

Thomas Aquinas on the World's Duration

Thomas Aquinas (1224/1226–1274) was a prolific philosopher and theologian. His exposition of Aristotle's philosophy and his views concerning matters central to the Christian faith had a huge impact upon the Church and later philosophers. The translation below follows that of the English Dominican Fathers.

Reading Aquinas: several of Aquinas's works, including the *Summa Theologiae* [ST], take the form of a *disputatio*. In reading the ST keep in mind that Aquinas first describes objections to his view before giving his view (in the **Reply**) and (typically) responding to the objections.

Summa Theologiae Ia Q46: The Beginning of the Duration of Created Things

Article 1. Has the universe of created things always existed?

Objection 1: It would seem that the universe of creatures, called the world, had no beginning, but existed from eternity. For everything which begins to exist, is a possible being before it exists: otherwise it would be impossible for it to exist. If therefore the world began to exist, it was a possible being before it began to exist. But possible being is matter, which is in potentiality to existence, which results from a form, and to non-existence, which results from privation of form. If therefore the world began to exist, matter must have existed before the world. But matter cannot exist without form: while the matter of the world with its form is the world. Therefore the world existed before it began to exist: which is impossible.

Objection 2: Further, nothing which has power to be always, sometimes is and sometimes is not; because so far as the power of a thing extends so long it exists. But every incorruptible thing has power to be always; for its power does not extend to any determinate time. Therefore no incorruptible thing sometimes is, and sometimes is not: but everything which has a beginning at some time is, and at some time is not; therefore no incorruptible thing begins to exist. But there are many incorruptible things in the world, as the celestial bodies and all intellectual substances. Therefore the world did not begin to exist.

Objection 3: Further, what is unbegotten has no beginning. But the Philosopher (*Phys.* i, text 82) proves that matter is unbegotten, and also (*De Caelo et Mundo* i, text 20) that the heaven is unbegotten. Therefore the universe did not begin to exist.

Objection 4: Further, a vacuum is where there is not a body, but there might be. But if the world began to exist, there was first no body where the body of the world now is; and yet it could be there, otherwise it would not be there now. Therefore before the world there was a vacuum; which is impossible.

Objection 5: Further, nothing begins anew to be moved except through either the mover or the thing moved being otherwise than it was before. But what is otherwise now than it was before, is moved. Therefore before every new movement there was a previous movement. Therefore movement always was; and therefore also the thing moved always was, because movement is only in a movable thing.

Objection 6: Further, every mover is either natural or voluntary. But neither begins to move except by some pre-existing movement. For nature always moves in the same manner: hence unless some change precede either in the nature of the mover, or in the movable thing, there cannot arise from the natural mover a movement which was not there before. And the will, without itself being changed, puts off doing what it proposes to do; but this can be only by some imagined change, at least on the part of time. Thus he who wills to make a house tomorrow, and not today, awaits something which will be tomorrow, but is not today; and at least awaits for today to pass, and for tomorrow to come; and this cannot be without change, because time is the measure of movement. Therefore it remains that before every new movement, there was a previous movement; and so the same conclusion follows as before.

Objection 7: Further, whatever is always in its beginning, and always in its end, cannot cease and cannot begin; because what begins is not in its end, and what ceases is not in its beginning. But time always is in its beginning and end, because there is no time except “now” which is the end of the past and the beginning of the future. Therefore time cannot begin or end, and consequently neither can movement, the measure of what is time.

Objection 8: Further, God is before the world either in the order of nature only, or also by duration. If in the order of nature only, therefore, since God is eternal, the world also is eternal. But if God is prior by duration; since what is prior and posterior in duration constitutes time, it follows that time existed before the world, which is impossible.

Objection 9: Further, if there is a sufficient cause, there is an effect; for a cause to which there is no effect is an imperfect cause, requiring something else to make the effect follow. But God is the sufficient cause of the world; being the final cause, by reason of His goodness, the exemplar cause by reason of His wisdom, and the efficient cause, by reason of His power as appears from the above (Q. 44 a 2, 3, 4). Since therefore God is eternal, the world is also eternal.

Objection 10: Further, eternal action postulates an eternal effect. But the action of God is His substance, which is eternal. Therefore the world is eternal.

On the contrary, It is said (Jn. 17:5), “Glorify Me, O Father, with Thyself with the glory which I had before the world was”; and (Prov. 8:22), “The Lord possessed Me in the beginning of His ways, before He made anything from the beginning.”

I answer that, Nothing except God can be eternal. And this statement is far from impossible to uphold: for it has been shown above (Q. 19 a 4) that the will of God is the cause of things. Therefore things are necessary, according as it is necessary for God to will them, since the necessity of the effect depends on the necessity of the cause (*Metaph.* v). Now it was shown above (Q. 19 a 3), that, absolutely speaking, it is not necessary that God should will anything except Himself. It is not therefore necessary for God to will that the world should always exist; but the world exists forasmuch as God wills it to exist, since the being of the world depends on the will of God, as on its cause. It is not therefore necessary for the world to be always; and hence it cannot be proved by demonstration.

Nor are Aristotle's reasons simply, but relatively, demonstrative — viz. in order to contradict the reasons of some of the ancients who asserted that the world began to exist in some quite impossible manner. This appears in three ways. Firstly, because, both in *Phys.* viii and in *De Caelo* i, text 101, he premises some opinions, as those of Anaxagoras, Empedocles and Plato, and brings forward reasons to refute them. Secondly, because wherever he speaks of this subject, he quotes the testimony of the ancients, which is not the way of a demonstrator, but of one persuading of what is probable. Thirdly, because he expressly says (*Topic.* i, 9), that there are dialectical problems, about which we have nothing to say from reason, as, “whether the world is eternal.”

Reply to Objection 1: Before the world existed it was possible for the world to be, not, indeed, according to a passive power which is matter, but according to the active power of God; and also, according as a thing is called absolutely possible, not in relation to any power, but from the sole habitude of the terms which are not repugnant to each other; in this case possible is opposed to impossible, as appears from the Philosopher (*Metaph.* v).

Reply to Objection 2: Whatever has power always to be, from the fact of having that power, cannot sometimes be and sometimes not be; but before it received that power, it did not exist. Hence this reason which is given by Aristotle (*De Caelo* i, text 120) does not prove simply that incorruptible things never began to exist; but that they did not begin by the natural mode whereby things generated and corruptible begin.

Reply to Objection 3: Aristotle (*Phys.* i) proves that matter is unbegotten from the fact that it has not a subject from which to derive its existence; and he proves that heaven is ungenerated, forasmuch as it has no contrary from which to be generated. Hence it appears that no conclusion follows either way, except that matter and heaven did not begin by generation, as some said, especially about heaven. But we say that matter and heaven were produced into being by creation, as appears above (Q. 44 a 1 ad 2).

Reply to Objection 4: The notion of a vacuum is not only “in which is nothing,” but also implies a space capable of holding a body and in which there is not a body, as appears from Aristotle (*Phys.* iv). Whereas we hold that there was no place or space before the world was.

Reply to Objection 5: The first mover was always in the same state: but the first movable thing was not always so, because it began to be whereas hitherto it was not. This, however, was not through change, but by creation, which is not change, as said above (Q.

45 a 2 ad 2). Hence it is evident that this reason, which Aristotle gives (*Phys.* viii), is valid against those who admitted the existence of eternal movable things, but not eternal movement, as appears from the opinions of Anaxagoras and Empedocles. But we hold that from the moment that movable things began to exist movement also existed.

Reply to Objection 6: The first agent is a voluntary agent. And although He had the eternal will to produce some effect, yet He did not produce an eternal effect. Nor is it necessary for some change to be presupposed, not even on account of imaginary time. For we must take into consideration the difference between a particular agent, that presupposes something and produces something else, and the universal agent, who produces the whole. The particular agent produces the form, and presupposes the matter; and hence it is necessary that it introduce the form in due proportion into a suitable matter. Hence it is correct to say that it introduces the form into such matter, and not into another, on account of the different kinds of matter. But it is not correct to say so of God Who produces form and matter together: whereas it is correct to say of Him that He produces matter fitting to the form and to the end. Now, a particular agent presupposes time just as it presupposes matter. Hence it is correctly described as acting in time “after” and not in time “before,” according to an imaginary succession of time after time. But the universal agent who produces the thing and time also, is not correctly described as acting now, and not before, according to an imaginary succession of time succeeding time, as if time were presupposed to His action; but He must be considered as giving time to His effect as much as and when He willed, and according to what was fitting to demonstrate His power. For the world leads more evidently to the knowledge of the divine creating power, if it was not always, than if it had always been; since everything which was not always manifestly has a cause; whereas this is not so manifest of what always was.

Reply to Objection 7: As is stated (*Phys.* iv), “before” and “after” belong to time, according as they are in movement. Hence beginning and end in time must be taken in the same way as in movement. Now, granted the eternity of movement, it is necessary that any given moment in movement be a beginning and an end of movement; which need not be if movement be a beginning. The same applies to the “now” of time. Thus it appears that the idea of the instant “now,” as being always the beginning and end of time, presupposes the eternity of time and movement. Hence Aristotle brings forward this reason (*Phys.* viii) against those who asserted the eternity of time, but denied the eternity of movement.

Reply to Objection 8: God is prior to the world by priority of duration. But the word “prior” signifies priority not of time, but of eternity. Or we may say that it signifies the eternity of imaginary time, and not of time really existing; thus, when we say that above heaven there is nothing, the word “above” signifies only an imaginary place, according as it is possible to imagine other dimensions beyond those of the heavenly body.

Reply to Objection 9: As the effect follows from the cause that acts by nature, according to the mode of its form, so likewise it follows from the voluntary agent, according to the form preconceived and determined by the agent, as appears from what was said above (Q. 19 a 4; Q. 41 a 2). Therefore, although God was from eternity the sufficient cause of the world, we should not say that the world was produced by Him, except as preordained

by His will — that is, that it should have being after not being, in order more manifestly to declare its author.

Reply to Objection 10: Given the action, the effect follows according to the requirement of the form, which is the principle of action. But in agents acting by will, what is conceived and preordained is to be taken as the form, which is the principle of action. Therefore from the eternal action of God an eternal effect did not follow; but such an effect as God willed, an effect, to wit, which has being after not being.

Article 2. Is it an Article of Faith that the World Began?

Objection 1: It would seem that it is not an article of faith but a demonstrable conclusion that the world began. For everything that is made has a beginning of its duration. But it can be proved demonstratively that God is the effective cause of the world; indeed this is asserted by the more approved philosophers. Therefore it can be demonstratively proved that the world began.

Objection 2: Further, if it is necessary to say that the world was made by God, it must therefore have been made from nothing or from something. But it was not made from something; otherwise the matter of the world would have preceded the world; against which are the arguments of Aristotle (*De Caelo* i), who held that heaven was ungenerated. Therefore it must be said that the world was made from nothing; and thus it has being after not being. Therefore it must have begun.

Objection 3: Further, everything which works by intellect works from some principle, as appears in all kinds of craftsmen. But God acts by intellect: therefore His work has a principle. The world, therefore, which is His effect, did not always exist.

Objection 4: Further, it appears manifestly that certain arts have developed, and certain countries have begun to be inhabited at some fixed time. But this would not be the case if the world had been always. Therefore it is manifest that the world did not always exist.

Objection 5: Further, it is certain that nothing can be equal to God. But if the world had always been, it would be equal to God in duration. Therefore it is certain that the world did not always exist.

Objection 6: Further, if the world always was, the consequence is that infinite days preceded this present day. But it is impossible to pass through an infinite medium. Therefore we should never have arrived at this present day; which is manifestly false.

Objection 7: Further, if the world was eternal, generation also was eternal. Therefore one man was begotten of another in an infinite series. But the father is the efficient cause of the son (*Phys.* ii, text 5). Therefore in efficient causes there could be an infinite series, which is disproved (*Metaph.* ii, text 5).

Objection 8: Further, if the world and generation always were, there have been an infinite number of men. But man's soul is immortal: therefore an infinite number of human souls would actually now exist, which is impossible. Therefore it can be known with certainty that the world began, and not only is it known by faith.

On the contrary, The articles of faith cannot be proved demonstratively, because faith is of things “that appear not” (Heb. 11:1). But that God is the Creator of the world: hence that the world began, is an article of faith; for we say, “I believe in one God,” etc. And again, Gregory says (*Hom. i in Ezech.*), that Moses prophesied of the past, saying, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth”: in which words the newness of the world is stated. Therefore the newness of the world is known only by revelation; and therefore it cannot be proved demonstratively.

I answer that, By faith alone do we hold, and by no demonstration can it be proved, that the world did not always exist, as was said above of the mystery of the Trinity (Q. 32 a1). 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. Now everything according to its species is abstracted from “here” and “now”; whence it is said that universals are everywhere and always. Hence it cannot be demonstrated that man, or heaven, or a stone were not always. Likewise neither can it be demonstrated on the part of the efficient cause, which acts by will. For the will of God cannot be investigated by reason, except as regards those things which God must will of necessity; and what He wills about creatures is not among these, as was said above (Q. 19 a 3). But the divine will can be manifested by revelation, on which faith rests. Hence that the world began to exist is an object of faith, but not of demonstration or science. And it is useful to consider this, lest anyone, presuming to demonstrate what is of faith, should bring forward reasons that are not cogent, so as to give occasion to unbelievers to laugh, thinking that on such grounds we believe things that are of faith.

Reply to Objection 1: As Augustine says (*Civ. Dei* xi, 4), the opinion of philosophers who asserted the eternity of the world was twofold. For some said that the substance of the world was not from God, which is an intolerable error; and therefore it is refuted by proofs that are cogent. Some, however, said that the world was eternal, although made by God. For they hold that the world has a beginning, not of time, but of creation, so that in a certain hardly intelligible way it was always made. “And they try to explain their meaning thus (*Civ. Dei* x, 31): for as, if the foot were always in the dust from eternity, there would always be a footprint which without doubt was caused by him who trod on it, so also the world always was, because its Maker always existed.” To understand this we must consider that the efficient cause, which acts by motion, of necessity precedes its effect in time; because the effect is only in the end of the action, and every agent must be the principle of action. But if the action is instantaneous and not successive, it is not necessary for the maker to be prior to the thing made in duration as appears in the case of illumination. Hence they say that it does not follow necessarily if God is the active cause of the world, that He should be prior to the world in duration; because creation, by which He produced the world, is not a successive change, as was said above (Q. 45 a 2).

Reply to Objection 2: Those who would say that the world was eternal, would say that the world was made by God from nothing, not that it was made after nothing, according to what we understand by the word creation, but that it was not made from anything; and so also some of them do not reject the word creation, as appears from Avicenna (*Metaph.* ix, text 4).

Reply to Objection 3: This is the argument of Anaxagoras (as quoted in *Phys.* viii, text 15). But it does not lead to a necessary conclusion, except as to that intellect which deliberates in order to find out what should be done, which is like movement. Such is the human intellect, but not the divine intellect (Q. 14 a 7, 12).

Reply to Objection 4: Those who hold the eternity of the world hold that some region was changed an infinite number of times, from being uninhabitable to being inhabitable and “vice versa,” and likewise they hold that the arts, by reason of various corruptions and accidents, were subject to an infinite variety of advance and decay. Hence Aristotle says (*Meteor.* i), that it is absurd from such particular changes to hold the opinion of the newness of the whole world.

Reply to Objection 5: Even supposing that the world always was, it would not be equal to God in eternity, as Boethius says (*Consolatio* v, 6); because the divine Being is all being simultaneously without succession; but with the world it is otherwise.

Reply to Objection 6: Passage is always understood as being from term to term. Whatever bygone day we choose, from it to the present day there is a finite number of days which can be passed through. The objection is founded on the idea that, given two extremes, there is an infinite number of mean terms.

Reply to Objection 7: In efficient causes it is impossible to proceed to infinity “per se”—thus, there cannot be an infinite number of causes that are “per se” required for a certain effect; for instance, that a stone be moved by a stick, the stick by the hand, and so on to infinity. But it is not impossible to proceed to infinity “accidentally” as regards efficient causes; for instance, if all the causes thus infinitely multiplied should have the order of only one cause, their multiplication being accidental, as an artificer acts by means of many hammers accidentally, because one after the other may be broken. It is accidental, therefore, that one particular hammer acts after the action of another; and likewise it is accidental to this particular man as generator to be generated by another man; for he generates as a man, and not as the son of another man. For all men generating hold one grade in efficient causes — viz. the grade of a particular generator. Hence it is not impossible for a man to be generated by man to infinity; but such a thing would be impossible if the generation of this man depended upon this man, and on an elementary body, and on the sun, and so on to infinity.

Reply to Objection 8: Those who hold the eternity of the world evade this reason in many ways. For some do not think it impossible for there to be an actual infinity of souls, as appears from the *Metaphysics* of Algazel, who says that such a thing is an accidental infinity. But this was disproved above (Q. 7 a 4). Some say that the soul is corrupted with the body. And some say that of all souls only one will remain. But others, as Augustine says [*Civ. Dei* xii. 13], asserted on this account a circuit of souls — viz. that souls separated from their bodies return again thither after a course of time; a fuller consideration of which matters will be given later. But be it noted that this argument considers only a particular case. Hence one might say that the world was eternal, or least some creature, as an angel, but not man. But we are considering the question in general, as to whether any creature can exist from eternity.

Article 3. Whether the creation of things was in the beginning of time?

Objection 1: It would seem that the creation of things was not in the beginning of time. For whatever is not in time, is not of any part of time. But the creation of things was not in time; for by the creation the substance of things was brought into being; and time does not measure the substance of things, and especially of incorporeal things. Therefore creation was not in the beginning of time.

Objection 2: Further, the Philosopher proves (*Phys.* vi) that everything which is made, was being made; and so to be made implies a “before” and “after.” But in the beginning of time, since it is indivisible, there is no “before” and “after.” Therefore, since to be created is a kind of “being made,” it appears that things were not created in the beginning of time.

Objection 3: Further, even time itself is created. But time cannot be created in the beginning of time, since time is divisible, and the beginning of time is indivisible. Therefore, the creation of things was not in the beginning of time.

On the contrary, It is said (Gn. 1:1): “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.”

I answer that, The words of Genesis, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth,” are expounded in a threefold sense in order to exclude three errors. For some said that the world always was, and that time had no beginning; and to exclude this the words “In the beginning” are expounded — viz. “of time.” And some said that there are two principles of creation, one of good things and the other of evil things, against which “In the beginning” is expounded “in the Son.” For as the efficient principle is appropriated to the Father by reason of power, so the exemplar principle is appropriated to the Son by reason of wisdom, in order that, as it is said (Ps. 103:24), “Thou hast made all things in wisdom,” it may be understood that God made all things in the beginning — that is, in the Son; according to the word of the Apostle (Col. 1:16), “In Him” — viz. the Son — “were created all things.” But others said that corporeal things were created by God through the medium of spiritual creation; and to exclude this it is expounded thus: “In the beginning” — i.e. before all things — “God created heaven and earth.” For four things are stated to be created together — viz. the empyrean heaven, corporeal matter, by which is meant the earth, time, and the angelic nature.

Reply to Objection 1: Things are said to be created in the beginning of time, not as if the beginning of time were a measure of creation, but because together with time heaven and earth were created.

Reply to Objection 2: This saying of the Philosopher is understood “of being made” by means of movement, or as the term of movement. Because, since in every movement there is “before” and “after,” before any one point in a given movement---that is, whilst anything is in the process of being moved and made, there is a “before” and also an “after,” because what is in the beginning of movement or in its term is not in “being moved.” But creation is neither movement nor the term of movement, as was said above (Q. 45 a 2, 3). Hence a thing is created in such a way that it was not being created before.

Reply to Objection 3: Nothing is made except as it exists. But nothing exists of time except “now.” Hence time cannot be made except according to some “now”; not because in the first “now” is time, but because from it time begins.