

philosophica (Taurini, Romae: Marietti, 1954), pp. 105-108. The two chapters from the *Compendium theologiae* are here reprinted, with the kind permission of the publishers, from my translation of that work, *Compendium of Theology* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1948), pp. 98-103.

St. Thomas Aquinas
On the Eternity of the World
(*De Aeternitate Mundi*)

1. If we suppose, in accord with Catholic faith, that the world has not existed from eternity but had a beginning of its duration, the question arises whether it could have existed forever. In seeking the true solution of this problem, we should start by distinguishing points of agreement with our opponents from points of disagreement.

If the question is phrased in such a way as to inquire whether something besides God could have existed forever, that is, whether a thing could exist even though it was not made by God, we are confronted with an abominable error against faith. More than that, the error is repudiated by philosophers, who avow and demonstrate that nothing at all can exist unless it was caused by Him who supremely and in a uniquely true sense has existence.

However, if we inquire whether something has always existed, understanding that it was caused by God with regard to all the reality found in it, we have to examine whether such a position can be maintained. If we should decide that this is impossible, the reason will be either that God could not make a thing that has always existed, or that the thing could not thus be made, even though God were able to make it. As to the first alternative, all parties are agreed that God could make something that has always existed, because of the fact that His power is infinite.

2. Accordingly our task is to examine whether something that is made could have existed forever. If we reply that this is impossible, our answer is unintelligible except in two senses or because there are two reasons for its truth: either because of the absence of passive potentiality, or because of incompatibility in the concepts involved.

The first sense may be explained as follows. Before an angel has been made, an angel cannot be made, because no passive potentiality is at hand prior to the angel's existence, since the angel is not made out of pre-existing matter. Yet God could have made the angel, and could also have caused the angel to be made, because in fact He has made angels and they have been made. Understanding the question in this way, we must simply concede, in accordance with faith, that a thing caused by God cannot have existed forever, because such a position would imply that a passive potentiality has always existed, which is heretical. However, this does not require the conclusion that God cannot bring it about that some being should exist forever.

Taken in the second sense, the argument runs that a thing cannot be so made because the concepts are incompatible, in the same way as

affirmation and denial cannot be simultaneously true; yet certain people assert that even this is within God's power. Others contend that not even God could make such a thing, because it is nothing. However, it is clear that He cannot bring this about, because the power by which it is supposed to be effected would be self-destructive. Nevertheless, if it is alleged that God is able to do such things, the position is not heretical, although I think it is false, just as the proposition that a past event did not take place involves a contradiction. Hence Augustine, in his book against Faustus, writes as follows: "Whoever says, 'If God is omnipotent, let Him bring it about that what has been made was not made,' does not perceive that what he really says is this: 'If God is omnipotent, let Him bring it about that what is true is false for the very reason that it is true.'"¹ Still, some great masters have piously asserted that God can cause a past event not to have taken place in the past; and this was not esteemed heretical.

3. We must investigate, therefore, whether these two concepts are logically incompatible, namely, that a thing has been created by God and yet has existed forever. Whatever may be the truth of the matter, no heresy is involved in the contention that God is able to bring it about that something created by Him should always have existed. Nevertheless I believe that, if the concepts were to be found incompatible, this position would be false. However, if there is no contradiction in the concepts, not only is it not false, but it is even possible; to maintain anything else would be erroneous. Since God's omnipotence surpasses all understanding and power, anyone who asserts that something which is intelligible among creatures cannot be made by God, openly disparages God's omnipotence. Nor can anyone appeal to the case of sin; sins, as such, are nothing.

The whole question comes to this, whether the ideas, to be created by God according to a thing's entire substance, and yet to lack a beginning of duration, are mutually repugnant or not. That no contradiction is involved, is shown as follows. A contradiction could arise only because of one of the two ideas or because of both of them together; and in the latter alternative, either because an efficient cause must precede its effect in duration, or because non-existence must precede existence in duration; in fact, this is the reason for saying that what is created by God is made from nothing.

4. Consequently, we must first show that the efficient cause, namely God, need not precede His effect in duration, if that is what He Himself should wish.

¹ *Contra Faustum*, XXVI, 5 (PL, 42, 481).

In the first place, no cause producing its effect instantaneously need precede its effect in duration. Now God is a cause producing His effect, not by way of motion, but instantaneously. Therefore He need not precede His effect in duration. The major premise is clear from induction, based on all instantaneous changes, such as illumination, and the like. It can also be demonstrated by reasoning. In any instant in which a thing is asserted to exist, the beginning of its action can likewise be asserted, as is evident in all things capable of generation; the very instant in which fire begins to exist, it emits heat. But in instantaneous action, the beginning and the end of the action are simultaneous, or rather are identical, as in all indivisible things. Therefore, at any moment in which there is an agent producing its effect instantaneously, the terminus of its action can be realized. But the terminus of the action is simultaneous with the effect produced. Consequently no intellectual absurdity is implied if we suppose that a cause which produces its effect instantaneously does not precede its effect in duration. There would be such an absurdity in the case of causes that produce their effects by way of motion, because the beginning of motion must precede its end. Since people are accustomed to think of productions that are brought about by way of motion, they do not readily understand that an efficient cause does not have to precede its effect in duration. And that is why many, with their limited experience, attend to only a few aspects, and so are overhasty in airing their views.

This reasoning is not set aside by the observation that God is a cause acting through His will, because the will, too, does not have to precede its effect in duration. The same is true of the person who acts through his will, unless he acts after deliberation. Heaven forbid that we should attribute such a procedure to God!

5. Moreover, the cause which produces the entire substance of a thing is no less able to produce that entire substance than a cause producing a form is in the production of the form; in fact, it is much more powerful, because it does not produce its effect by educing it from the potentiality of matter, as is the case with the agent that produces a form. But some agent that produces only a form can bring it about that the form produced by it exists at the moment the agent itself exists, as is exemplified by the shining sun. With far greater reason, God, who produces the entire substance of a thing, can cause His own effect to exist whenever He Himself exists.

Besides, if at any instant there is a cause with which the effect proceeding from it cannot co-exist at that same instant, the only reason is that some element required for complete causality is missing; for a complete cause and the effect caused exist together. But

nothing complete has ever been wanting in God. Therefore an effect caused by Him can exist always, as long as He exists, and so He need not precede it in duration.

Furthermore, the will of a person who exercises his will suffers no loss in power. But all those who undertake to answer the arguments by which Aristotle proves that things have always had existence from God for the reason that the same cause always produces the same effect,² say that this consequence would follow if He were not an agent acting by His will. Therefore, although God is acknowledged to be an agent acting by His will, it nevertheless follows that He can bring it about that what is caused by Him should never have been without existence.

And so it is clear that no logical contradiction is involved in the assertion that an agent does not precede its effect in duration. As regards anything that does imply logical contradiction, however, God cannot bring it into being.

6. We now proceed to inquire whether logical contradiction is latent in the position that a created thing was never without existence. The reason for doubting is that, since such a thing is said to have been made from nothing, non-existence must seemingly precede its existence in the order of duration. The absence of any contradiction is shown by Anselm in the eighth chapter of his *Monologium*, where he explains how a creature may be said to have been made from nothing. "The third interpretation," he states, "according to which something is said to have been made from nothing, is reasonable if we understand that the thing was, indeed, made, but that there is nothing from which it was made. In a like sense we may say that, when a man is saddened without cause, his sadness arises from nothing. In this sense, therefore, no absurdity will follow if the conclusion drawn above is kept in mind, namely, that with the exception of the supreme essence all things that exist were made by it out of nothing, that is, not out of something."³ According to this explanation, then, it is clear that no order is established between what was made and nothing, as though what is made would first have to be nothing, and would afterward be something.

7. To proceed further, let us suppose that the order alluded to above, namely, relationship to nothingness, remains asserted, so that the sense is this: the creature is made from nothing [*ex nihilo*] that is, it is made after nothing. The term "after" unquestionably connotes order. But order is of various kinds; there is an order of duration and an order of nature. If, therefore, the proper and the particular do not

follow from the common and the universal, it will not be necessary, just because the creature is said to exist subsequent to nothingness, that it should first have been nothing, in the order of duration, and should later be something. It is enough that in the order of nature it is nothing before it is a being; for that which befits a thing in itself is naturally found in it before that which it merely has from another. But a creature does not have existence except from another; regarded as left simply to itself, it is nothing; prior to its existence, therefore, nothingness is its natural lot. Nor, just because nothingness does not precede being in duration, does a thing have to be nothing and being at the same time. For our position is not that, if the creature has always existed, it was nothing at some time. We maintain that its nature is such that it would be nothing if it were left to itself; just as, if we say that the air was always illuminated by the sun, we must hold that the air has been made luminous by the sun. And because everything that comes into being comes from what is not contingent, that is, from that which does not happen to exist along with that which is said to become, we must assert that the air was made luminous from being not luminous or from being dark; not in the sense that it was ever non-luminous or dark, but in the sense that it would be such if it were left to itself alone. And this is brought out more clearly in the case of stars and planets that are always being illuminated by the sun.

8. Thus it is evident that the statement that something was made by God and nevertheless was never without existence, does not involve any logical contradiction. If there were some contradiction, it is surprising that Augustine did not perceive it, as this would have been a most effective way of disproving the eternity of the world; and indeed he brings forward many arguments against the eternity of the world in the eleventh and twelfth books of *De civitate Dei*;⁴ yet he completely ignores this line of argumentation. In fact, he seems to suggest that no logical contradiction is discernible here. Thus in Book X, chap. 31 of *De civitate Dei*, he says of the Platonists: "They found a way of accounting for this by explaining that it was not a beginning of time but a principle of subordination. They point out that if a foot had always, from eternity, been planted in the dust, there would always be a footprint underneath, and no one would doubt that the footprint had been made by someone stepping there; and yet the foot would not be prior to the print, although the print was made by the foot. In the same way, they continue, the world and the gods created in it have always existed, since He who made them has always existed,

² *Phys.*, III, 4 (203b 27-30).

³ *Monologium*, 8 (PL, 158, 156; ed. Schmitt, I, 23).

⁴ *De civ. Dei*, XI, cc. 4-6; XII, cc. 15, 16 (PL, 41, 319 ff.; 364 f.).

and nevertheless they were made."⁵ Augustine never charges that this is unintelligible, but proceeds against his adversaries in another way. He also says, in Book XI, chap. 4: "They who admit that the world was made by God, yet do not wish it to have a beginning in time but only a beginning of its creation, so that it was always made in some sense that is scarcely intelligible, do indeed say something." How and why this is scarcely intelligible, was touched on in the first argument.⁷

9. Another surprising thing is that the best philosophers of nature failed to discern this contradiction. In the fifth chapter of the same book, Augustine, writing against those who were mentioned in the preceding reference, remarks: "Our present discussion is with those who agree with us that God is incorporeal and is the Creator of all natures, with the exception of His own." And, regarding the latter, he adds, further on: "They surpassed all other philosophers in prestige and authority."⁸ The same situation emerges if we carefully consider the position of those who held that the world has always existed; for in spite of this they teach that it was made by God, and perceived no logical inconsistency in this doctrine. Therefore they who do decry such inconsistency with their hawk-like vision are the only rational beings, and wisdom was born with them!

10. Yet, since certain authorities seem to be on their side, we have to show that the foundation furnished by these authorities is fragile. Damascene, for instance, in the eighth chapter of the first book, observes: "What is brought to existence from non-existence is not of such a nature as to be co-eternal with Him who is without beginning and exists forever."⁹ Similarly Hugh of St. Victor says, in the beginning of his book, *De sacramentis*: "The ineffable power of omnipotence could not have anything co-eternal with it, so as to have aid in creating."¹⁰

The minds of these authorities and of others like them is clarified by what Boethius says in the last book of the *Consolation*: "Certain people, when they learn about Plato's view that this world did not have a beginning in time and is to have no end, wrongly conclude that the created world is thus made co-eternal with its Creator. But it is one thing to be carried through an endless life, which is what Plato attributed to the world, and quite another to embrace the whole presence of endless life all at once, which is manifestly proper to the divine mind."¹¹

⁵ *Ibid.*, X, 31 (PL, 41, 311).

⁶ *Ibid.*, XI, 4 (PL, 41, 319).

⁷ Cf. no. 4 above.

⁸ *De civ. Dei*, XI, 5 (PL, 41, 320 f.).

⁹ St. John Damascene, *De fide ortho-*

doxa, I, 8 (PG, 94, 814).

¹⁰ Hugh of St. Victor, *De sacramentis*, I, 1 (PL, 176, 187).

¹¹ Boethius, *De consolazione philosophiae*, V, pr. 6 (PL, 63, 859).

11. Hence it is clear that the difficulty feared by some does not follow, that is, that the creature would be on a par with God in duration. Rather we must say that nothing can be co-eternal with God, because nothing can be immutable save God alone. The statement of Augustine in *De civitate Dei*, XII, chap. 15, is to the point: "Since the flight of time involves change, it cannot be co-eternal with changeless eternity. Accordingly, even though the immortality of the angels does not run on in time, and is not past as though it were no longer present, or future as though it had not yet arrived, yet their movements, by which successive times are traversed, do change over from the future into the past. And therefore they cannot be co-eternal with the Creator, in whom we cannot say that any movement has occurred that no longer endures, or that any will occur that has not yet taken place."¹² He speaks in like vein in the eighth book of his commentary on Genesis: "Because the nature of the Trinity is absolutely changeless, it is eternal in such a way that nothing can be co-eternal with it."¹³ And he utters similar words in the eleventh book of the *Confessions*.¹⁴

12. They also bring in arguments which philosophers have touched on, and then undertake to solve them. One among them is fairly difficult; it concerns the infinite number of souls: if the world has existed forever, the number of souls must now be infinite. But this argument is not to the purpose, because God could have made the world without men and souls; or He could have made men at the time He did make them, even though He had made all the rest of the world from eternity. Thus the souls surviving their bodies would not be infinite. Besides, no demonstration has as yet been forthcoming that God cannot produce a multitude that is actually infinite.

There are other arguments which I forbear to answer at the present time. A reply has been made to them in other works.¹⁵ Besides, some of them are so feeble that their very frailty seems to lend probability to the opposite side.

¹² *De civ. Dei*, XII, 15 (PL, 41, 364).

¹³ *De Genesi ad litteram*, VIII, 23 (PL, 34, 389).

¹⁴ *Confessiones*, XI, 30 (PL, 32, 826).

¹⁵ See responses to objections in the selections from *Contra Gentiles*, *De potentia*, and *Summa theologiae* included in this book.