

St. Thomas, Aristotle, and Creation

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Is it possible to attribute to Aristotle a doctrine of creation, i.e. a doctrine of the production of beings as beings? Is it possible to attribute to the unmoved mover discussed in *Metaph.* 12 the role of an efficient cause, whose field of causality would extend to all else as to the very substance of all else? Or is the very possibility of such a cause an issue completely outside Aristotle's approach to things?

It is rather a commonplace of twentieth-century history of philosophy that there is no doctrine of creation in Aristotle. His highest cause or first unmoved mover brings about movement in things, not as an efficient cause or productive cause, but purely and simply as a *final* cause. We see such a view presented in Joseph Owens' *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian METAPHYSICS*, and there Father Owens acknowledged that he was proposing nothing new.¹

The issue has been controversial over the centuries. In the thirteenth century, when Aristotle came into prominence in the Latin world, opinion was divided as regards the question: "Did Aristotle teach the creation of material things, right through to their primary matter?" Bonaventure was hesitant, but inclined to think not. Albert the Great, in his **Commentary on Aristotle's PHYSICS**, thought he could see a doctrine of creation even of matter in Aristotle, but previous to that and subsequently he seems to have come down on the negative side. Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, the pupil of Albert the Great, claimed to see a doctrine of creation of matter in Aristotle. He held this from the beginning of his career, freshly come from Albert's (negative) classes, to the end.²

The case of Thomas is an interesting one, because he steadfastly distinguished the question of the dependence of beings as beings on a productive cause from the question of the duration of

1. Cf. Owens, Joseph, *THE DOCTRINE OF BEING IN THE ARISTOTELIAN 'METAPHYSICS'* (A Study in the Greek Background of Mediaeval Thought), Toronto, 2nd edition, revised, 1963: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, p. 13. This work will henceforth be referred to as "DBAM".

2. Cf. Johnson, Mark F., "Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?", *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989), 129-155. Cf. also Lawrence Dewan, "St. Albert, Creation, and the Philosophers", *Laval theologique et philosophique* 40 (1984), 295-307.

the beings which are caused. The view that material reality might have unlimited duration in the past (no temporal beginning) he regarded as entirely compatible with the dependence of that reality through and through on a higher being, a cause of beings as beings. Philosophy has simply no answer to the question: past duration limited or unlimited? Indeed, it can *know* it can have no answer. On the other hand, philosophers can have something to say about the issue of total dependence. They have come to definite conclusions.³

I say the case of Thomas is interesting because the distinction he makes between the two issues, dependence and duration, invites him to ask himself how a mind that simply would not entertain the imagery of temporal beginning would envisage and present a doctrine of total dependence. What would be the argumentative strategy to be employed by such a mind? What Thomas always makes the crucial point regarding philosophers and their knowledge of creation is whether they have attained to a consideration of beings viewed from the *universal* aspect expressed in the word "being".⁴

If we look at Owens' discussion of Aristotle's doctrine of being, we find that he explicitly rules out a doctrine of free creation, i.e. a doctrine in which the creator freely chooses to give being to beings other than himself. Indeed, he rules out any consideration of what he calls "existential problems". Owens sees this as a deficiency in Aristotle, a deficiency which one discerns only by looking at Aristotle from a later historical viewpoint, the viewpoint of St. Thomas Aquinas.⁵ Since Owens professes to be looking at Aristotle from this viewpoint in making his judgment about Aristotle and creation, it is appropriate to ask whether Owens has correctly conceived Thomas' doctrine of creation. Failure to have

3. For the impossibility that philosophers reply to the question of duration, cf. *Summa theologiae* (henceforth "ST") 1.46.1. For the philosophical doctrine of total dependence, cf. ST 1.44.1 and 2.

4. One can see this in ST 1.44.2 and the many parallels. However, I might call attention to one sometimes neglected parallel, which appears to be the earliest presentation by Thomas of a history of philosophical thought in this matter, viz *Summa contra gentiles* (henceforth "SCG") 2.37. What is remarkable in that particular presentation is that Thomas, though as usual he presents the pre-socratics as not attaining to a doctrine of creation, nevertheless leaves room even for some of them to have done so. He says, speaking of their common doctrine that "nothing is made from nothing", that if some of them arrived at a doctrine of creation, they balked at calling it a "making" [*factio*], since that word conveys an idea of change, and the sort of origination creation is cannot be a change [*mutatio*].

5. Cf. DBAM, p. 466, with n. 41.

done so may significantly affect the validity of his judgment of Aristotle in this matter. Owens says:

What can be known and contemplated for the Stagirite is *form*, even though understood as act. Determination and necessity and finitude are requisite. The contingent and the infinite have no place in this contemplation. What is not form, or reducible to form, has no interest for the Primary Philosophy . . . An act like that of existence, which is irreducible to form, has no place in the Primary Philosophy or in any other science.

Creation, in the Christian sense of a free creation, could have had no interest for the Primary Philosophy, even had Aristotle believed it as a religious dogma. It would not have been reducible to a *form*, it would have been Being *per accidens* and so outside the scope of science. A fundamentally new metaphysics would be required if it were to have a place in philosophy.⁶

What Owens seems to mean is this. In Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of free creation, the being of creatures is contingent. The actual existence of creatures is related to the creatures, not as their form, nor even as a property (i.e. an accident necessarily associated with the thing's essence or form), but as a *per accidens* associate, an "accident" (using that term in the way it names one of the "predicables"). Owens, in another work, so interprets Thomas' doctrine of existence.⁷

However, that is not the only issue present in Owens' judgment. There is also the irreducibility of existence (again presumably conceived as Aquinas would) to form. This seemingly has something to do with form's being determinate, necessary, and finite.

Let us examine these points in turn. In Thomas' doctrine of created being, is existence a *per accidens* associate of the creature? And is the creature a contingent being, just by virtue of being a creature? St. Thomas explicitly rejects the idea that existence is a *per accidens* associate of the creature. To an objector who argues that creatures cannot last forever, because no accidental unity can last forever, and the act of being (*esse*) is accidentally united to the creature, Thomas replies:

. . . *esse* is not called an "accident", as if it were in the genus of accident, speaking of the *esse* of the substance: for it is the

6. Cf. DBAM, pp. 466-467.

7. Cf. Owens, Joseph, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics*, Houston, TX, 1985: Center for Thomistic Studies [reprint of the volume published by Bruce, Milwaukee, 1963], p. 73. While Owens is here speaking for himself, I believe it is fair to say he takes himself to be presenting what is also the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas.

act of the essence. Rather, [it is called an "accident"'] by a certain similarity: because it is not part of the essence, as neither is an accident [part of the essence]. If, nevertheless, it were in the genus of accident, nothing would prevent its lasting interminably: for *per se* accidents inhere in their substances necessarily, and thus nothing prevents them inhering perpetually. Accidents, however, which inhere in their subjects *per accidens* in no way endure forever, according to nature. But the substantial act of being of the thing [*ipsum esse rei substantiale*] cannot be something of that order: because it is the act of the essence.⁸

This view is constant with Thomas to the end of his career.

And is a creature, just because it is a creature, a contingent being? Not at all. What predominates in Thomas' metaphysical vision of creatures is absolute necessity. In the primary beings of created reality, i.e. the intellectual substances, intrinsic absolute necessity of being prevails.⁹ And even contingency, as to substances (i.e. the generable and corruptible substances), is a case of failing *eventually*, i.e. *always* working, until one day. . .¹⁰ Thus, it pertains to the very intelligibility of that-which-is (*ens*) that it have as differences the necessary and the contingent (or possible), and recognition of this is required if one is to grasp God as cause of beings as beings, with the transcendence which this involves. Thus we read:

. . .that-which-is, inasmuch as it is that-which-is [*ens inquantum ens est*] has God himself as its cause: thus, as that-which-is is subject to divine providence, so also are all the properties [*accidentia*] of that-which-is inasmuch as it is that-which-is, among which are *the necessary and the contingent*. . .¹¹

And again:

. . . the divine will is to be understood as standing outside the order of beings [*ut extra ordinem entium existens*], as a cause pouring forth that-which-is in its entirety [*totum ens*] and all its differences [*differentias*]. Now, the possible and the necessary are differences of that-which-is. . .¹²

8. Cf. St. Thomas, *De potentia*, 5.4 ad 3. On this point, cf. Lawrence Dewan, "Being *per se*, Being *per accidens*, and St. Thomas' Metaphysics", *Science et Esprit* 30 (1978), esp. pp. 171-175.

9. Cf. SCG 2.30 (at least the first three paragraphs); also *De potentia* 5.3 ad 12; ST 1.19.8 ad 3 and 1.22.4 ad 3. Concerning the primacy of such being, cf. ST 1.23.7 (Ottawa ed., 166b1-4).

10. Cf. St. Thomas, *Commentary on Aristotle's METAPHYSICS* (henceforth, "CM"), 6.2 (ed. Spiazzi, # 1184-1188).

11. Cf. CM 6.3 (# 1220). Cf. also # 1222.

12. Cf. St. Thomas, *Commentary on Aristotle's PERI HERMENEIAS*, 1.14 (ed. Spiazzi, # 197). cf. also ST 1.48.2 (ed. Ottawa, 305a41-45).

In the metaphysics of creation of Thomas Aquinas, a creature can be an intrinsically (and so, absolutely) necessary being, and nevertheless be entirely dependent on its cause, the creator.¹³

What about the supposed irreducibility of existence to form, which Owens presents (given Aristotle's focus on form) as resulting in an exclusion of existence from Aristotle's field of metaphysical investigation? Does Thomas Aquinas treat existence as "irreducible" to form? If this simply means: does Thomas teach that one cannot identify a creature's form with its actual existence, then the answer is "yes".¹⁴ If, however, we are asking about the *natures* of the various metaphysical targets of attention, e.g. form, matter, the composite or the subsisting thing, the actual being or existence (*esse*) of the thing, etc., then the answer is not so simple. For the sake of brevity, I will call to mind only the reasoning of Thomas on the question: is God's substance infinite? He teaches that there is a sort of infinity which attaches to *form* as such. He continues: existence [*esse*] is *most formal of all*. He continues: God is an act of being [*esse*] which subsists by itself, not received in anything else. Therefore, God is infinite.¹⁵ I.e. the reasoning depends on seeing in existence what constitutes form precisely as form, and that in the highest degree. This cannot be sloughed off as reducing form to existence. Rather, Thomas is teaching us to view existence as what is altogether primary in the line of form. If the forms of created things cannot be identified with their existence, it must be because of their inferiority as to what it is to be form.¹⁶

13. Cf. especially ST 1.44.1.obj. 2 and *ad* 2. There the objector holds that there must be beings not caused by God, because some beings are necessary, and what cannot not be needs no efficient cause. Thomas replies:

On this basis, some people were prompted to maintain that that which is necessary does not have a cause, as is reported in *Physics* 8 [ch. 1, 252a35]. But this appears manifestly false in the demonstrative sciences, in which necessary principles are the causes of necessary conclusions. And so Aristotle, in *Metaphysics* 5 [ch. 4, 1015b9], says that there are some necessary things which have a cause of their necessity. Therefore, it is not for this reason alone that an efficient cause is required, viz that the effect is able not to be, but rather [an efficient cause is needed] because the effect would not be if the cause were not: for this conditional is true, whether the antecedent and the consequent are possible or impossible.

Cf. also ST 1.50.5 *ad* 3 and 1.75.6 *ad* 2.

14. Cf. ST 1.50.2 *ad* 3, and 1.7.2 *ad* 1; also SCG 2.52 and 54.

15. Cf. ST 1.7.1.

16. Cf. St. Thomas, *De immortalitate animae ad* 17; for which see Leonard

If we find in Thomas' doctrine that existence is reducible to form, is it because he has a new notion of form, different from that of Aristotle? Owens stresses the finitude of form in Aristotle, and we have just seen that Thomas sees a sort of infinity as the intrinsic character of form as form. Have we thus entered into that "fundamentally new metaphysics" which Owens said was needed, if free creation were to be a concern of metaphysics? This does not seem to me to be what Owens meant. He meant rather that in Thomas' metaphysics we would find a primacy of the doctrine of existence, conceived as something irreducible to form. This would be a metaphysics of the contingent being of creatures. Form would remain, located within this created reality, as something finite and a source of limited or, as it were, particular necessities.¹⁷ I am suggesting that we find quite a different metaphysics of created being in Thomas than Owens leads one to expect. It is a metaphysics which does not seem so incompatible with what one finds in Aristotle, and thus it helps one see why Thomas himself could have been so ready to interpret Aristotle in a creationist sense.

Still, what about the determinateness and finitude which Owens sees as characteristic of Aristotle's forms? This seems to have much to do with the judgment that Aristotle's unmoved mover in *Metaph.* 12 is a mover only as final and not as efficient cause.¹⁸ In one place, Owens associates it with the self-containedness of the separate entities, and the doctrine that their activity must be a thinking which has itself for object of contemplation.¹⁹ Does creation require a fundamentally new metaphysics of form, one not found in Aristotle but present in Thomas Aquinas?

Thomas associates form with infinity, an infinity which pertains to things insofar as they are higher in the line of *perfection*. He

A. Kennedy, "A New Disputed Question of St. Thomas Aquinas on the Immortality of the Soul", in *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, 45 (1978), 205-223. There St. Thomas tells us that "form" (*forma*) is among the terms predicated *analogically* of diverse things. — St. Thomas' notion of form should be considered in the light of his reading of Aristotle, *Metaph.* 9.6, on the notion of act; particularly important is the proportion expressed by the use of the preposition "in": "as A is in B, so C is in D". Form is *in* matter: cf. CM 9.5 (ed. Spiazzi, # 1828). Accordingly, we find (ST 1.8.7: ed. Ottawa, 41b46-50): "Being [*esse*] is that which is most 'within' each thing, and is what most deeply inheres, since it is *formal* with respect to everything which is in the thing."

17. Cf. Owens, Joseph, *An Interpretation of Existence*, Houston, TX, 1985: Center for Thomistic Studies (reprint of volume published by Bruce, Milwaukee, 1968), pp. 28-29. Cf. Lawrence Dewan, "St. Thomas, Joseph Owens, and Existence", *The New Scholasticism* 56 (1982), esp. pp. 408-409.

18. Cf. DBAM, p. 22 and pp. 467-468.

19. Cf. DBAM, p. 453, with n. 63, the quotation from W.D. Ross.

contrasts this with another infinity, an infinity which pertains to matter, and to things insofar as they remain imperfect or incomplete or unfinished.²⁰ There can be no doubt that in Aristotle's vocabulary, "infinity" refers to this material and imperfect side of things.²¹ However, we are not considering only differences of vocabulary, but the presence or absence of certain conceptions of reality. Does the dimension of form which Thomas calls "infinity" take us entirely out of the domain of Aristotelian form? Not necessarily. Thomas relates it explicitly to the "ampleness" of the *knowing* nature as contrasted with the "narrowness", the "confined" character of the sort of being which lacks knowledge. He relates this directly to the Aristotelian conception of knowledge as "form without matter".²² In this regard, he often cites Aristotle's *De anima*: ". . .the soul is in a way all existing things. . ." ²³ If the soul is in a way all things, this is surely much truer of separate entity. Aristotle's conception of form, and of the hierarchy of forms and souls, seems to fall in very well with the reality which Thomas calls form's "infinity".²⁴

Does Thomas' conception of form as infinite rob form of its determinateness, its definite character? Not at all. Even if we take what I would consider the extreme case, God as the subsisting act of existence, Thomas can be found deliberately describing it as "determinate".²⁵ And apart from this vocabulary, which I would say Thomas rather avoids, there can be no doubt that he sees form, taken precisely as involving what he calls "infinity", as something distinct in itself and intrinsically different from others. Thus, Thomas presents us with the objection: just as what is *here*

20. Cf. ST 1.7.1.

21. Cf. e.g. Aristotle, *Metaph.* 9.6 (1048b9-17). A possible exception to this would be the attribution to the first mover of infinite power, in *Metaph.* 12.7 (1073a5-11).

22. Cf. ST 1.14.1; and Aristotle, *De anima* 2.12 (424a26-b3), 3.4 (429a13-b6), and 3.8 (431b29-432a3).

23. Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* 3.8 (431b21-22). Cf. ST 1.14.1 (ed. Ottawa 91b53-54). Aristotle's interest in this ampleness of knowing natures as contrasted with those which lack knowledge could also be illustrated in his presentation of power (*dunamis*) as with reason and without reason: reason dominates a field which embraces contraries. Cf. *Metaph.* 9.2 (104a36-b24); this chapter of Aristotle lies behind Aquinas' doctrine that the higher in reality a power is, the more universal is the object or field to which it relates: cf. ST 1.78.1 (ed. Ottawa 472b45-47) and 1.77.3 *ad* 4.

24. Cf. Aristotle, *De anima* 2.3 (414b20-415a13); also *Metaph.* 8.3 (1043b-1044a14).

25. Cf. St. Thomas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* 1.8.4.1. *ad* 1 (ed. P. Mandonnet, Paris, 1929; Lethielleux, t. 1, p. 219): "Ita etiam divinum esse est determinatum in se et ab omnibus aliis divisum". For an example, however, of "determinatum" used to imply finitude, and of form as a principle of finitude, cf. ST 3.75.4 (ed. Ottawa, 2943a7-25).

in such a way that it is not *there* is finite according to place, so also what so is *this* that it is not *that* is finite according to substance; thus, since God is this and not that, he is not infinite. In reply, Thomas says:

. . . by the very fact that the being [*esse*] of God is subsisting by itself, not received in anything, which is precisely what is called his "infinity" ["unconfinedness"], he is *distinguished* from all other things, and other things are put at a distance from him; just as, if there were a subsisting whiteness, by the very fact that it was not in another, it would *differ* from every whiteness existing in a subject.²⁶

If Thomas' metaphysics of creature and creator are not as fundamentally different from Aristotle as one might have thought, there is perhaps room to re-read some passages of Aristotle with a view to asking whether it is altogether clear that his separate entities can be movers only by way of final causality. For the sake of brevity I will discuss only one case, *Metaph.* 12.10 (1075b8-10), concerning Anaxagoras.

In chapter 10. of book 12, Aristotle compares his own doctrine of the first principle of all things with the views of others. He is generally critical of those who propose contraries as principles, but especially critical of those who do not at least include the good and the bad in their list of contraries, for ". . . in all things the good is in the highest degree a principle."²⁷ The others do make the good a principle, and in that they are right, "but *how* the good is a principle they do not say — whether as end or as mover or as form."²⁸ Aristotle then enters into particular cases. He criticizes Empedocles (who identifies the good with love) because it is not clear in precisely which respect he makes love a principle, whether as a mover or as matter. Seemingly in the same general line of thought he comes to Anaxagoras. He makes the good a mover. Aristotle bases this on the fact that Anaxagoras' mind [*nous*] moves things. It is supposed to be clear that *nous* is something good.²⁹ Obviously, "mover" in all of this is the Aristotelian cause "whence motion", i.e. efficient causality is meant.

Aristotle now presents the shortcoming of Anaxagoras' view as compared with his own. He says:

26. Cf. ST 1.7.1. *ad* 3.

27. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* 12.10 (1075a37). The translation here and elsewhere is that of W.D. Ross.

28. *Ibid.* (1075a38-b1).

29. On Anaxagoras's *nous* as good, cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* 14.4 (1091a29-b11); cf. also *EN* 1.6 (1096a25, also 1096b16 and 29).

But it [i.e. *nous*] moves them for an end, which must be something other than it, except according to *our* way of stating the case; for, on our view, the medical art is in a sense health.³⁰

The point that *nous* moves things towards the good and towards what is better, and thus on the basis of its vision of the good, is exactly the conception of *nous* we see in Plato's *Phaedo*, where Socrates is at first so happy to find Anaxagoras proposing *nous* as the cause.³¹ The difficulty is that *nous* itself turns out not to be the good; it is rather the thing it is thinking about which is the good. This difficulty seems to take its rise from the view mentioned in ch. 9 (1074b35):

But evidently knowledge and perception and opinion and understanding have always something else as their object, and themselves only by the way.

It would seem that Aristotle attributes this sort of view of mind to those he is criticizing. He thus goes on to point out that this problem is no problem the way he himself has presented mind. The idea seems clearly to be that on his account there is no difficulty in making the first cause both end and mover, i.e. in identifying the good as final cause with *nous* as productive cause.

That this is what Aristotle means to suggest about his own view of the highest cause is indicated by his referring to his account of *productive* mind, i.e. the medical art. The first cause would be self-thinking thought in which goodness and productive mind would not merely be found together in one being, but would constitute a single identical intelligibility.

Obviously, this would not be the *first* thing to say about the highest cause. The view of it as *self*-thinking thought is primary. Thus, in Aristotle's ch. 9, in which he is discussing the difficulties which the nature of mind raises, as regards the first cause, it is his account of *theoretical* mind (whose objects are without matter, and thus where there is thoroughgoing identity of the act of thinking and the object of thought) that solves the problem.³²

Nevertheless, there seems no compelling reason to interpret Aristotle's presentation of the superiority of his position as compared with that of Anaxagoras in a way which limits the Aristotelian first cause to final causality. Owens so interprets it, saying that the unmoved movers cannot be efficient causes. To this statement he attaches a quotation of W.D. Ross: "If *Metaphysics lambda* tells us anything, it tells us that God's thought is a thinking on

30. Cf. *Metaph.* 12.10 (1075b9-10).

31. Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 97B-98B.

32. Cf. *Metaph.* 12.9 (1075a2-5). I leave aside the question: in what sense would this still be a vision of "the good".

thought *and on nothing else*, and that God moves the world only *hos orekton*."³³ Such judgment about the nature of self-thinking thought, imagining it as closed in upon itself in such a way as to *exclude* the thought of anything else, seems to me to leave to one side Aristotle's conception of the soul as "in a way all things". If this is true of the soul, might it not be truer of higher mind? And would its thought of itself not include a knowledge of all things? And if it sees itself as "good", might not that even include knowing itself as worthy of desire by *all things*?³⁴

Here, I wish merely to make a suggestion about a tendency in interpretation of Aristotle. There will, I suppose, always be frustration with the ambiguities of Aristotle's thought. On the more definite question: was Thomas Aquinas right to see creation in Aristotle, I believe the answer to lie in Thomas' appreciation of Aristotle's conception of being as divided by act and potency. A doctrine of creation will be a doctrine of being as distinguished by *modes* of being as being. But that would require much more discussion.

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33. Cf. DBAM, p. 453, with n. 63.

34. Cf. Aristotle, *EN* 1.1 (1094a3).