes deprived.” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 141).

Lastly, divine punishments do not fit into a predictable chronology because they pertain to the wide order of providence. Usually, human punishments immediately follow a violation. Once police apprehend a murderer, the trajectory of punishment is pre-established: trial, then a prison sentence. God, on the other hand, might intervene exactly when one does not expect Him. The timing of divine intervention is unpredictable because it pertains to the larger plan of God, which connects particular matters in a web inaccessible to human knowledge. As David Fergusson puts it, “The economy of salvation betokens the foresight and wisdom of God, rather than a sudden scrambling to initiate a recovery process.” (Fergusson 2018, p. 38). Consider Milady de Winter, one of the most famous villains in literature. Milady de Winter is the right hand of Cardinal Richelieu in Alexander Dumas’ *Three Musketeers*; her role is to work behind the curtains on behalf of the Cardinal against the king. She is a fascinating villain endowed with remarkable qualities: smart,

beautiful, and insightful. However, she is also cruel, manipulative, and unscrupulous. Her evolution in the novel shows a turning point of providence. Her qualities are initially matched by favorable circumstances that allow her to realize her plans and escape dangers or justice. However, at a certain point, providence replaces favorable circumstances with unfavorable ones. “Great criminals bear a sort of predestination with them that enables them to surmount all obstacles and to escape all dangers until that moment which providence, grown weary, has marked as the shoal on which their impious fortune will founder. It was so with Milady. She passed between the cruisers of two nations and arrived at Boulogne without mishap.” (Dumas 2006, p. 531). Before, everything was easy for her. Suddenly, everything becomes difficult at the climactic moment of the novel, when she is apprehended by the three musketeers on behalf of the king, put on trial and condemned. Dumas describes this turning point as a withdrawal of divine help: “She understood that heaven was refusing her its aid, and she remained in the attitude in which she found herself, her head bowed and her hands joined.” (Dumas 2006, p. 575). Milady understands that she is dealing with God’s special intervention, which ends her cynical machinations. The sudden hardening of her circumstances is indeed unusual and symmetrically opposed to the easiness of her evildoing.

We can thus conclude that divine interventions occur in the mode of contingency and in unusual circumstances. One can ask, though, whether all contingent, unusual events in our lives qualify as special divine action. Is winning a lottery a divine reward? Is being hit by a hurricane a divine punishment? Cornelio Fabro thinks that, after reading the *Liber de bona fortuna*, Aquinas adopted Aristotle’s distinction between divine and natural fortune. In *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle writes: “It is clear, then, that there are two kinds of good luck, the one divine—and so the lucky seem to succeed owing to god—, the other natural.” (Aristotle 1995, 1248b, pp. 2–4). Fabro shows that Aquinas brings both divine and natural luck under the purview of providence. While the natural fortune is a matter of the overall arrangement of providence, the divine fortune represents a direct divine intervention (Fabro 1988, p. 570). So, not all contingent events are divine fortune. Some are simply natural fortune.

Once this difference is established, how do we know if a life event or mental state pertains to divine fortune? Aquinas argues that, first of all, we can never know with certainty whether we experience a divine intervention due to its contingent character and the incomprehensibility of divine will: “Concerning divine judgments the most certain and demonstrative proof cannot be introduced because of the incomprehensibility of the divine will. Hence, he adds *For He Himself is alone*, as if to say: He has no other creature similar or equal to Him, and consequently not His will either. Hence he adds *and no one can observe*, that is, know with certainty, *His reflections*, that is, the dispositions of his judgments” (*The Litteral Exposition on Job*, 23:8–13; see also 11:1–7). We can only have conjectural knowledge of divine interventions. Aquinas defines this type of knowledge (Franklin 2001, p. 203) based on the contingent character of its object and opposes it to certain knowledge, which deals with necessary objects: “Other future effects, however, do not exist so determinately in their causes that something else might not happen; their causes are merely disposed more to one effect than another; and these effects are contingent events, which happen more or less often as the case may be. As a consequence, effects of this type cannot be known in their causes with infallibility, but only with conjectural certitude.” (*Truth* I, q. 8, a. 12).

I propose to distinguish between two types of conjectural knowledge that mirror the two types of contingency: regular and irregular. Applied to regular contingency, conjectural knowledge works with probability and concludes with approximate prediction. “We can conjecture about future effects depending upon free choice by considering men’s habits and temperaments, which incline them to one course of action.” (*Truth*, q. 8, a. 12; see also Aquinas 2012, *The Power of God*, q. 5, a. 6).

Applied to irregular contingency, conjectural knowledge proceeds through sign interpretation. As we have seen earlier, Aquinas called the extraordinary circumstances of

Job's adversities "signs" of a divine intervention. Job's reflections on his hardship include interpreting signs that make him aware of the divine intervention. Moreover, the interpretation of signs is not limited to the divine action on external circumstances but also regards the divine action on the human soul. When discussing whether a person can know that she has grace, Aquinas shows that such knowledge occurs through revelation or through the interpretation of signs. While revelation depends exclusively on God, conjectural knowledge is open to everybody: "Thirdly, things are known conjecturally by signs; and thus anyone may know he has grace, when he is conscious of delighting in God, and of despising worldly things, and inasmuch as a man is not conscious of any mortal sin. / . . . / Whoever receives it knows by experiencing a certain sweetness, which he who does not receive it, does not experience." (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 112, a. 5; see also *Commentary on the Sentences* I, d. 17, q. 1, a. 4; *Commentary on the Sentences* III, d. 23, a. 2).

However, interpretation by itself is not enough. How do we avoid superstitious and arbitrary interpretations that inflate the significance of some life events? It seems that we need an orientational criterion. Since the special divine action is a subtype of providence, this orientation emerges from the teleology of providence, that is, from the final end of the human person.

5. Special Divine Action and the Final Good of the Person

The special divine action does not occur only to fix a temporary issue. Instead, it aims at transfiguring one's life toward the final good of the person, namely union with God. An interpretation of life events that might constitute divine interventions must account for the overall order of one's life toward this final goal. We can miss this underlying order if we focus on divine action as a mere episode of divine will. As Simon Maria Kopf argues, this might be the problem with some contemporary theories of special divine action that work with a narrow action model fashioned after human action. Divine providence has a different breath; it spans over the entire order of the universe and aims at an end that is God Himself. Therefore, Kopf thinks Aquinas' prudential-ordinative paradigm can contribute much to the contemporary debate (Kopf 2023, p. 107). Providence is a rational order oriented toward fulfilling human nature through union with God. Divine interventions are not merely voluntaristic initiatives but manifest the prudential arrangement of human life toward the final good.

Human beings reach their perfection through beatitude, the vision of God and union with God in the afterlife. This is a special end (*specialis finis*), which differentiates humans from non-human creatures: "But He directs righteous men to Himself as to a special end, which they seek, and to which they wish to cling." (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 109, a. 7). Thus, humans have a special place within providence both regarding their nature (as we saw in Section 3) and their end. While it perfects human nature, beatitude surpasses its boundaries. In other words, humans are created for a goal that fully perfects them but cannot be achieved with human efforts alone. The final good of the human person is supernatural. To reach that, humans need additional help from God (*Summa Theologiae*, q. 109). Through His interventions, God stirs the course of human lives toward the supernatural good. Divine interventions are not disruptions of nature but rather additions that strengthen the orientation of persons toward this supernatural good. "Other creatures, which are irrational, are accepted by God only with regard to natural goods. Consequently, in their case divine acceptance does not add anything above the natural condition by which they are made proportionate to such goods. But man is accepted by God with regard to a supernatural good; and so there is required something added to his natural gifts by which he is proportioned to that good (*Truth*, q. 27, a. 1).

The final end guides our lives and engages us in all particular moments. Yet, as Emmanuel Durand remarks, not all moments of human life are equivalent; some have a higher stake in salvation than others (Durand 2014, p. 177). God intervenes, especially in those high-stakes moments. His intervention brings up a novelty in our lives, calls for an interior engagement, has long-term consequences, and stimulates our interpretation

(Durand 2014, p. 89). At the same time, Durand warns that, although they create novelty, some special divine actions in everyday life might be less bombastic than one would imagine when comparing them to the grand Biblical events (for instance, the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ). In such cases, the concerned person might not even realize, at the moment, that she is dealing with a divine intervention. For this reason, Durand resists using the term “event” employed in religious phenomenology (Durand 2014, p. 80). “Event” captures the novelty and soteriological quality of the special divine action but does not admit that said action can often be hidden or less distinguishable from the rest of natural processes or states of affairs.

Aquinas shows how the special divine action in Job’s case involves his salvation (see also Ausin 1976, p. 538; Nutt 2015, p. 57). First, God puts humans sometimes on trials for their salvation: “Now it happens sometimes that God permits either trials or even more spiritual defects to befall some men in order to procure their salvation.” (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 9:11–15). Commenting on the Biblical description of human life as a military campaign, Aquinas compares God to a general who sends to battle his best soldiers. Job is, in this sense, chosen by God for a tough battle: “It is manifest that the general of an army does not spare vigorous soldiers from dangers or labors, but as the plan of the campaign requires, he sometimes exposes them both to greater labors and to greater dangers, but after victory has been won he honors the more vigorous soldiers more. /.. / Hence, neither is divine providence disposed to exempt good men more from the adversities and labors of the present life, but to reward them more generously in the end.” (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 7:1–6). Job is tested to manifest virtue not only for his own good but also for the good of the others who can take him as a model: “Now one should consider that God not only orders the life of just men to their own good but also makes it conspicuous to others.” (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 1:7–9). Second, Aquinas shows that God’s restoration of Job’s health, prosperity, and family in the aftermath of his adversities is a sign of Job’s salvation: “Hence, by the fullness of days is also designated his abundance, both with respect to the goods of fortune and with respect to the goods of grace, by which he was led to future glory, which lasts forever and ever. Amen.” (*The Literal Exposition on Job*, 42:10–16).

Thus, considering the final good emphasizes the special character of some moments in our lives and helps to interpret whether a person receives divine intervention. This interpretation must reckon, though, with the hiddenness of God. While the circumstances of such interventions are special, their unusual character is less visible than that of a miraculous intervention.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, I proposed an account of the special divine action in human life based on Aquinas’ philosophy of providence. I showed that God intensifies His action in moments of our lives that are particularly significant for our salvation. In such moments, God intervenes in a contingency mode and reorients our lives for the sake of our final good.

Aquinas’ use of the terms *specialis* and *intervenire* differs from the understanding of “intervention” in contemporary debates on divine action. For him, divine interventions are part of God’s special providence for human beings. Humans have a special place in the created order thanks to reason and freedom. While God governs each non-human thing only for the sake of the species, He governs each human person for the sake of the species and her own good. Because of this special care, He intervenes in human lives in particular moments. This intervention, I argued, is compatible with God’s permanent providence in human lives as the first cause of human beings’ existence and operations.

The special divine action occurs in a contingency mode, which befits human freedom and its manifestation in a causally open world. Given the unusual circumstances of divine intervention, this mode pertains to irregular contingency. Unlike regular contingency, in which causes rarely fail to obtain their effects, irregular contingency excludes repetition and is not intended by its natural causes. I used Aquinas’ description of the

unusual circumstances of Job's adversities to flesh out this special mode of contingency in divine interventions. I then considered other cases of divine intervention: habitual grace, God's moving of the human will, God's enlightening of the human intellect, and divine punishment.

Finally, I showed that not all contingent events, states of affairs, mental processes, or mental states might qualify as special divine action, even though they are within the purview of providence. I thus introduced an orientational criterion of interpretation, the final good of the person. Irregular contingency can be interpreted as a divine action if it transfigures a person's life for the sake of her final good, salvation. This interpretation is what Aquinas calls conjectural knowledge, available to everybody, although not as certain as demonstration. We cannot know with certainty whether an event is a divine intervention, but we can conjecturally understand our lives as we seek our salvation in relationship with God.

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