

# Permanent Creation in Saint Thomas Aquinas

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The intellectual climate in which Aquinas matured was one of conflict. The arrival of the works of Aristotle in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries brought to the Christian West an awareness of the natural world as an integrated, self-sufficient entity. Aristotle, as the first historian of philosophy, expressed the Greek philosophical tradition that 'from nothing nothing comes', a challenge to the Christian notion of creation. Let us mark but a couple of sayings discoverable in the tradition. Heraclitus, for example, wrote: 'This world order (the same for all) did none of the gods or men make, but it always was and is and shall be: an everlasting fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures.<sup>1</sup> Empedocles is even more adamant in his refusal to entertain any notion of making from nothing: 'Fools—for they have no far-reaching thoughts—who fancy that that which formerly was not can come into being or that anything can perish and be utterly destroyed.'<sup>2</sup> Aristotle's position, although subtler than his predecessors', is consonant with the tradition: 'We ourselves are in agreement with them in holding that nothing can be said without qualification to come from nothing.'<sup>3</sup> To the ears of a growing population of Aristotelian disciples who equated Aristotle with truth, this seemed to amount to the philosophical denial of creation from nothing.

This and other doctrines apparently incompatible with Christianity caused a reactionary movement among many theologians, and what was already a fairly well-established theological tradition became more explicit. It was argued that, since the world was created from nothing, it tends towards nothing and will, in fact, finally return to nothing. The roots of this tradition we can find in the thought of Origen in the East and that of St. Augustine in the West. Origen writes: 'One of the dogmas of the Church, held chiefly in consequence of our belief in the truth of our records, is that this world was made and began to exist at a definite time and that as a result of the consummation of the age to which all things are subject, it must be dissolved through its own corruption.'<sup>4</sup> For St. Augustine only God is absolutely immutable and eternal and thus can be said to exist in the full sense of the word. All else is subject to change and hence loss of being. 'For what is changed does not conserve its own being, and what can be changed, even if it is not changed, is able to not be what it

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was; and because of this, only that which not only is not changed but also cannot be changed in any way can be called being in the truest sense without any scruple.<sup>5</sup> This doctrine is explicitly pronounced in Aquinas's own time by his Franciscan contemporary, St. Bonaventure: 'Everything which has changed has in itself mutability; but every creature has been made; and so every creature has been changed: therefore, none is immutable.'<sup>6</sup>

Aquinas counters that both traditions are mistaken in considering all making as change. Besides the making that is of this particular thing, besides even the universal cause or causes of all generation, there is a more radical making which is of the totality of being. 'Not only must we consider the emanation of some particular being from some particular cause, but also the emanation of all being from the universal cause which is God; and this emanation we designate by the name creation.... Creation, which is the emanation of all being, is from the non-being which is nothing.'<sup>7</sup> When we ask why something we experience exists, we may answer by pointing to its particular causes (its form and matter, its immediate efficient cause) or even to the universal formal/efficient/final causes within the universe; or we may answer by pointing out the fact that there is a universe. That there is anything at all is due to a cause that transcends the universe in which there is change: this is the Creator, and his effect, which is the totality of being, is not by change but creation. This doctrine we find implicit in the Five Ways, essentially established in the realization of the distinction between essence and existence in all the things we experience, and openly explicit in Aquinas's discussions of creation itself.

That the universe is permanent, in no way tending to non-being, is no less firmly held by Aquinas. Against the Arabian philosopher Avicenna, who argued that the essences of all things are possible in themselves and necessary through another,<sup>8</sup> and that accordingly existence is an accident of essence, Aquinas holds that to speak of essences as possible in themselves makes no sense.<sup>9</sup> Essence is actual through its form, and form is act, not potency. One may speak of essences or forms as possible in the sense that they are in the mind of the Creator and may or may not be realized by his act of will, but they are not properly said to be possible in themselves. Once given existence, form as such has no possibility for, nor tendency toward, absolute non-existence. There are two kinds of things that are incorruptible: those whose form completely dominates their matter, and those whose form exists without matter. In addition, the universe of material things itself cannot be corrupted since it has no substratum which could underlie the change: this, I think, is what Aquinas means by saying that prime matter is incorruptible. And so in itself the universe is a seamless web of integrated things, among which there is ordered causality, which has no tendency to return to nothingness. 'In all

created nature there is no potency by which it is possible for something to tend toward nothingness.<sup>10</sup> Only by misconceiving the act of creation as change does it make sense to speak of a tendency or possibility to corruption in the created universe.

Before seeing how Aquinas reconciles these two traditions, let us explore his answers to each in more depth. In his treatise on creation in the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas explicitly states that ‘It is necessary to say that everything, which in any way is is from God.’<sup>11</sup> His full response makes use of what he said about the simplicity of God in question 3 and the proofs for God’s existence in question 2. God is said to be self-subsisting being (his essence is not other than his existence), and since anything self-subsisting can be only one, all other beings exist by participation in God’s existence, which means that their essence (limitation of existence) and their existence (which is the same as God’s—the only existence) are really distinct. Going back to question 3, we find that God is shown to be absolutely simple in reference to what has been proved in the Five Ways. Implicit in the proofs themselves, and more explicit in Aquinas’s teaching on essence and existence, is the doctrine of creation from nothing.

Although the Five Ways are taken from pagan sources (originating in Plato and Aristotle), and in their pagan context are not meant to prove creation, Aquinas recognizes that they prove more than Plato or Aristotle were aware of. To be pure actuality (the requirement to explain any change from non-being to being) is to be not only formally without potency (as intellectual substances are said to be), but also to be existentially without potency, that is, to be the cause of the existence of the world of changing things. Likewise, to be first efficient cause in the absolute sense is to be the universal cause, not just of some order of being, but of all being. And to be that ‘intelligent being by which *all* natural things are ordered to an end’ is to be the cause not only of all the material non-intelligent beings tending to some end, but also of the immaterial, intelligent causes of the order within the universe: it is to be the Creator of the ordered universe.

Consideration of the Third and Fourth Ways I have left for last because it is they, especially the Fourth, which most explicitly imply creation. In the Third Way necessary being which is necessary in itself is distinguished from necessary being (the separate substances or perhaps, as a modern analogue, the laws of physics) which are necessary through another, which are necessary because they *exist* as necessary beings, because there is a universe at all, and not nothing. The Fourth Way demonstrates, from the discovery of varying degrees of the transcendental perfections (being, truth and goodness) found in all experienced things, the existence of the extreme of being, truth, and goodness. That there are grades of these perfections in the things we experience implies that there is a limit to the perfection of each thing. Now the limit and the perfection are

not identical. The limit provides the ground for distinguishing among the things; the perfection is what they share in common. What is common is not caused by what is unique to each, and therefore there must be a universal cause of the instantiations of the perfections, that is, a cause of all being, truth, and goodness—the creating cause of the universe.

This same kind of argument provides the ground for the more explicit distinction between essence (limit) and existence (perfection) in all finite beings, which we find Aquinas denying of God in the fourth article of question 3. The fact that Aquinas denies such a distinction of God implies that it is recognized first in the things of experience. It is not that we know what being as being or self-subsisting being must be like prior to our experience of beings, and hence can say that since being as being must be only one, therefore in all other beings there is a real distinction between essence and existence. It is, on the contrary, the recognition that there is a real distinction between essence and existence in the material things we experience (that why they are *what* they are does not explain why they are in the radical sense of there being an existing universe and not absolutely nothing) that demonstrates to us the existence of a creating God, who must be unparticipating or self-subsisting existence. It is generally in the context of proving the necessity of there being the real distinction in angels that Aquinas uses the argument from the uniqueness of self-subsisting being to the composition in all other beings, including angels.<sup>12</sup> And this makes perfect sense, for we cannot study the angels directly since, as immaterial beings, their essences are unknown to us.<sup>13</sup> But that there is a real distinction between essence and existence in material things, and that therefore there must be a cause of their existence (since it is unexplained by their essences alone): this is known prior to, and as one way (in fact, the best way) to knowing the existence of unparticipating or self-subsisting existence, that is, God the Creator. 'There is found a double composition (in material things). The first is of form and matter, from which a certain nature is constituted. The composite nature, however, is not its own existence, but existence is its act.'<sup>14</sup>

That the doctrine of creation is implicit in the proofs for the existence of God (especially the Fourth Way) and the real distinction in creatures of essence and existence is born out by what Aquinas explicitly states at the opening of the treatise on creation. 'Therefore, it is necessary that all things which are diversified according to a diverse participation of existence, with the result that they are more or less perfect, must be caused by one first existent which is most perfect.'<sup>15</sup> All things alike exist. One might say, therefore, that existence is 'something' they all share. But what things which are diverse in other respects share in common must have a cause above their particular differences. The things we know differ in essence, or within a species by particular matter; yet they all exist. Therefore, there must be a universal cause of existence, that is, a Creator

of all things.

The order of causes must be according to the order of effects, since effects are reduced to proper causes. Hence just as proper effects are reduced to proper causes, so what is common in the proper effects must be reduced to some common cause: in this way, above the particular causes of the generation of this or that thing, there is the sun, the universal cause of government in the kingdom, and also of the individual cities. Therefore, above all causes there must be some cause to whom it belongs to give existence. But the first cause is God, as shown above. Therefore, it is necessary that all things which exist are from God.<sup>16</sup>

What is the universal cause of beings insofar as they are beings, that is, insofar as they exist, is the cause of all that pertains to beings. Thus, even the material principle of things, which the Greeks held to be ungenerated, can be said to be created by God,<sup>17</sup> although it is more proper to say that it is concreated, since it is the subsisting thing that is created *per se*.<sup>18</sup> Now since matter is not presupposed to creation, and all substantial change requires a material substratum, it is clear that creation is not a change. With this conclusion, Aquinas has effectively neutralized the arguments against creation latent in the Greek tradition and, as we shall see, the arguments of the theologians who, conceiving creation as a kind of change, thought that since the world has changed from non-being, it could change back again. 'All motion or change is "the act of that which exists potentially insofar as it is potential"'. But in this action (creation) nothing pre-exists in potency which receives the action, as has just been shown. Therefore, creation is not a motion or change.'<sup>19</sup>

Thus Aquinas establishes philosophically that the universe is created: that the universe in itself exists indefectibly, that it cannot be corrupted, is no less firmly held by him. Form is act, and existence follows form. If something can lose its existence, it is not through its form, but through the presence in that thing of the principle of substantial change, that is, matter.<sup>20</sup> And so only things composed of matter and form are susceptible to corruption and can be said in a sense (although not an absolute sense, as we shall see) to tend toward non-being. Three kinds of 'things' Aquinas calls incorruptible: those whose form so dominates its matter that the matter cannot receive other forms; those which are pure forms; and prime matter. In the first class, Aquinas places the heavenly bodies. Although we know through modern science that the heavenly bodies do change substantially and finally corrupt, there seem to be some examples of what Aquinas meant lingering in our world: on the chemical level, helium appears to be incorruptible, for it will not interact with other elements; on the subatomic level, the smallest particles might be considered to be incorruptible. As for the existence of intellectual substances, we have in the

first place<sup>21</sup> the experience of the human intellect which, since it has an operation not involving the body (i.e., the act of knowing, which is of the universal and unchanging and is not a change but a perfecting act), can exist apart from the body.<sup>22</sup> Corruption comes about only by the separation of form and matter. Since, then, the intellect has no matter, it cannot be corrupted: it is by nature necessary. Besides the human intellect, Aquinas holds that it can be demonstrated from the order of the experienced universe that there must be creatures which are intellects without bodies, the separate substances or angels. We experience a hierarchy of physical things the highest of which is also an intellectual thing—the human being. Given the continuity of gradations to this level, it is reasonable to posit the existence of creatures between us and the absolutely perfect being, God.<sup>23</sup> As intellectual substances without bodies, these are pure forms, and as such are incorruptible.

Finally, Aquinas says that prime matter itself is incorruptible.<sup>24</sup> What can he mean by this? As pure potency, prime matter is not a thing that can exist by itself; it only *is* as informed. What is clear to us, however, is that the material things we experience do change into one another: wood becomes ash, grass becomes cow, my supper becomes me. Prime matter designates the possibility and continuity of this change. And so, to say that prime matter is incorruptible is to say that material things considered altogether cannot be corrupted. There is no prime matter of prime matter; there is no potency underlying the universe of material things which could receive another form (which could only be the meaningless notion of the form ‘non-existence’) and so spell the corruption of the universe. ‘Hence it remains that in the whole created nature, there is not any potency whereby it is possible for anything to tend toward nothing.’<sup>25</sup>

To say that the universe is created and yet permanent and indefectible is not, however, to relegate it self-sufficiency of existence. For there exists in the Creator, who acts by free will, the possibility that the universe may return to nothingness. Only by God’s sustaining hand does the universe continue in existence. To understand Aquinas’s position we must emphasize that he is arguing for a creation that is not temporal but metaphysical. Creation is not to be considered as some ‘big bang’ that happened in the past, or a push that God gave the universe to get it going. God does not create necessary beings and then dissociate himself from them, leaving them self-sufficient. In fact, he cannot, since every creature has existence (*esse*) only inasmuch as it participates in divine existence. To be a creature is not to be existence but to have existence. There is only one source whence this may come—God. Existence is the very core of the creature, its deepest act without which it is totally nothing.<sup>26</sup> No creature can exist unless conserved by God.

God does not produce things in being by one act and conserve them by another. For the existence (*esse*) of permanent things is

not divisible unless by accident, as subject to some motion; according to itself, it is in an instant. Hence the operation of God, which is the *per se* cause why a thing is, is not one thing according as it makes a beginning of being and another as it conserves being.<sup>27</sup>

The universe depends on God the way the illumination of air depends on the sun, or my image in a mirror depends on me, or the song depends on the singer. There is a formal structure to illuminated air, image and song, but they cannot be without sun, myself and the singer. In a similar way, the universe, while having its own internal structure and existence which is not subject to absolute corruption, depends radically on God for its existence. Without God, it is nothing. Thus, the necessity of existence which the universe possesses is a conditional one. Given the fact that God creates (that is, shares existence), the universe must exist. In itself there is no possibility of non-existence: such a possibility lies only in the Creator.

Therefore, by the fact that it is said that all things, even the angels, would fall back into nothingness unless they were preserved by God, it is not to be understood that there is any principle of corruption in the angels, but that the existence of the angels depends on God as a cause. However, something is not said to be corruptible through the fact that God is able to reduce it to non-being by withdrawing his conservation, but rather through the fact that it has some principle of corruption in itself.<sup>28</sup>

Aquinas has shown that the world is at once radically dependent on a creating God, and in itself necessary and permanent. Basically, it is the doctrine of the composition in all creatures of essence and existence which expresses this synthesis. As to their essences, what they are, the things we experience can be explained by pointing to causes within the universe. As we have seen, the universe in itself must exist, since neither intellectual substances nor the totality of material things can be corrupted. Whether one explains what things are in terms of causes that are composite of form and matter, or in terms of causes that are pure forms (for Aquinas the separate substances, for modern science, perhaps the purely formal laws of physics), the essential structure of things, *what* they are, can be explained in terms of these causes within a universe whose existence in itself is necessary. From the point of view of asking what things are, the fact that they are created does not arise. However, to the question 'Why is there anything at all?' nothing in the universe, not even its necessary laws or principles, can give an answer. Things exist in the ultimate sense because God gives them existence. As to its essential structure, its internal order and causality, the world is self-explanatory (at least in principle); as to its existence, it depends absolutely on another.

When we speak of the production of some particular creature,

we are able to assign the reason why it is such a thing from other creatures, or at least from the order of the universe, to which every creature is ordered as a part to the form of the whole. When, however, we speak of the whole universe being called forth into existence, we are not able to find anything created from which the reason why it is such and such can be taken.<sup>29</sup>

Since the two questions ‘Why is this such and such?’ and ‘Why is there a universe of being at all?’ are irreducible, so in the particular thing essence is irreducible to existence and *vice versa*. We may, if we like, consider only the first question, and then existence is viewed as an accident at best, and finally as indistinguishable from essence. This is the realm of scientific explanation for which the question ‘Why is there anything at all?’ is not a legitimate question. On the other hand, we may recognize through judgment that a thing exists in the radical sense of there being a universe at all. Its *esse* or act of existing cannot be derived from a thing’s essence, yet is the *sine qua non* for all the thing’s perfections. Knowing this, we may argue that what *is* in the full sense is *esse* and that all other metaphysical principles including essence are modes or limitations of *esse*. Thus, essence appears to be ultimately reducible to existence. But to us as human beings both questions are legitimate. Each point of view is true, but it is not the whole truth. For anything *is what it is* because it is determined to be a particular *what* by causes within a universe which itself is made *to be* by God.

Aquinas has a favourite analogy for displaying how essence and existence are related in creatures; how, although existence follows form or essence, the latter is nothing without existence.

Now every creature is related to God as air is to the illuminating of the sun. For just as the sun is giving light by its nature, but air is made luminous by participating in the light from the sun, so only God is a being by his essence, for his essence is his existence (*esse*) while every creature is a being by participation, and its essence is not its existence.<sup>30</sup>

Air is a kind of thing that can be illuminated; that is, it can be illuminated because of its form. A creature is a kind of ‘thing’ that can be created; that is, it can be created because it is limited by its form or essence, as only what is limited can be created (infinite being is uncreated being). The natural effect of the sun is light; the air is luminous not by its nature, but by participating in the nature of the sun. Now existence is the nature of God and is his effect; creatures exist not by their essences, but by participating in the nature of God, that is, existence. As the illumination of the air depends completely on the sun, so the existence of creatures depends completely on God. Within the context of the daylight world illumination other than the sun is always found in a diaphanous medium such as air;



light without a medium is not seen, except in its source which is the sun. Similarly, existence other than God's is always found with an essential medium; existence without a medium cannot be, except in its source which is God.

However, there is nothing in the air, given the influx of light, which militates against illumination; nor is there anything in form or essence, given God's influx of existence, which might cause it to lose existence. *Esse* follows form. Where form is without matter, or as totally dominating matter, it exists permanently and indefectibly. Neither do the forms of material things have any tendency to return to absolute nothingness: they remain at least in the potentiality of matter, that is, of the material universe as a whole. 'Existence (*esse*) *per se* follows form, supposing nevertheless the influx of God, just as light follows the diaphanous nature of air, supposing the influx of the sun.'<sup>31</sup>

The analogy, of course, breaks down because, unlike the independence air has from the sun, essence has none from God. Precisely speaking, it is the subsisting thing, essence and existence, which is caused to be by God. Nevertheless, it remains true to say that all beings have a permanence, a necessity of existence which is their own, based on their essence (either individual as in intellectual substances or as part of the universal order of material things). Thus, the world we experience has a formal structure which assures its permanence and can be explored by all natural methods on its own grounds, while at the same time the existence itself of the permanent universe is a fact that all internal causality cannot explain. Given existence, the universe shows no signs of being able to lose it: but the very fact that existence is given is inexplicable in terms of the universe itself. That there is anything at all and not nothing can only be explained by what we mean by God the Creator.

The intrinsic intelligibility of the world and its extrinsic dependence on God, far from proving to be irreconcilable, actually are complementary and mutually supportive. Studying the natural world for its own sake on its own terms, far from disparaging the power of God, reveals it: the more we learn about the order of the universe, the more we learn of the power and perfection of its Creator. After all, it is from our experience of the existence of the things around us that we become aware philosophically of a creating God. And surprisingly, the fact that the universe is created does not put a cap on the scope of scientific enquiry—quite the opposite! To raise the question 'Why is there anything rather than nothing' and to recognize it as a legitimate question whose answer is what we mean by God the Creator, is to open the doors to the pursuit of all manner of natural exploration. God the Creator is not a force within the universe which skews the findings of science, which vitiates or does away with the proper causality of things: he is rather the upholder of the totality of being, which is the object of natural inquiry. To say that the very existence of the world,

the *sine qua non* for all its perfections, is from an infinitely perfect God is to say that all our attempts to explicate the intrinsic order of the universe can be improved upon. There is not less order in the universe than science claims, but more. Ptolemy gives way before Galileo, Galileo before Newton, Newton before Einstein, and so on. To say that the world is created is to say that the expanding domain of scientific explanation must continue to expand, not that it ought to be bridled. Endless awe at the Creator of such a universe, and an endless field of enquiry—these are the results of Aquinas’s option for *both ... and* rather than *either* a created world *or* the integral, permanent world which science investigates.

- 1 Fragment 30. Clement of Alexandria *Stromateis* V, 104, I, tr. by Kirk and Raven in *The Presocratic Philosophers, A critical history with a selection of texts* by G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).
- 2 Fragment 11. Plutarch *Adv. Volet.* 12, 1113c. tr. by Kirk and Raven.
- 3 *Physics* I, 8 (191b13–14), tr. by R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).
- 4 *First Principles*, Book III, Chapt. V, (1), tr. by G.W. Butterworth (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936).
- 5 *De Trinitate* V, 2 (PL 912).
- 6 *I Sententia*, d.8, p.1, a.1, q.2, c.
- 7 *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter *S.T.*) I, 45, i, c.
- 8 Avicenna, *The Healing, Metaphysics* I, 6.
- 9 *De Potentia* (hereafter *De Pot.*) V, 3; also, *S.T.* I, 104, 4.
- 10 *De Pot.* V, 3, c.
- 11 *S.T.* I, 44, 1, c.
- 12 See *De Ente et Essentia* V, 3; *Summa Contra Gentiles* (hereafter *C.G.*) II, 52, (2); *De Pot.* III, 5, c, and VII, 2, ad 5; *De Spiritualibus Creaturis* I, c; *De Substantiis Separatis* VIII, (42), and IX, (18).
- 13 See *S.T.* I, 50, 2, c; 88, 1, c.
- 14 *S.T.* I, 50, 2, ad 3.
- 15 *S.T.* I, 44, 1, c.
- 16 *C.G.* II, 15, (4); also see *De Substantiis Separatis* IX, (49).
- 17 *S.T.* I, 44, 2, c; *C.G.* II, 16 (14); *Compendium Theologiae*, 69.
- 18 *De Pot.* III, 1, ad 12; *S.T.* I, 44, 2, ad 3.
- 19 *C.G.* II, 17, (2); cf. *S.T.* I, 45, 2, c.
- 20 *S.T.* I, 9, c.
- 21 See *S.T.* I, 51, 1, c, where Aquinas argues for the existence of separate intellectual substances from the existence of intellectual substances bound up with matter.
- 22 *S.T.* I, 75, 2, c.
- 23 *C.G.* II, 91; cf. also *S.T.* I, 51, 1, c.
- 24 *De Pot.* V, 3, c; *S.T.* I, 104, 4, c; *C.G.* II, 55, (6).
- 25 *De Pot.* V, 3, c; cf. *S.T.* I, 104, 4, c.
- 26 *S.T.* I, 8, 1, c.
- 27 *De Pot.* V, 1, ad 2.
- 28 *S.T.* I, 50, 5, ad 3; cf. 75, 6, ad 2 and *C.G.* II, 55, (14).
- 29 *De Potentia* III, 17, c.
- 30 *S.T.* I, 104, 1, c.
- 31 *Ibid.*