

# RESEARCH STATEMENT

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What do we mean precisely when we say that the fire is cracking in the fireplace *because* I lit it? Or what is happening when the fire *ignites* the newspaper I threw in it? Is this merely a way of everyday talking, to be abandoned after some philosophical reflection, or are these things really acting on each other? Would our answer be different if there were some higher agent (God) who is responsible for every being in the universe at every moment of their existence? In the emerging neo-Aristotelian metaphysics of the last few decades, some of these questions have received renewed attention, and there has also been a growing interest in the richest tradition devoted to them: the medieval period.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there is still no comprehensive study on medieval theories of causation and divine concurrence, nor on their heritage in early modern philosophy, and indeed our current understanding of the medieval developments is at best gappy. With my research I aim to bridge some of these gaps. My underlying conviction is that the later medieval accounts are both intrinsically interesting, and enable us to learn a great deal about metaphysics, philosophy of religion, and some problems of early modern philosophy and science. My even deeper underlying conviction is that it is difficult to understand problems in the history of philosophy if our understanding is too gappy.

I started the project on medieval theories of causation with my dissertation, “Medieval Problems of Secondary Causation and Divine Concurrence,” in which I focused on some specific debates about reconciling created causation with an omnipresent sustainer of the universe, spanning from the mid-thirteenth to the early fifteenth century (roughly between Thomas Aquinas and Gabriel Biel). My current and planned research is a continuation of this broad theme, but focusing on slightly different time periods as well as slightly different problems.

First, although it is good to see the growing research and the increasing number of publications on some medieval accounts of causation, these publications focus, almost without exception, on figures between Aquinas (d. 1274) and Ockham (d. 1347).<sup>2</sup> The next major

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1. I have no space here to provide a comprehensive bibliography, but for starting points, see, e.g., Anna Marmodoro, “Causation without Glue: Aristotle on Causal Powers,” in *Aitia I: les quatre causes d’Aristote, origines et interprétations*, ed. Cristina Viano, Carlo Natali, and Marco Zingano (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), 221–246; Alfred J. Freddoso, “God’s General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Pitfalls and Prospects,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (1994): 131–156; Gloria Frost, “Aquinas’ Ontology of Transeunt Causal Activity,” *Vivarium* 56 (2018): 47–82; Can Laurens Löwe, “Peter Auriol on the Metaphysics of Efficient Causation,” *Vivarium* 55 (2017): 239–272.

2. See the above mentioned, and also Gloria Frost, “Peter Olivi’s Rejection of God’s Concurrence with Created Causes,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 4 (October 2014): 655–679; Gloria Frost, “John Duns Scotus on God’s Knowledge of Sins: A Test-case for God’s Knowledge of Contingents,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48, no. 1 (2010): 15–34; Marilyn McCord Adams, “Was Ockham a Humean about Efficient Causality?,” *Franciscan Studies* 39 (1979): 5–48; Johann Stufler, “Bemerkungen zur Konkurslehre des Durandus von St. Pourçain,” *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters* Suppl. 3.2 (1935): 1080–1090.

figure who appears on the scene at least if one's primary compass is the contemporary scholarship, is Francisco Suárez, a quarter of millennia later.<sup>3</sup> (A telling example: in the otherwise excellent collection edited by Tad Schmaltz, *Efficient Causation: A History*,<sup>4</sup> the chapter "From Ibn Sina to Ockham" is followed by the chapter "From Suárez to Descartes.") My earlier research followed this general trend, including the publication of an edition of a text written by the early 14th-century Peter of Palude, or my most recent paper, which deals with Aquinas's, Durand of St.-Pourçain's, and Peter of Palude's account of impassibility.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, I think it is worthwhile to look into what exactly was going on in the gap after Ockham's time, since it was precisely this gap that resulted in the kind of scholastic philosophy with which, for instance, Descartes was mostly familiar. Having written a paper on Ockham's theory of concurrence, and having — at least briefly — considered Pierre d'Ailly's and Gabriel Biel's account (more about them later), I am planning to examine what thinkers such as Nicholas Oresme, Thomas de Vio Cajetan, or Luis de Molina said on the subject.

My second project focuses on another gap, which is more a gap in breadth than a gap in time. While Aquinas and some subsequent thinkers have been the subject of intense scrutiny, the same cannot be said of his contemporaries or predecessors. I have been involved, to some extent, with the [Richard Rufus project](#) (run by Rega Wood at Indiana University), and as a result, have become quite interested in Rufus's work. I aim to continue working with the project but also to examine Rufus's stance on the impassibility problem, which shows some interesting parallels between his account and the one found in an anonymous manuscript (Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 119). I aim to compare their accounts with some contemporaries, those of John Peckham and the *Summa Halesiana* (of dubious authorship). While the main terms of the later debate were set by Aquinas and his generally Aristotelian framework, we find the same issues in Aquinas's predecessors and contemporaries in a different light — which will also help us better appreciate the diversity of medieval thought. This is perhaps the most technical project of the three, insofar as it involves some LSA (Latent Semantic Analysis), and reading various medieval manuscripts.

Third, I have been working on — and plan to continue to work on — the notion of *sine qua non* causation. A couple of decades ago Steven Nadler made the case that early modern occasionalism can be understood as a continuation of the medieval developments; he showed, in particular, that there is a direct lineage spanning from Al-Ghazali to Hume, by the mediation of Autrecourt and Malebranche.<sup>6</sup> While Nadler's contribution to our understanding of the early modern debates is irreplaceable, the above sketched lineage is, again, very gappy. In particular, it should be noted that it was not only the explicitly skeptical arguments (à la Al-Ghazali or Autrecourt) that exerted influence, but also, and much more, the more conservative development of the notion of *sine qua non* causes. Although the two concepts were originally different, it is the *sine qua non* cause that becomes "occasional" in the early modern period. I have done some work on how Ockham, Pierre d'Ailly, and Gabriel Biel distinguished *sine qua non* causes from proper causes, and am planning to continue filling out

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3. E.g., Jakob Leth Fink, ed., *Suárez on Aristotelian Causality* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Alfred J Freddoso, "Suarez on God's Causal Involvement in Sinful Acts," in *The Problem of Evil in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Elmar Kremer and Michael Latzer, year unknown (University of Toronto Press, 2001), 10–34

4. Tad M Schmaltz, ed., *Efficient Causation: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

5. Zita V Toth, "Peter of Palude on Divine Concurrence: An Edition of his *In II Sent.*, d.1, q.4," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 83, no. 1 (2016): 49–92; Zita V Toth, "Perfect Subjects, Shields, and Retractions: Three Models of Impassibility" (under review).

6. Steven Nadler, "'No Necessary Connection': The Medieval Roots of the Occasionalist Roots of Hume," *The Monist* 96, no. 3 (1996): 448–468.

this picture with some of Ockham's critics (such as Walter Chatton and Adam Wodeham), as well as with some later figures like Oresme and William Crathorn.

Overall, all three projects contribute to our “less gappy” understanding of medieval theories of causation, and of their connection to the early modern accounts. My further hope is that even some relatively obscure figures in the history philosophy can say something interesting to contemporary readers, and can be full-right participants in the contemporary neo-Aristotelian debates. A comparative medieval and early modern account of causal powers can also shed some light on how the role of causal explanations changed in the sciences during the Scientific Revolution — but this is another story that I aim to return to later.