

DE PRINCIPIUM ORIGINIS:***Thomistic Epistemology and the Doctrine of Creation***

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Abstract: This paper is an examination of the Doctrine of the Creation in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas and the central place it occupies in Thomistic epistemology. In particular, it focuses on creation as the emanation of the totality of being from God as universal cause. Given the traditional notion of God's ineffability, Aquinas maintains that any knowledge concerning God's nature is derived by means of analogy. As the category of being relates to the common feature of all existent and potentially existent things, including God, it can be seen as the means of discovering the ontological principle of origin.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, Doctrine of Creation, epistemology, emanation, analogy

"Thou are in small things great, not small in any.... For thou art infinite in one and all."¹
-Herbert Spencer

Introduction

The Doctrine of Creation is a concept of especial significance within the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas. His beliefs in this regard, it will be argued, provide much of the ground for his confidence in our knowledge concerning the divine, as well as, forming the basis of his characteristically positive assessment concerning the nature of the world and of human

¹ George Herbert, "Providence," lines 41 and 44, from *The Poems of George Herbert*, ed. by Helen Gardner (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 54.

beings.² His argument concerning the importance of the concept of creation for any discussion of God can be summed up in the Scholastic formula that *every agent causes something similar to itself (Omne agens agit sibi simile)*.³ That is, something of the nature of a cause can be discerned in the effect(s) it produces. Thus, he maintains that by examining God's effects (namely, those present in creation) we can come to learn something concerning the transcendent God himself⁴ (who otherwise would be, strictly speaking, unknowable). Therefore, in the pages that follow, I will examine Aquinas's arguments concerning (1) the essential goodness of creation, (2) its scope and the manner of its emergence, and (3) what Aquinas believes we can know of God analogically from exploring his effects in creation.

I. The Works of Creation

For the respective authors of the biblical narratives of creation,⁵ the universe was not to be seen as “a monstrous and meaningless accident...that has occurred purely at

² Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologiae* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 123.

³ ST. I. Q. 4, a. 3 (cf. Ps. Dionysius, *Div. Nom. Ix*).

⁴ Disclaimer pertaining to gender-specific language: It is my strong conviction that every effort should be made to utilize gender-inclusive language where appropriate, particularly when discussing the divine (which of course in the Christian tradition is non-gendered). That being said, in the following paper, I chose to follow the convention of referring to God according to masculine pronouns. My reasons for this are twofold: (1) So as to avoid confusion where quotations are concerned—which, to be consistent, would require in some places reassigning gendered designations when used—I chose to simply follow the convention utilized by Aquinas himself; (2) Personified pronouns in English tend to be gendered, while the neuter designation “It” tends to refer explicitly to non-personified objects. In order to avoid de-personifying God—while at the same time not wishing to use a cumbersome designation such as “he-she-it”—again, led me to choose to follow historical convention, noting its frequently inappropriate and harmful application in such cases.

⁵ Gen 1; 2:1-9, 18-23; 5:1-2; 6:6; Exod. 20:9-10; Neh. 9:6; Job 38:4—40:19; Pss. 8:3-6, 33:6-11, 90:2, 102:25, 136:5-6; Prov. 3:19, 8:26-29; Isa. 29:16, 42:5, 45:12, 18; Jer. 10:12; Amos 4:13; Jonah. 1:9; John 1:1-3,10; Acts 7:50, 17:24; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:10, 3:4, 11:3; Rev 4:11, 10:6

random.”⁶ Rather, for them, the cosmos is the theatre in which the performance of God’s unfolding narrative of salvation (*Heilsgeschichte*) has begun and continues to take place (*in statu viae*). Aquinas, for his part, takes the opening words of Genesis not necessarily as the literal expression of events as they occurred at some period in the remote past, but rather as a clue about the divine nature and a means of expressing God’s ongoing relation to creation.

1.1. *The Goodness of Creation*

Aquinas interprets the biblical narrative as conveying the essential goodness and order of creation—in opposition to dualistic or anti-materialist tendencies which saw the physical-world and corporeal bodies as antithetical to the spiritual (ST. I. Q. 65. a. 1).⁷ Contrariwise, he maintained that all of creation was fashioned by God according to his goodness and wisdom through the agency of his Son (though the act of creation itself was not proper to any one person within the Trinity).⁸ Thus, in spite of the world’s corruptibility, he echoes Scripture by saying that those things which comprise corporeality came into being, precisely because God thought that *it was good* that they should be. Therefore, for Aquinas, to disparage God’s work of creation as somehow inherently evil would be tantamount to impugning implicitly the very goodness and/or wisdom of God.⁹ Furthermore, insofar as he sees the universe as integrated and interconnected, Aquinas

⁶ Paul Davies, *God & the New Physics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 177.

⁷ This anti-materialist dualism can be seen in the heretical movements of Marcionism and Gnosticism, as well as the later teachings of the quasi-Gnostic sects Manichaeism, Mandaeism, and (closer to Aquinas’ own time) Albigensian-Catharism. It can also be seen in the Neo-Platonism of Origen (*Peri Archon*, II; cf. ST. I. Q. 65, a. 2).

⁸ See ST. I. Q. 45, a. 6.

⁹ Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 123.

maintains that every creature which exists begins to exist for the sake of the perfection of the whole universe as it is ordained towards its proper end (namely, God).

1.2. *Ex Nihilo and the (non) Beginning of Creation*

By Aquinas' time a substantial amount of literature devoted to the problem of creation had already arisen among Greco-Roman, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian thinkers.¹⁰ Much of the debate hinged on the disagreement over whether creation should be understood as occurring "*ex nihilo*" or "*ex materia*." The phrase *creatio ex nihilo*, of course, designates the traditional notion of God's act of creation "out of nothing."¹¹ That is, God's creating the universe not by taming primal chaos,¹² but by establishing the very foundational principles of being. By contrast, *creation ex materia* involves the arrangement of prime matter. In his *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*,¹³ the Jewish philosopher Saadia ben Joseph offers an early series of arguments in favor of the biblically-inspired belief in

¹⁰ Among the significant contributors to this discussion were Maimonides, Solomon ibn Gabirol (Avicebron), Bahya ibn Paquda, al-Farabi (Alpharabius), Ibn-Sinā (Avicenna), Ibn Rušd (Averroës), al-Kindī, John Philoponus, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Augustine, Albert Magnus, and Bonaventure.

¹¹ There is some disagreement as to whether the biblical account truly offers a depiction of *creation ex nihilo* (for example, Abraham ibn Ezra famously rejected the notion). Nevertheless, since Maimonides, most Jewish and Christian scholars have embraced the idea.

¹² In Gen 1:2, הַמְּיִת describes the primordial waters of YHWH's unfinished work of creation, and can perhaps denote some sense of primal chaos. Support for this interpretation can be found by comparing this word to the related Ugaritic word *thmt* and the Akkadian word *tīāmtu/tāmtu*, deep, ocean (see W. M. Schniedewind and J. H. Hunt, *A Primer on Ugaritic: Language, Culture, and Literature* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 208). Nevertheless, when taken together with the ubiquity of the "Chaoskampf" motif in nearly all ancient cosmogonies, its appearance in Genesis is especially muted. For example, in the *Enūma Eliš* (The Babylonian cosmogonical myth), the monstrous mother-goddess *Tiamat/Thalattē*, was personified as the primal ocean. It is from the divided carcass of Tiamat that the god Marduk created the earth and the sky (cf. Gen 1:6-8 and *Enūma Eliš* 4.135-38; 5.62; also compare linguistic similarities with the Greek primordial sea-goddesses, Thalassa (Θάλασσα) and Tethys (Τηθύς), the sister-wife of Oceanus) [See B. T. Arnold and B. E. Beyer (eds.), *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 31-50]. These legends relate to Canaanite lore (Ba'al vs. Yam), Egyptian religion (Atum vs. Nehebu-Kau) and the later Jewish folklore surrounding the sea-monster Leviathan (Tannin/Rehab) [cf. Job 41:1-34; Isa 27:1].

¹³ *Kitāb ul-ʿamānāt wal-iʿtiqādāt*, or *Sefer ha-Emunot ve-ha-De'ot*

creation *ex nihilo*.¹⁴ He says, in opposition to the hypotheses of the eternality of the world that, “[i]f we assume that a thing created itself before it came into being, then we assume that it was non-existent at the time when it created itself and obviously something non-existent cannot create a thing. If, on the other hand, we say that it created itself after it had come into being, the obvious comment is that after a thing has come into existence there is no need for it to create itself.”¹⁵ At first glance, this quote would seem to apply more properly to inconsistencies in strictly materialist explanations of a self-creating universe than to the idea of a truly eternal universe of infinite duration. Nevertheless, if we maintain that simply positing the eternal existence of prime matter and the fixity of laws of motion does not adequately account for their presence or operation without begging the question, then Saadia’s critique once again becomes relevant in relation to those who would claim that the universe is eternal and unchanging.

Among the ancients, Aristotle is generally assumed to have maintained the eternality of the universe.¹⁶ This assumption derives from Aristotle’s arguments concerning material substratum, motion, and the impossibility of vacuums existing in nature. Concerning *substratum* (ὑποκείμενον or *subiectum*), Aristotle believed that prime matter was neither created (generated out of nothing) nor destroyed (converted into nothing). Thus, all forms were said to be derived from the manipulation or change in a

¹⁴ It is doubtful that Aquinas himself would have been immediately aware of Saadia’s work, but his formulation of the problem does offer a helpful inroad into the discussion of the Doctrine of Creation as it relates to Aquinas’s work. (See Saadya Gaon, *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, ed. and trans. Alexander Altmann [London: East and West Library, 1946]. Reprinted in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages: The Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Traditions*, ed. Arthur Hyman and James J. Walsh. *Second Edition* [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1973], 345).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 348.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Physics* VIII and *De Coelo* I.

primal material substratum (*creatio ex materia*). This assumption underlies his argument that that which comes into being is always a composite. Inasmuch as Aristotle could not imagine how prime matter could arise out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), he maintained the earlier position advanced by Parmenides and Empedocles that “nothing can come from nothing” (*ex nihilo nihil fit*). Against this conclusion, Aquinas maintained along with Saädia that creation does not consist simply in the construction of composite things out of pre-existing principles. Rather, the ‘composite’ is brought into being at the same time with all its principles. Creation is not simply the generation of objects from prime matter but the emergence of the whole of being.

With respect to motion, Aristotle argues that assuming an absolute beginning to motion appears necessarily to involve inconsistencies. For example, if we were to assume that prime matter existed in a perpetual state of rest and somehow subsequently began to move, its initial movement would itself require the existence of some force to set it into motion. This holds even if we were to assume that the world began to exist at some designated period in the remote past and has existed ever since that moment in a perpetual state of rest. This initial act of coming into being would still seem to require motion in order for it to arrive at its present state. This would seem to imply that motion has to be taken as primal if one is to avoid the problem of a vicious cycle requiring the presupposition of motion to account for the generation of motion. Aquinas argues on the contrary that in the act of creation God produces things without need of movement. This is the case, inasmuch as creation marks a distinction in *relation* between the creator and the thing created.

Things generated by the existence of movement or change are caused by the manipulation of something pre-existing. In this way, a given object is recognizably related to its predecessor according to the order of creation. By way of contrast, God's act of creation with respect to creatures designates the creature's real relation to the Creator—not as a link in the successive order but as to the very principle of its being. God's relation to the creature is not therefore a *real* relation (in the manner in which an object relates to its successive predecessor in the order of creation), but is a relation with respect to reason only. This is because God is outside the order of creation, but the order of creation depends on God as its cause (ST. I. Q. 13, a 7). In this respect, whatever is to be taken truly as a cause cannot simply be the source of this or that accidental form in a successive chain of relations. Designating God as the source or cause of being, therefore, is not restricted to his determining the nature of composite forms by means of their material constituents. Rather, according to Aquinas, even primary matter has to be seen as caused and owing its underlying being to the creative act of God.

Finally, regarding vacuums, Aristotle maintained that it is of the nature of matter that it has extension in space. He concludes therefore that it would be impossible to imagine matter existing without space for it to occupy. He found it correspondingly difficult to conceive how empty-space (a vacuum) could exist unoccupied by prime matter. This is because the very notion of a vacuum itself implies the existence of a *space* theoretically capable of enclosing a body (Aristotle, *Phy.* iv. 60). Before the creation of the universe, however, there was no such place or space or vacuum. Therefore, Aquinas believes that "it is evident that this reason, which Aristotle gives (*Phys.* viii), is valid against those who admitted the existence of eternal movable things, but not eternal movement, as appears

from the opinions of Anaxagoras and Empedocles” (ST. I. Q. 46). The *principle of action* indicates that effects follow from the requirements of their form, therefore from the moment that movable objects came into being motion must have already existed (because it is presupposed in their motion). Thus, on the surface, Aristotle’s arguments would seem to preclude creation *ex nihilo*, as it would appear to involve positing a pre-existent vacuum as the necessary condition from which prime matter was to emerge. As we have seen, however, this charge cannot apply to Aquinas’s argument that creation designates the communication of God’s being to creatures. This process therefore does not necessitate any pre-existent space from which matter might emerge, because to be outside of creation is to not exist absolutely and *to be* is likewise to preclude the existence of a vacuum.

1.3. *Ibn Rušd and the Eternality of Creation*

The works of Aristotle form the basis for most attempts to argue for the existence of an eternal materially constituted universe. As Etienne Gilson has pointed out, however, the texts of Aristotle’s works are not themselves explicit regarding his acceptance of these premises as leading necessarily to the belief in the existence of the world’s eternity. Therefore, Gilson questions whether Aristotle should really be cited as an authority for the position at all.¹⁷ Especially, as his expressed rejection of actual infinities (a position which relates to time) would seem to militate against it. A more explicit example of the argument in favor of eternity can be found in the work of the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rušd (Averroës). In his book, *The Incoherence of Incoherence*,¹⁸ he maintained (against al-

¹⁷ Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. L. K. Shook, C.S.B. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1994), 147.

¹⁸ *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*. The title of which was a direct challenge to al-Ghazālī’s work, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*^h.

Ghazālī)¹⁹ that the world was indeed created by God, but that this act of creation existed *from eternity*. Ibn Rušd reasoned that this was the case, on the grounds that, if God willed anything to come into being—and we accept that God does not change—he must always have willed it to be. Correspondingly, since there can exist nothing with the power to restrain God from fulfilling his will, it must be the case that God had created the world from eternity. This conclusion also assumes that God is not subject to time, indicating no need for a durative separation between God’s will and his act.

Insofar as Ibn Rušd’s argument relies on God as creator, it proves much more difficult for Aquinas to refute. This eventually led him to claim controversially that, according to these terms, the non-eternality of the world could not be demonstrated by reason but had to be taken rather on faith and the testimony of Scripture.²⁰ Indeed, in his later work *De æternitate mundi* Aquinas goes so far as to claim, along with Ibn Rušd, the possibility of an *eternally created world*. To this possibility he notes that there is no necessary contradiction in asserting that the universe is created and that it has also always existed.²¹ Aquinas finds this view consistent with orthodoxy because, as Boethius notes,

¹⁹ By the time of Ibn Rušd’s criticism, however, Islamic philosophy’s rejection of Platonism and Aristotelianism was a virtual *fait accompli*. The enormous influence of al-Ghazālī criticism of the philosophies of Ibn-Sīnā (Avicenna) and al-Farabi (Alpharabius) in his book, *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*^h (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers*), saw the ascendancy of the Asharite school of Islamic theology and the subsequent decline of Islamic influence on Western thought.

²⁰ John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 580.

²¹ Aquinas is sure that if there were such a logical contradiction, then surely, Augustine would have noticed it and listed it as such among his many objections to the eternity of the world in *De Civitate Dei* (XI-XII). Utilizing Augustine’s silence on this point, Aquinas wants to maintain, in opposition to the apparent position of John Damascene (I *De Fide Orthodoxa* cap. 8) and Hugh of St. Victor (*De Sacramentis* I-1 cap. 1), that our conception of God’s eternity cannot be decoupled from his necessity. That is, the temporally eternal existence of a *finite* object in time (assuming that time had no beginning), would not mean that such an object would be coeternal with God in any robust sense. Namely, finite objects will have always been dependent upon the (prior) existence of the infinite and therefore, should be understood as *created*. See Aquinas, “On the

even if the world had always existed, it would not be equal with God from eternity (*De Consol.* V. 6). This is because being exists within God perfectly without succession or simultaneity.

II. Creation as Emanation

For Aquinas, as we have seen, creation involves much more than merely a supra-punctiliar event issuing in the appearance of the physical universe in (and along with) space-time. Rather, creation (properly understood) is the emanation of the *totality of being* from its origin in a universal cause (*De principium originis*). In this way, the *totality of being* encompasses not merely the *corporeal world* (i.e. finite physical bodies in motion through space-time), but also the realms of the *immaterial* (i.e. the heavenly and angelic) and the *potential*. All beings can ultimately be resolved into a single unifying principle, according to which all that exists in whatever manner is subject—be they spiritual or corporeal—that principle is being. Hence, even potentiality must be *created* if creation is to be possessive of all that belongs to being. As a consequence, the beginning of time should not be seen as the measure of God's creation. Things are said to be created in time, insofar as heaven and prime matter were created alongside time.

2.1. Substance, Form, and Matter

The Western tradition since Parmenides has posited that unity is a more primal state than is multiplicity. Correspondingly, Parmenides considered that if all that could be said to exist exists *as being* then being is the most universal and also the most unique

Eternity of the World (*De Aeternitate Mundi*)" in *Sancti Thomae De Aquino Opera Omnia*, vol. 43 (Rome, 1976), 85-89, trans. Robert T. Miller (1997).

principle of the universe. This being the case, we cannot imagine a cause to being, because any cause would have to exist in order to call itself into being. Thus, pure being can have no beginning, while contingent beings owe their being to some participation in a yet more primal *essence of being*.²² Therefore, with respect to the conditions of *existing corporeal beings*, we observe in the physical world that increasing complexity always emerges as the causal determination of the process of evolution from simpler forms.²³ The *essence* of being, however, is not subject to this same causal principle, thus a being whose essence and existence are one and the same would not be subject to the same laws of causality—it would be, in effect, an *uncaused* being standing outside the order of creation. *Essence* (“quiddity” or “nature”) is here defined as that *by which something is what it is*. With respect to God his very essence is to exist inasmuch as his act of existing corresponds to his manner of being (namely uncaused and necessary). If on the other hand something possesses its *being* by means of participation, then that entails of course that it is itself contingent and caused. We know that effects have to be reduced to increasingly more simple, universal, and prior causes; however, the most universal effect is being itself. Therefore, the proper effect of the first and most universal cause (God) is being.

Aquinas makes a distinction between substantial form and matter. He notes that, “[m]atter is contracted by its form to a determinate species, as a substance belonging to a certain species, is contracted by a supervening accident to a determinate mode of being” (ST. I. Q. 44). *Substantial form* speaks in terms of the unicity of an object, which identifies it

²² Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosopher*, Second Edition (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1949), 7.

²³ Plato, *Parmen*. xxvi.

as a specific thing. *Matter*, of course, consists of the constitutive parts of an individual thing. In this respect, Aquinas can speak of the principle required for accidental (or nonessential) alteration vs. substantial change. An accidental change can consist of a non-elemental change in a given object (e.g. the change of a piece of raw timber into a wooden chair). A substantial change, on the other hand, would mark a fundamental or elemental change in an object (e.g. the change of a man into a dog—to offer an absurd example).²⁴

Nevertheless, to determine the cause of beings *as* beings (rather than merely restricting the discussion to accidental or substantial forms) is to determine the cause of all properties which are in any way possessed by beings. As it has been shown, it is necessary to posit a universal cause in order to account for the existence of prime matter. Furthermore, inasmuch as emanation of the totality of being necessarily comes from God (*qua* first principle of being), it is impossible to posit the existence of any being prior to God's initial act of creation. Therefore, calling something into being (in the act of creation proper) is a more radical act than even converting a man into a dog, because there can be no greater divide that exists between being and non-being. To say that apart from God, nothing exists or existed, is the same as saying that apart from creation nothing exists (ST. I. Q. 44, a. 1, 2). This being the case, it follows again that God brings things into being out of nothing and outside of being there is nothing.

According to Aquinas, *being* in the individual is not reducible to our intelligence or soul except insofar as it relates to the operation of the divine (*De Causis prop.*, iii). Creation is not therefore the production of this or that being, but is the production of being

²⁴ John F. Wippel, "Metaphysics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 111.

absolutely. Whether with respect to individual substances (in the case of simple objects) or composite substances (as in the case of material objects), to be created is to consist of the properties belonging to subsisting things (ST. I. Q. 44, a 2-3). Simply put, created things *are* subsisting things. Non-subsisting properties such as forms and accidents inhere in subsisting beings and have no independent existence of their own. Rather, they are concretized by their coexistence with an existent being (Aristotle *Metaph.* vii, 2). An accidental property, such as a color or relation like that of father or mother, is not possessive of an independent substantial form.

2.2. *Emanation from a First Cause*

In his *Disputations*, Aquinas maintains that it is within the nature of every act to communicate itself to the greatest extent possible.²⁵ Now, insofar as God is both ‘Pure Act’ (*Actus purus*) and Creator (*Creatore dei*), we recognize that he must necessarily communicate his being according to at least two modes. The first mode is the manner in which God communicates his divine essence to the other persons of the Godhead.²⁶ The second mode is the manner in which God communicates himself to all other ‘created’ beings—which is according to likeness only (*se ipsam per solam similitudinem*).²⁷ Aquinas argues that because God’s essence and his existence represent one and the same reality, God does not require a separate substance through which he might receive such a communication of being. That is, God inasmuch as he is *esse sic et simpliciter* does not

²⁵ *Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia Dei*, Q. III, A. 1 (cf. ST. I. Q. xiv, a. 2)

²⁶ In similar manner in which we recognize that a human being possesses and is thereby able to communicate his human nature to another human. So too, God has the power to communicate his divine nature

²⁷ *Quaestiones Disputatae De Potentia Dei*, Q. II. A. 1.

require some means of reception (a substance) by which he might receive his being. Indeed, all of his attributes are convertible with his essence. This is because his being is self-subsisting and formally determined as the cause of all being (*Ipsum esse per se Subsistens*, “being itself subsisting through itself”).²⁸ Reason dictates that a self-subsisting being must be one. All things which are diverse by their diverse participation in being are caused by First Being. Thus, all created-beings require a means by which they might receive a form or nature and whereby it may subsist (in a manner distinct from their essence).

If creation does not involve the arrangement of some preexistent matter, which would require merely an instrumental cause, then we must presuppose all subsequent effects to arise from their proper effect (namely, being) which stems from an ultimate cause (God). It is not within the power of any creature to act “ministerially” to produce being; being as we have demonstrated is primal to all creatures. Insofar as agents produce like effects, an act’s principles can be determined by the effects it produces. Rudi te Velde notes that, “[f]or Thomas, to be a creature must be understood metaphysically as being through participation (*ens per participationem*). Participation signifies the mode of being of creatures.”²⁹ Therefore, it has been demonstrated that every being that begins to exist in whatever manner itself emanates from God, as the source of their being.

2.3. *Participation*

²⁸ Te Velde, 81

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 139

In his Commentary on Boethius's treatise *De Hebdomadibus*, Aquinas argues that, "when something receives in particular fashion that which belongs to another in universal (or total) fashion, the former is said to participate in the latter."³⁰ Insofar as essence and existence are distinct in human persons³¹ (and all other creatures), creatures have to receive their being by means of participation in God, who possesses being in total fashion. Thus, creatures can be said to take part in (*partem capere*) God's being. Aquinas recognizes, however, that participation cannot be spoken of univocally. Rather, he observes that it occurs in one of three forms.

First, a species (e.g. *Homo sapiens*) can be said to participate in genus (e.g. animal). Likewise, an individual subject (e.g. Socrates) can be spoken of as participating in a species. Second, a subject is said to participate in its accidents. Accidents, of course, are non-essential attributes to a subject. Finally, an effect can be said to participate in its cause. In all of these examples the object in question serves as a delimitation of the category to which it participates. Nevertheless, each of these instances deals with intelligible content and the participation intimated is logical or intentional in nature. That is, they do not deal specifically with ontological categories or their relations.³² In terms of ontology, Aquinas draws a distinction between the manner in which an individual subject participates in their

³⁰ In *De Hebdomadibus*, lect. 2, Leon. 50.271:71-73. Quoted in Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 96.

³¹ As to the nature of the human being itself, Aquinas rejects the monism of Aristotle and the dualism of Plato, and speaks rather of what can be called the "hylomorphic composition" of human persons. On this account, the soul—while its intellectual operation can be considered as being incorporeal and subsistent—is not, strictly speaking, separate from the body. It is not a body, but neither can it exist without a body. Rather, the soul is that which animates or pertains to the life of a given subject (be they human or another animal). Thus, the *essence* (i.e. "οὐσία," "*substantia/essentia*," "quiddity," or "nature") of what it means to be a person cannot be reduced to matter or form (the soul). A person is rather a composition of a soul and a body.

³² See Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 97.

nature and the manner in which they participate in “the nature of being” (*natura essendi*). On this point Aquinas notes that, “[j]ust as this human being participates in human nature, so does created being (*ens*) participate, if I may so speak, in the nature of being, because God alone is his *esse*.”³³

2.4. *God as Efficient, Exemplar and Final Cause*

According to Aquinas, God creates by means of his intellect and will just as a human craftsman. Like the craftsman who produces his work by conceiving an object in his mind. Aquinas maintains that God is to be understood as being the first exemplar cause of all things. In other words, he believes that in order that any given effect receives defined form, every production must require the existence of an exemplary cause. In nature, the cause of determinate forms which provides order and structure to the universe is divine wisdom. Divine wisdom in this regard is to be understood as the types or ideas (in the Platonic sense) of all things—existing as exemplar forms in the divine mind (ST. I. Q. 15. a 1). God is the exemplar of all things insofar as his ideas are not separate from his essence. Indeed, as God is the creator of prime matter, he can be said to be the efficient, exemplar, and final cause (*causa finalis*) of all things which exist in a single unified whole. God is the final cause because, as we have already noted, all created things strive after the good and inasmuch as things desire the good, they desire God.

Knowledge Concerning God

With respect to creatures, we have established through our forgoing discussion that:
[1] being (*ens*) is the common predicate of all things, [2] that creation consists in the

³³ *In De Hebdomadibus*, lect. 2, Leon. 4.470. Quoted in Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 110.

communication of the totality of being to creatures by means of their relation to a universal cause (God), [3] that this act of creation arises *ex nihilo*, and [4] that creation—inasmuch as it is created and sustained by God, ordered according to his wisdom, and strives after his goodness as its ultimate end—is itself essentially good. Now, with these conclusions in mind (along with the principle that *every agent causes something similar to itself*), we can set before ourselves the task of determining what information we can infer about God from these determined statements.

3.1. *Reason and God's Essence*

In Question 12 of the *Summa*, Aquinas addresses whether or not any created intellect can see the essence of God. He argues that because God is *Actus purus* he is “in himself supremely knowable.” Nevertheless, given his superabundance, he may well be unknowable to any given person. To deny the possibility of knowing God’s essence in its fullness, however, would seem according to Aquinas to preclude the possibility of ever achieving the beatific vision. Though God’s very incorporeality means that it is impossible that he should ever be seen physically, his essence can be perceived by means of the intellect (appropriately elevated by means of a supernatural disposition). This is not to say, however, that any created intellect can *comprehend* God, nor is it to say that one can ever attain to such knowledge within one’s mortal life. Indeed, Aquinas insists that, insofar as knowledge can only pertain to the nature of the knower, it is necessary that one be separated from the limitations of corporeality before one is able to grasp God’s essence. In Article 12 (*Q. 12*), Aquinas asks whether God can be known in this life according to the light of natural reason, to which he answers that our knowledge of the sensible can lead us to

draw certain conclusions regarding God's nature and whether or not he exists. Though reason can never attain to the essence of God (which requires Grace), from an observation of his effects we can make mitigated judgments concerning his nature as a cause.

3.2. *The Analogy of Being*

The analogy-of-being (*Analogia entis*) refers to the attempt to determine something of the act-of-being by means of the effects it produces in *beings*. The difficulty with respect to divine predication is the infinite gulf which lies between God (who transcends all categories and classifications) and any finite object which exists within the categorical sphere. In attempting to describe God, we are forced to ascribe to him certain names and attributes ultimately derived from our knowledge of the sensible world. This is problematic because one can never arrive at the *pure being* of God from the limited scope of human cognition. Insofar as we can only ever know God rationally according to these observations, our knowledge is necessarily restricted to determining the degrees of proportion between a given object and God by means of analogy. Nevertheless, the use of analogy always implies simultaneously a similarity and a difference between the objects under comparison. With respect to God, these applied attributes can only be fitting in a limited sense and ultimately hinge on the degree to which we can determine the resemblance between God and his effects.

Though we cannot create an image of God without reference to the world—so long as the principle holds that every effect is in some way analogous to its cause—we may be able to make valid affirmative propositions about God by determining the perfected states of creatures and applying that understanding to God. This does not mean that one can

determine that God is like any particular creature. Rather, this procedure assumes that creatures carry within them some image of the divine—however marred that image may have become. David Bentley Hart has noted that, “[b]efore all else, one must grasp that...the ontological analogy does not treat “being” as some genus under which God and the creature—or the infinite and the finite—are placed as distinct instances.” In fact, he goes on to say that, “[a]ny notion that God and creatures alike are “beings” comprehended by ‘being as such’ [is what the analogy as] a principle denies.”³⁴ As was demonstrated in the discussion of God’s being outside the order of creation, he cannot be understood simply as another being of a higher or more perfect order. Rather, God exists *extra omne genus*.

3.3. *Knowledge Related to God*

In Question 2 of the *Summa*, Aquinas poses a question as to whether or not the existence of God is self-evident. He answers that self-evident can be relative given that propositions which are self-evident to some (say, a learned person) may not be so to another who does not fully understand the terms or objects in question. Taken in itself, Aquinas maintains that the proposition is self-evident insofar as the predicate is the same as the subject. Nevertheless, since we cannot know God’s essence in its fullness, we cannot be said to know the answer as self-evident. If we are to arrive at an answer then, it must be demonstrated by things concerning the subject which we can know more readily than its essence. For Aquinas, this is to be found in the effects of creation. Since we can observe the effects of God in nature, we can make determinations concerning his essence based upon

³⁴ David Bentley Hart, “The Destiny of Christian Metaphysics: Reflections on the Analogia Entis,” in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 397.

those effects. While we cannot obtain perfect knowledge of God's essence through *a posteriori* observations (inasmuch as God's effects are not directly proportional to his person[s]), Aquinas believes that we can offer proof of his existence and determine many of his attributes.

Final Summary

In our initial summary of his position concerning creation, we noted that Aquinas had established: [1] being as representing the sole common predicate among all existing or potentially existing things, [2] that creation consists in the emanation of the totality of being from God as the universal cause [3] that creation is accomplished *ex nihilo*, and [4] that creation (as it relates to God) is essentially good. Now, concerning the knowledge of God, we can say that from these initial conclusions, Aquinas argues that: [1] insofar as God is *Actus purus* his essence is knowable. Nevertheless, the inherent limits of our faculties as corporeal beings limit our ability to comprehend the fullness of his essence; [2] Saints in the beatific vision (and angels inasmuch as they are not limited by corporeality) have access to God's essence, though they can never fully comprehend it; [3] Given God's ineffability, we come to know (and describe) him by means of analogy. The analogy with the greatest means of drawing a comparison between the similarity and dissimilarity between creature and Creator is the *Analogia entis*, as it relates to the common feature of all existent and potentially existent things; [4] as with God's essence, his existence (which is convertible with his essence) is (at least theoretically) knowable. Nevertheless, as with his essence, the limitations of our rational faculties prevent us from knowing God absolutely so long as we are subject to our material bodies; Finally, [5] given our limited means of

gaining access to God's essence, we have to infer his qualities and existence from what we can come to know by means of observation and extrapolation from his effects preserved in creation.

Conclusion

Through the course of this paper we have established that Aquinas grounds his epistemological claims concerning the nature of God in his observations concerning creation. Insofar as he assumes that effects naturally reflect something of the nature of their causes, he is able to postulate certain conditions (or rational parameters) for the operation and origin of nature. In the process, he brings to bear this understanding of the world (as gleaned from experience and rational reflection) upon questions concerning the nature of the divine. In the end, he reinforces our conviction that the essence of the divine necessarily eludes the grasp of the rational human intellect. Nevertheless, he does offer hope in two ways: (1) holding out the possibility of knowledge pertaining to God existing more fully in the blessed state of the saints; (2) also, by way of his confidence in asserting that God's radical otherness does not preclude our approaching knowledge of him by means of analogy. Indeed, the analogy of being demonstrates that emphasis on God's radical otherness can often belie the closeness and immediacy of God shared at the foundation of what it means to exist in the world. Today, we may call into question certain of Aquinas's assumptions and conclusions, but the relative strength of his overarching argument that creation should serve as the primary referent for any discussion our knowledge of the divine remains an essential insight.

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