

Thomas Aquinas on the Eternity of the World

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Introduction

Did the universe have a beginning in time? Scientifically, it may be naturally true that the world had a beginning. Yet, this argument is closely related with the issue of creation, so many philosophers and theologians have treated this investigation from the ancient times. The Greek philosopher such as Aristotle thought the world is eternal. On the other hand, Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologian did not admit that the world is eternal because only God is eternal. If the world is eternal, the world must also be infinite, but it cannot be so. Furthermore, if the world is eternal, it must be necessary world because eternity means necessity. In this case, the world is necessary in the sense that such a world would be wholly self-sufficient or in the sense that it would not be the production of God's will. If so, the world does not depend on God's free act of creation. This notion is contrary to Christian doctrine. In order to defend a view of God as absolutely free and sovereign, it seems that we must affirm that the world is temporally finite. Although it is true that a world which is temporally finite, there will be considerable debate as to whether the world must have a temporal beginning and whether the reason can prove this problem.

In fact, for many centuries, Jewish, Christian and Muslim had been arguing about this issue. Especially among the medieval thinkers, this argument was treated in diverse religious traditions and discussed with the relationship between faith and reason, and between theology and philosophy.

In this paper, I would like to introduce St. Thomas Aquinas' view, referring to other philosophers and theologians.

I . Islamic and Jewish view of eternity

First, we will see the Islamic influence on the Christian theology in the next passage. Thomas' development of his understanding of eternity owes to the Islamic thinkers such as Avicenna and Averroes. At the 10th century, there seemed to be a famous public debate in Bagdad over the merits of the "new learning," concerning on the Aristotelian thought and its Arabic use and appropriateness.¹ Al-Fārābī (870-950) established in Cairo a curriculum for the study of Plato and Aristotle. Also, Avicenna (980-1037) offered an excellent example of the way in which Greek thought was appropriate to the Islamic thought and left his great works of medicine, natural philosophy, and metaphysics. Later, Avicenna's writings were translated into Latin, and contributed to Thomas' thought.²

Avicenna's great influence is his distinction between existence and essence. He observes that a thing's essence is different from whether a thing exists. On the basis of the ontological distinction between essence and existence, Avicenna argues that all beings other than God require a cause in order to exist.³

Also, Avicenna distinguishes between eternity according to time and eternity according to essence. The former pertains to the world, which had no beginning in time but has existed during infinite past time. The latter pertains to God, whose essence is uncaused. Likewise, motion is eternal. It has a beginning in the sense that it comes from God, but had no beginning in time.

Yet, this distinction between existence and essence gave ontological priority to the intelligible nature. Hence, this notion attracted the Neoplatonic emanation according to which all existing things flow from a primal source of being and intelligibility. For

Avicenna, essence is something prior and to which existence happens or comes as an accident. So, this notion of emanation seemed heretic to Christian doctrine and became one of the most difficult problems that most of the Christian thinkers had to struggle with.⁴

Another contribution of Avicenna is that he distinguished between necessity in itself and natural necessity. An eternal world was often regarded as a necessary world. But Avicenna thought that the contingency of the world did not deny natural necessity, that the contingent existence is necessary through another, although not necessary in itself (*per se*). "Finite things were contingent in themselves but necessary with reference to their causes and ultimate to God, who is the Cause of causes. Thus the natural order retains its integrity and the continuity of its categories—time, space, causality, the wholeness of human intelligence, and moral sense."⁵ According to him, a world without necessary relationships, that is, the knowledge of a necessary nexus between cause and effect, is an unintelligible world. Creation for Avicenna is an ontological relationship, a relationship in the order of being which has no reference to temporality. In this way, Avicenna accepted the Greek view that the universe is eternal and had his view of emanation of existing things from a primal source. Consequently, he was attacked by al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), Muslim theologian, since it was inconsistent with the God revealed in the Koran. Al-Ghazālī thought that the notion of an eternal world was the very antithesis of a created one and threats to the orthodox Islamic doctrine.⁶ He points out that "the philosophers like Avicenna wanted to show the world's timeless dependence upon God, but the idea of timelessness demands that of self-sufficiency."⁷ Even in the Islamic world, the issue of the "eternity" had been argued and had arisen controversy.

The philosopher whom secondly we should refer to is Averroes (ca.1126–1198). Later in the twelfth century, in *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, he defended the Greek philosophical tradition

against al-Ghazālī. He argued that eternal creation is not only intelligible, but is “the most appropriate way to characterize the universe.”⁸ On the contrary, al-Ghazālī thought that only God must be the cause of the world, and that God must be the agent who brings about the existence of the world. Such causality required a temporal beginning. In other words, the world cannot be both eternal and the result of God’s action, since whatever exists eternally cannot have another existence as its originating source.⁹

In reply to this, Averroes draws a distinction between two different senses of an eternal world: eternal in the sense of being unlimited in duration, and eternal in the sense of being eternally self-sufficient, without a first cause:

If the world were by itself eternal and existent ... then, indeed, the world would not have an agent at all. But if it is eternal in the sense that it is an eternal [process of] origination and that its origination has neither beginning nor end, then certainly that which conveys the meaning of eternal origination has a greater right to be called ‘creation’ than that which conveys the meaning of limited creation. In this way the world is God’s creation and the name ‘origination’ is even more suitable for it than the word ‘eternity’. The philosophers only call the world eternal to safeguard themselves against [being identified with those who believe in] the kind of creation, which is from something, in time, and after a state of non-existence.¹⁰

As we have seen, Muslim theologians such as al-Ghazālī and the early Christian Fathers argued so strongly against the Greek notion of the eternity of the world and they were convinced that that notion was obviously incompatible with the doctrine of creation. Yet, Averroes notes that a world, which is eternal only in the first sense of eternal, that is, unlimited in duration, would still require an

external agent, which gives it its existence. On the other hand, a world which is eternal not only in the sense of unlimited duration but also in the sense of being completely self-sufficient would be entirely independent of any external cause. Its eternal existence would be rooted simply in what it is. It would exist necessarily, without cause. Averroes maintains that philosophers, such as Aristotle, are committed to the eternity of the world only in the sense of unlimited duration and not in the sense of the world's being wholly self-sufficient. Thus, he made a distinction between a world, which is eternally existent in itself, and a world, which is eternally existent, by being made so.¹¹ Later, Averroes' interpretation of Greek philosophy, in particular his commentaries on the texts of Aristotle, makes a great influence on the discussions about creation and the eternity of the world in the thirteenth century.¹²

Also important is the thought of Jewish theologian and philosopher, Maimonides (1135–1204). He thinks that whether the universe is eternal or temporally created cannot be known by the human intellect with certainty. (The very notion of this position is the same as that of Thomas.) All that we can do is to refute the proofs of the philosophers who have the ideas of the eternity of the world. Along with Averroes, he was critical of the kalam theologians who assign all causal agents to God. He was particularly alert to what he considered to be the dangers of Neoplatonic emanationism in which the doctrine of creation and the eternity of the world are combined in such a way that would deny the free activity of God. According to Maimonides, if we affirm that God is truly a free agent by faith, then we must reject an eternal universe, since such a universe denied God's freedom and eliminated His purpose.¹³

II. St. Augustine's view

Among the Church Fathers, St. Augustine made the most impor-

tant contribution to the doctrine of creation. Not only does he make clear the difference between an eternal universe of Greek philosophy and the Christian understanding that the universe and time begin together. He also distinguishes between the way we come to know creatures as they exist and develop in time and the way God knows creatures as their cause. Augustine observes that there are “two moments of creation”:

one in the original creation when God made all creatures before resting from all His works on the seventh day, and the other in the administration of creatures by which He works even now. In the first instance God made everything together without any moments of time intervening, but now He works within the course of time, by which we see the stars move from their rising to their setting, the weather change from summer to winter....¹⁴

According to him, the creation in Genesis occurred simultaneously. Augustine says: “He made that which gave time its beginning, as He made all things together, disposing them in an order based not on intervals of time but on causal connections.”¹⁵

Or, he says: “The world was not made in time, but along with time.”¹⁶ Augustine also recognizes that God’s creative agency is not only exercised at the beginning of the universe, but continuously, causing all that is to exist. Yet, he doubted that creation from eternity is possible. He says, in *De civitate Dei*: “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.”¹⁷ To this remark, Thomas is surprised that even the great theologian such as St. Augustine failed to discern the possibility of the eternity of the world, and writes how and why this is scarcely intelligible.

III. Controversy in the Thirteenth Century

Most of the eminent Scholastics of the thirteenth century accepted from revelation the fact that the world was created in time and denied Aristotle's position. God created the world immediately without any secondary causes and created the universe with a temporal beginning. Since an infinite regression in causality is impossible, we must come to the first one in the sphere of material causes. Yet, this first material cause does not produce itself. Accordingly it is not eternal and therefore the world is not eternal.¹⁸

Also, whether reason can prove the beginning of the world is one of the most famous arguments. This argument is an encounter between claims to truth founded on reason and on faith. St. Anselm, Richard of St. Victor, William of Paris, St. Bonaventure, and Henry of Ghent hold that a world without beginning is intrinsically repugnant, and hence that its finite duration is demonstrable. Also, Alexander of Hales, Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon had the same opinion. Opposing to this view, St. Thomas, and his school such as Giles of Rome, Cajetan, John of St. Thomas, along with Louis de Molina, Francis Suarez, had the view that eternal creation or a universe existing without a beginning have no intrinsic contradiction. On this possibility of the eternal world, there was considerable controversy in the thirteenth century.

Of all the Scholastics who maintained that creation in time is rationally demonstrable, the most emphatic is St. Bonaventure. He not only refutes the main arguments proposed by Aristotle, but also takes the offensive to prove that the hypothesis of an eternal duration of a universe created by God is intrinsically inconsistent.¹⁹ The contradiction is so clear to him. According to him, if the world does not begin, an infinite number of days has preceded the present one. Therefore it is impossible to traverse them, and so we could never have arrived at today.²⁰ Moreover, if the world is eternal, the

human race must also be eternal, because the universe, existing as it does for the sake of man, was never without men. Hence men in infinite number have existed, and their immortal, rational souls must be now existing. But simultaneously infinite number is impossible. Consequently the world must have begun in time.

The fifth proposition is: It is impossible that there simultaneously an infinite number of things. (ST I.q46, a.2, ad 6m) But if the world is eternal and without a beginning, then there has been an infinite number of men, since it would not be without there being men---for all things are in a certain way for the sake of man (Aristotle, physics II, 2, 194a34-35) and a man lasts only for a limited length of time. But there have been as many rational souls as there have preceded existence been men, and so an infinite number of souls. But, since they are incorruptible forms, there are as many souls as there have been; therefore an infinite number of souls exist. If this leads you to say that there has been a transmigration of souls or that there is but the one soul for all men, the first is an error in philosophy, because, as Aristotle holds, "appropriate act is in its own matter." Therefore, the soul, having been the perfection of one, cannot be the perfection of another, even according to Aristotle. The second position is even more erroneous, since much less is it true that there is but the one soul for all.²¹

Bonaventure also mentions that the very concept of creation implies a temporal beginning. What is created by God from nothing preexisting, is not derived from nothing regarded as a material substratum. Hence the creation from nothing indicates temporal succession. In created beings, therefore, non-existence precedes existence.

But the world has being after non-being. Therefore it is impossible that it be eternal. the world has its being totally from God; therefore the world is out of nothing. But not out of nothing as a matter (*materaliter*); therefore out of nothing as an origin (*originaliter*).²²

From this argument it is evident that he believes that creation involves a temporal product. For him, the creation, which he calls a supra-natural motion, involves the creating of both natural motion and time. Furthermore, creation is from the divine will through the divine wisdom. So, eternity is not fit for the mutable nature of the creature. Thus, Bonaventure believes that *rationes necessariae*, arguments necessitating assent, may be given for what the Christian already knows by faith and revelation: "In the beginning God made all things."²³

Bonaventure concludes as follows: "it has to be said that to maintain that the world is eternal or eternally produced by claiming that all things have been produced out of nothing is entirely against truth and reason."²⁴ In this way, he insists on the beginning of the world and strongly opposes to the possibility of the eternal world.

IV. St. Thomas' position

Now we will see Thomas' position and his argument.

First, from his earliest to his last writings on the subject, Thomas maintains that it is possible for there to be an eternal, created universe. On the basis of faith, Thomas holds that the universe is not eternal. But he thinks that God could have created a universe which is eternal. Although reason affirms the intelligibility of an eternal, created universe, Thomas thinks that reason alone leaves unresolved the question of whether the universe is eternal. The development by Thomas of an understanding of creation from noth-

ing, and, in particular, his understanding of the possibility of an eternal, created universe, offers one of the best examples of his account of the relationship between faith and reason.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas held that there must be an unchanged changer or unmoved mover. But Aristotle argued that the world had no beginning in time.²⁵ On the other hand, following the tradition of Judaism and Christianity, Thomas denied this statement. Yet he also holds that, from the viewpoint of philosophy, it cannot be proved that the world had a beginning. He says: "That God is the creator of a world that began to be is an article of faith. It is held through revelation alone, and cannot be demonstrated."²⁶ "By faith alone do we hold, and by no demonstration can do it be proved, that the world did not always exist, as was said above of mystery of the Trinity (32, 1). The reason of this is that the newness of the world cannot be demonstrated on the part of the world itself. For the principle of demonstration is the essence of a thing."²⁷

Also, in "*On the Eternity of the World (De Aeternitate Mundi)*," he says as follows:

Although we accept according to the Catholic faith that the world had a beginning of its duration, nevertheless the problem has arisen of whether it could have always existed. In order that the truth of this problem be explained, first we must distinguish that about which we agree with our adversaries from that about which we differ from them. If, on the one hand, it is thought that something other than God could have always existed in the sense that something could exist but not [be] made by God, this is an abominable error, not only according to the faith but also according to the philosophers, who admit and prove that absolutely nothing would be able to exist unless it were caused by Him who has being in the highest degree and most truly. If, on the other hand, it is thought that something has always existed

and still had been caused completely by God, an investigation should be made whether this can be the case.

Now if it is said that this is impossible, this will be said either because God could not make something which always existed, or because, even if God could make it, it could not be made. On the first part, considering God's infinite power, everyone agrees that God could have made something which always existed. It remains, therefore, to see whether it is possible for something to be made which always existed.²⁸

On the contrary, Bonaventure had the view that reason can demonstrate that the world must have started a finite time ago. Aquinas, however, is simply unconvinced by the arguments, and thinks that there is no contradiction involved in saying that the world never had a beginning, for he holds that the world is not definable so as to rule out its always having existed. In his view, God causes things by virtue of his will. So we cannot deduce that God just wills a certain kind of world (e.g. one which had a beginning).²⁹

Secondly, following Islamic thinkers such as Avicenna and Averroes, Thomas distinguishes the order of beings, essence and existence, and the nature of eternity. Aquinas follows Avicenna, but rather develops the notion of radical dependency in such a way that creature's existence is understood not as something which happens to essence but as a fundamental relation to God as origin. It is true that for all creatures being is not essential. Therefore, we can think creatures of the non-existence. On the contrary, it is impossible to think the first being of non-existent. The being and essence of the first being should be identical.

From this point of view, Thomas distinguishes eternity of God and that of the created beings.

Nevertheless, there is before time a duration, namely, the eter-

nity of God, which has no extension, and no before and after, as does time, but is a simultaneous whole. [The divine duration] cannot be compared with time, just as the divine magnitude cannot be compared with a corporeal magnitude. When we say, therefore, that outside of the world there is nothing but God, we do not mean that there is some [real] dimension outside of the world; in like manner, when we say that before the world nothing existed, we do not mean that there is some successive duration before the world.³⁰

Or, he says,

To the seventh it ought to be said that even if the world always existed, it would not be equal to God in duration, because the divine duration, which is eternity, is a simultaneous whole, whereas the duration of the world is a succession of time. Boethius explains this in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, book 5, prose 6.³¹

Also, following Averroes, Thomas distinguishes the eternal world in the sense of unlimited duration and the one in the sense of being completely self-sufficient. The former still requires an external agent which gives it its existence. In his *On the Eternity of the world*, Thomas says as follows:

First I shall show that it is not necessary that an efficient cause, such as God, precede its effect in duration, if He Himself had willed [that He does not precede His effect]. First, [I argue] as follows. No cause that instantaneously produces its effect precedes its effect necessarily in duration. But God is a cause that produces His effect. Not through motion, but instantaneously. Therefore, it is not necessary that He precede His effect

in duration.³²

Or,

There are, however, several kinds of order, such as that of duration and that of nature. If the proper and the particular is not implied by the common and the universal, it would not be necessary that nothing precede in duration that which comes later, just because the creature is said to be after nothing, but it is enough that nothing be prior by nature to being. What is naturally prior in every thing is what belongs to itself rather than what it has only from another. Now a creature has no being except [what it has] from another, and if it is left to itself it is nothing. Hence nothing [itself] in the creature is naturally prior to being. And this does not imply that nothing and being are simultaneous because [nothing] does not precede [being] in duration.³³

In this way, for Thomas, to say that something has been made by God and that it has always existed is not a contradiction. The idea of creation does not logically require a beginning. The creature exists as an effect of God's creative act. If the Creator wills the creature to exist without inception of its duration, it exists so. If the Creator wills it to have a finite, limited duration, it has a beginning of its existence. Therefore, creation is essentially dependent in being. If the notion of beginning is associated with it, this is because of the fact acknowledged by Christian faith, not because of the very essence of creation. A universe without initial moment would still be a created universe dependent on the first Cause, and its successive-ness in time would be inferior to God's eternity. Accordingly we do not need to have a fear that a creature without beginning would be equal to God in duration, for no comparison is possible between time,

even though unlimited, and the immutable possession of eternity. Thomas never denies the Christian doctrine that God alone is without beginning, end, and succession.

Thirdly, Thomas does not think that creation is related with change. Aristotle argues that time is essentially connected with change, that it measures change. He does not think that it is identical with change, since many things change while “time is equally everywhere and with everything,” and since change may be fast or slow while “what is fast and what is slow is defined by time.” But he does maintain that without change there is not time.³⁴

Aquinas responds that creation is not a change and does not involve any sort of motion. If one wishes to call creation a change, however, it is a change that is preceded not by a change in the mover but only in the movable thing. But since the “movable thing” in the case of creation is really non-being, there cannot be any motion or change of any kind prior to creation. Creation is not change, but is a unilateral relation of dependence in the creature with respect to the God as cause of the creature’s existence.³⁵

To the second it ought to be said that creation is not the sort of making that is properly speaking a change, but is rather a certain receiving of being. Hence it need have no essential relation except to the giver of being, and in this way it is not “out of” non-being, except insofar as it is after non-being, as night is “out of” day.³⁶

Also, Thomas has an objection to the notion that a temporal beginning of creation is intelligible, because it involves the notion of a time before time. He mentions as follows:

As is stated in *Physics* IV, “before” and “after” pertain to time, seeing that “before” and “after” are found in motion. Hence

beginning and end in time are to be understood in the same way as in motion. In the hypothesis of the eternity of motion, any given moment in motion must be a beginning and an end of motion; but this is not necessary if motion has a beginning. And the same is true of the now of time. And thus it is clear that the idea of the instant now, viewed as being always the beginning and end of time, presupposes the eternity of time and motion.³⁷

In the *Summa contra Gentiles* [2.36.7], Aquinas describes the sense of “before” and “after” involved in speaking about the world’s coming-into-existence after it did not exist

... the before we speak of as proceeding time implies nothing temporal in reality, but only in our imagination. Indeed, when we say that time exist after not existing, we mean that there was no time at all prior to this designated now; even so, when we declare that above the heavens there is nothing, we are not implying the existence of a place outside the heavens which can be said to be above in relation to it, but that there is no place at all above it. In either case, the imagination can add a certain dimension to the already existing things; and just as there is no reason for attributing infinite quantity to a body, as is said in Physics III [206b20], so neither does it justify the supposition that time is eternal.

Next, how does Thomas respond to the objection of Bonaventure? A popular argument with defenders of the world’s non-eternity is that if the world has existed always, there would have elapsed an infinite number of days before the present one. But it is impossible to traverse an actual infinite. So if the world were without beginning, the present would never have arrived. However, Thomas regards this as a false argument. He argues that we should not suppose that

between two extremes there is an infinite number of finite lengths of equal size. So between two instants there cannot be an infinite number of days. Whatever past day we choose to focus on, there is merely a finite number of days between it and today. And there is thus no difficulty in supposing that the present could have arrived though the world is infinite. "A passage is always from one term to another, and whichever day from the past we pick on, there is only a limited number between then and today, and this span can be traversed."³⁸

Also, Thomas points out that the fundamental mistake of such an objection is the failure to distinguish between things that are successive and things that exist in a complete actuality, *totum simul*. A material thing that is a complete actuality, like a mountain, cannot be infinite, because it has all of its actuality at once (*totum simul*). If a mountain were infinite, an actually infinite amount of matter would be required, which is impossible. But for time to be infinite does not mean that anything must be actually infinite. What is actual of time is only the present moment. "There is nothing of time but the present moment," as Aquinas will say in *Summa*. Time never exists in actuality as a whole; rather, time is successive and hence has potentiality mixed with act.³⁹ Thus, by its very nature, time can never be actually infinite. Time is not fully actual thing, and therefore cannot be an actually infinite thing. Hence, to speak about "an infinite number of past days" is to treat time as if it had an actual existence. Thomas' response, therefore, to the objection is that if the world is eternal, the past would not constitute an actual infinity. Therefore it would always be possible to add more days.⁴⁰

The second objection is that if the world were eternal, there would have been an infinite number of generations of animals. But an infinite number of generations of animals means that there were an infinite number of causes that produced the present generation of animals. An infinite number of causes, however, is impossible.

Thomas responds by distinguishing between causes that are essentially ordered and causes that are accidentally ordered. It is true that there cannot be an infinite number of essentially ordered causes, but it is quite possible that accidentally ordered causes be infinite. The key to understanding the distinction between these two types of ordered causes is to recognize that essentially ordered causes must all exist simultaneously at the precise moment of causing; accidentally ordered causes need not be simultaneously present at the conception of the new animal: the male, the female, the heat from the sun, and whatever other causes are necessary for the act of conception. These causes must be finite in number and all present simultaneously; the absence of any one of them would prevent the conception from taking place. Accidentally ordered causes, on the other hand, need not exist at the time of conception: the previous generations of animals can all be non-existent, and the time of conception, and the conception will still take place. Since accidentally ordered causes do not have to exist at the time of the actual causing, there is nothing to prevent an infinite multiplication of such causes.

In his writings, *Sent.* Thomas mentions as follows:

To the fifth it ought to be said that one effect cannot have an infinite number of essential causes, but it can have an infinite number of accidental causes. In other words, it is impossible that some effect essentially require an infinite number of causes, but it is possible that there be an infinite number of causes which do not essentially bear upon the effect. For example, in order that a knife exist, some efficient causes are essentially required, such as a craftsman and a tool, and it is impossible that these be infinite in number, because there would consequently be an actual infinity of things. If, however, the knife is made by an old craftsman who many times replaces his tools, there would be a successive multitude of tools, [but] this is accidental. Nothing

prevents an infinite number of tools from existing which come before this knife, if the craftsman should be eternal. The same is true in the generation of animals, because the semen of the father is the efficient cause and the instrument of the sun's power. Because instruments of this sort, which are secondary causes, are generated and corrupted, it can happen that they are infinite in number. In the same way it can also happen that there were an infinite number of days before this day, because the substance of the sun is eternal, according to them, and each revolution of it is finite. This is the argument of the Commentator in Physics 8.⁴¹

The third objection is that if the world were eternal, and if men have always existed in the world, there would have been by now an infinite number of men. But an infinite number of men would mean that there are now an actually infinite number of human souls. Since an actual infinity is impossible, the world cannot be eternal. Thomas raises the objection in the final part of his *De aeternitate mundi*. It is the strongest argument precisely because, unlike the arguments about past time, it argues that something actual from the past is "left over." Past time is no longer actual, and therefore it makes no sense to speak about an eternal past as an "actual infinity." Human souls, however, are immortal, and hence all the souls of all the men who have ever lived are now actual. If men have existed from all eternity, there would surely now be an actual infinity of human souls.

To such an argument, Thomas' strongest response is (as he says in the *Summa* 1.46.2, ad8 and *De aeternitate mundi*), that the argument about an infinite number of human souls is strictly irrelevant to the question of the possibility of the eternal duration of the world. It would have been possible for God to have created the world as eternal and to have created the species man as having a temporal beginning.

The argument, thus, would hold only in the particular case of an eternal world in which men always existed. Thomas answers as follows:

[Some objectors] also add arguments on their own, which the philosophers touch upon and answer, among which the most difficult is that about the infinity of souls. If the world always existed, it is necessary that now there are an infinite number of souls. But this argument is not germane, because God could have made a world without men and without souls and without animals, or He could have made men to be when in fact He did make them, even if He had made the whole world from eternity. Thus there would not remain an infinite number of souls after [the death of] bodies. Furthermore, it has not yet been demonstrated that God could not make an actual infinity of things.⁴²

Thomas remarks that, even though the human race could not be eternal, the possibility of an eternal existence for the material world and the angels is not thereby excluded. His own purpose, abstracting from this particular question, is to investigate the general issue, whether some creature could exist eternally, that no one has yet demonstrated that God is unable to produce an actually infinite multitude.

The fourth objection is that if the world were eternal, the world would be equal to God. The world would have an infinite power, which is inappropriate to a creature. Thomas responds by noting that God's eternity is completely different from eternal temporal duration; God's eternity is not successive but is, rather, the perfect, simultaneous possession of all being. An eternity of time, since it is successive and never complete, could not be equal to God's eternity in any way. Likewise, if it existed eternally, the power of the world would not be like God, for the power through which the world exists

is not from itself but from God.

V. Conclusion

As we have already seen, it is clear that Thomas had a great influence from the work of medieval Muslim and Jewish thinkers in his thought. He developed their way of thinking and strengthened the cooperation of philosophy and theology, and did not reject even Greek thought, which seemed heretic to Christians.

Thomas recognized the possibility of an eternally created world because he saw that there was nothing in the concept of “being created out of nothing” that indicates the necessity of a temporal beginning. He emphasizes that the act of creation does not take any time, since it is not like a change that takes place in matter. Also, since actual causes are always simultaneous with their effects, it would not be unreasonable to say that the created world had eternal duration. Thomas was able to distinguish between the question of the ultimate origin of the world and whether the world had a temporal beginning. Thomas’ position is that reason can show that the world has an origin — in that it is dependent upon God as Creator — but reason cannot show that the world has a beginning of its duration.

Thomas thought that a world created from nothing (whether that world be eternal or temporally finite) was susceptible to scientific understanding. Creation so understood does not destroy the autonomy of that which is created, that is, created beings can and do function as real secondary causes, cause which can be discovered in the natural sciences. Contrary to the claims of Maimonides and al-Ghazālī, Thomas maintains that an eternal universe does not have to mean a necessary universe, a universe, which is not the result of the free creative act of God. An eternal, created universe would have no first moment of its existence, but, as Avicenna had noted, it

still would have a cause of its existence.

Thomas' emphasis is that the fact of temporal creation depends on God's free will, which cannot be known except by revelation. Since such a revelation has been communicated to us, we assert with complete assurance that the world has had a beginning, but our certain knowledge is based on faith alone.

In the end, we can say that what is most important for Thomas is to find a complementarity between reason and faith. Why Thomas admitted the eternity of the world is because of his faith. His argument is not heretic, rather emphasizes God's power. In this point, we should not misunderstand Thomas' intention and give it validity.

Notes

¹ Steven E. Baldner & William E. Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation* (Tronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), p.12.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p.14.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lenn E. Goodman, *Avicenna*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.74.

⁶ Steven E. Baldner & William E. Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation*, p.16.

⁷ Lenn E. Goodman, *Avicenna*, p.83.

⁸ Barry S. Kogan, *Averroes and the Metaphysics of Causation*, (NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), p.203.

⁹ Steven E. Baldner & William E. Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation*, p.17.

¹⁰ Averroes, Tahafut al-Tahafut 162; trans.Simon Van den Bergh, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, 2 vols. (London: Luzac, 1954), 1: 96-97.

¹¹ Steven E. Baldner & William E. Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation*, p.18.

¹² Ibid., p.19.

Aquinas refers to Averroes as "Commentator."

¹³ Steven E. Baldner & William E. Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation*, p.22.

¹⁴ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 5.11.27; trans. John Hammond Taylor as *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Ancient Christian Writers 41-42, 2vols. (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 1.162.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.5.12; trans. Taylor, 1:154.

- ¹⁶ Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XI, 6 (PL, 41, 322).
- ¹⁷ Ibid., XI, 4 (PL, 41, 319).
- ¹⁸ Cyrill Vollert, *On the Eternity of the World*, [with works by Siger of Brabant and St. Bonaventure], Mediaeval Philosophical Texts in Translation 16, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2000), p.13.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ In II Sent., d. 1, par. 1, a.1, q.2, fund.3 (Quaracchi, II, p.21a)
- ²¹ Ibid., fund.5 (Quaracchi, II, p.21b)
- ²² Ibid., fund.6 (Quaracchi, II, p.22a)
- ²³ Paul M. Byrne, L.S.M., *On the Eternity of the World*, [with works by Siger of Brabant and St. Bonaventure], Mediaeval Philosophical Texts in Translation 16, p.104.
- ²⁴ In II Sent., d. 1, par. 1, a.1, q.2, Concl.
- ²⁵ Aristotle, *Physics*, 8.1.251
- ²⁶ *Summa theologiae*, I, a.46.a.2.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *On the Eternity of the World*, trans. Steven E. Baldner & William E. Carroll, (Tronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), p.114.
- ²⁹ *Summa theologiae*, I, a.46.2.
- ³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Physics*, 990
- ³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Writings on the "Sentences" of Peter Lombard*, Book 2, Distinction 1, Question 1, a5., Reply to the Arguments "On the Contrary" 7.
- ³² Thomas Aquinas, *On the Eternity of the World*, trans. Steven E. Baldner & William E. Carroll, p.116.
- ³³ Ibid., pp.118-119.
- ³⁴ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, 16 (218b21f)
- ³⁵ Steven E. Baldner & William E. Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation*, p.56.
The arguments for the eternity of the world, based on an analysis of time and motion, have their source in Aristotle's *Physics*. Yet, he rejects Aristotle's arguments are sound in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, 986.
- ³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Writings on the "Sentences" of Peter Lombard*, Book 2, Distinction 1, Question 1, a2., Replies to Objections 2.
- ³⁷ *Summa theologiae*, I, a46, a.1. Reply to Obj. 7.
- ³⁸ *Summa theologiae*, I, a46.2.ad.6.
- ³⁹ *Summa theologiae*, I, a46.3.ad.3; I, a7.3.ad.4.
- ⁴⁰ Steven E. Baldner & William E. Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation*, p.58.

- ⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Writings on the "Sentences" of Peter Lombard*, Book 2, Distinction 1, Question 1, a5., Replies to the Arguments "On the Contrary" 5.
- ⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *On the Eternity of the World*, trans. Steven E. Baldner & William E. Carroll, pp.121-122.