

Creatio ex nihilo - on the mutual incorporation of theology and philosophy in Thomas Aquinas

An appreciation of *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and revelation in Aquinas*

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I can only wish I had become acquainted with the work of Per Erik Persson when it was first published in Swedish in 1957, the very year in which Bernard Lonergan, S.J., whose groundbreaking study, *Insight*, was first published. I was studying in Rome from 1956-60, under the inspiration of Lonergan whose "Concept of *Verbum* in the Writings of St Thomas Aquinas," had appeared in *Theological Studies* from 1946-49. (I would put those articles into book-form in 1967 as *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*.) I note the proximity in dates not to suggest any 'influence' from one of these thinkers to the other, but to call attention to affinities that can appear quite remarkable, absent any palpable connection. The primary affinity lies in appreciating Aquinas' mode of inquiry quite independently of the 'Thomist' pattern for structuring Aquinas' work then reigning in Catholic intellectual circles, stemming from the publication of the papal encyclical *Aeterni Patris* in 1879. It is fair to say that what became known as 'Thomism' owes its provenance to this initiative of Pope Leo XIII, designed to use Aquinas to advance the restoration of Christian philosophy, by explicitly counteracting trends then current in philosophy.

Those of us who found ourselves studying in Rome in mid-century, already indoctrinated into Thomism, would experience a far different Thomas Aquinas with Bernard Lonergan.

Fascinatingly enough, Persson's work breathes more of that inquiring spirit than of 'Thomism', by introducing us to an Aquinas whose exploratory *élan* outstripped his systematic prowess, and one whose theological focus ever directed and animated his philosophical inquiry. In that respect, both Persson and Lonergan anticipated John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998), which offers the dialectical interplay of 'philosophy' and 'theology' as key to a distinctively Catholic mode of inquiry. Persson sets himself against the *philosophia perennis* theme championed by *Aeterni Patris* to remind us that "Thomas ... was primarily a *theologian* and must therefore be viewed as such. ... It is significant," he notes, "that he himself never provided the kind of comprehensive discussion of his 'philosophy' which we can find in the writings of the neo-Thomists." Indeed, to focus on that, and even more, to accentuate his "interest ... in Greek philosophy and above all in Aristotelianism" cannot but be "misleading" (4).

The cultural context of the nineteenth century aligned the Catholic church with a discredited *ancien regime* to give a defensive impetus to Catholic intellectual endeavor, so a church document proposing a Thomistic philosophy to correct a prevailing way of doing philosophy would have to be taken as partisan. And yet more significant, as a distinguished mid-century Dominican, Ignatius Bochenski, once remarked, was the inevitable sociological fallout. Once a church mandates a philosophy, the result will invariably be mediocre, since that very sponsorship will call for an army of teachers, most of whom are likely to be second-rate.

It may be that Persson's Swedish cultural location simply released him from these cultural distortions. And his Lutheran confessional position may also have alerted him to another "frequently neglected factor" of high scholastic period: "a renewal of the study of the *Bible*" (4). Indeed, as a *magister in sacra pagina*, Aquinas' primary teaching responsibility would be exposition of biblical texts. Moreover, he reminds us how

study of the biblical text gave rise to what is perhaps the most characteristic form of instruction in the Middle Ages, and the form preferred by Thomas himself, namely, the disputation. (8)

We find this form of teaching exploited for detailed philosophical inquiry in his *Questiones disputatae*, yet its origin in biblical commentary forcibly reminds us how "the primary task of a scholastic theologian is to elucidate and set forth the divine revelation communicated in scripture" (10). In this context, then, "study of philosophy [will be] subordinated to the stated aim of theology", without which any discussion of Thomas' thought cannot but be "misleading in its interpretation" (11). So Persson articulates his study into three parts: (1) *Revelatio* and *Sacra Doctrina*, (2) *Ratio* And *Revelatio* in *Sacra Doctrina*, and (3) *Ratio* and *Sacra Doctrina*. Part one focuses on revelation and its communication, part two will employ metaphysics to display how a universe created freely by one God will have to be ordered, while part three elaborates how theology can be a mode of knowing [*scientia*].

While the breadth and clarity of Persson's review of Aquinas is awesome, this appreciation

will focus on part two, to parse Aquinas on free creation, which also forms the heart of his transformation of Aristotle's metaphysics, precisely to accommodate a free creator. It is telling how Aquinas will interweave philosophical and theological themes together to create the synergy needed to elucidate how key is God's activity of freely creating. Aquinas' capacity to integrate philosophical with theological demands is displayed in the initial article in the *Summa Theologiae* on creation: 'Must everything that is have been caused by God?'¹ Relying on his identification of God as that One whose very essence is to exist, Aquinas shows why one must 'necessarily say that whatever in any way *is* is from God'. For if

God is sheer existence subsisting of its very nature (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*), [and so] must be unique, . . . then it follows that all things other than God are not their own existence but share in existence (*ST* I.3.4; P102).

So the Neoplatonic distinction between *essential* and *participated* being is invoked to give everything but the creator the stamp of *created*. Very little, if anything, is said here about causation, but the elements are in place to press for a unique form of it, even though another way of posing the initial question employs Aristotle explicitly: 'whether God is the efficient cause of all beings?' An objection asks about those 'natural necessities' that Aristotle presumed simply to be, or always to have been: 'since there are many such in reality [—spiritual substances and heavenly bodies which carry no principle of dissolution within themselves—], all beings are not from God.' Aquinas deftly diverts this objection by recalling the primacy of existing:

an active cause is required not simply because the effect could not be [i.e., is contingent], but be-

¹ *ST* I 44 1. What follows reprises portions of "Act of Creation with its Theological Consequences," in Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, John Yocum, eds., *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2004) 27-44. References in text to Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*: *ST* I. 44. 1 ad. 2.= part. 1, question.44, article 1, response to objection 2. References to Persson, p. 23 = P23.

cause the effect would not be if the cause were not [existing] (*ST* I. 44.1 ad. 2; P113).

So even ‘necessary things’ will require a cause for their very being: this is a radical revision of Aristotle, depending on the Avicennian distinction of *essence* from *existing*. What it suggests is that Aquinas was seeking for a way of understanding created being using Aristotelian metaphysics, yet the ‘givens’ of that philosophy will have to be transformed to meet the exigency of a free creator. Put another way, which anticipates our elucidation, the *being* that Aristotle took to characterize substance must become (for Aquinas) an *esse ad creatorem* (an existing in relation to the creator). This is another way of saying that ‘all things other than God are not their own existence’ (P113), either in the radical sense on which this article insists, distinguishing creatures from the creator, or even in a more attenuated sense in which the being that they *have* cannot be ‘their own’ in the sense of belonging to them ‘by right’ or by virtue of their being the kind of things they are (which was Aristotle’s view). Everything other than God receives its being from the creator as a gift. Yet such derived or participated things are no less real than Aristotle’s substances, since now there is no other way to be except to participate in the *ipsum esse* of the creator. So the nature of the creating act depends crucially on our conception of the One from whom all that is comes.

Now if that One is most properly identified as ‘He who is’ since ‘the existence of God is his essence and since this is true of nothing else’, then we are in the presence of One whose characteristic act will be ‘to produce existence [*esse*] absolutely. . . which belongs to the meaning of creation’ defined as ‘the emanation of the whole of being from a universal cause’ or ‘universal being’.² That being’s ‘proper effect’, then, is the very existence of things (*ST* I.45.5; P126, 129). One implication of this unique form of causation is that creation is not a change, except merely according to our way of understanding, [since] creation, whereby the entire substance of things is produced, does not allow of some common subject now different from what it was before,

except according to our way of understanding, which conceives an object as first not existing at all and afterwards as existing (*ST* I.45. 2 ad 2)

So creating is not a process answering the question: *how* does God create? God creates intentionally, that is, by intellect and will, though these are identical in God, so Aquinas has no difficulty adopting the metaphor of ‘emanation’ to convey something of the act of creation: God’s consenting to the universe coming forth from God—that One whose essence is simply to-be (*ST* I. 19. 4 ad. 4; P128). The revelation of God’s inner life as Father, Son, and Spirit will in fact allow Aquinas to say more, while respecting the absence of process. For it is this revelation that directs us to the right idea of creation. The fact of saying that God made all things by His Word excludes the error of those who say that God produced things by necessity. When we say that in Him there is a procession of love, we show that God produced creatures not because He needed them, nor because of any other extrinsic reason, but on account of the love of His own goodness (*ST* I 32 1 ad 3; P143).

So the act of creating is not a ‘mere overflow’ (or emanation) from this One whose very nature is to-be. It is rather an intentional emanating and so a gracious gift. Yet the mode of action remains utterly consonant with the divine nature, hence the natural metaphor of *emanation*.

The other metaphor that Aquinas invokes is that of the artisan: ‘God’s knowledge is the cause of things; for God’s knowledge stands to all created things as the artist’s to his products,’ with the implication that ‘natural things are suspended between God’s [practical] knowledge and our [speculative] knowledge’ (*ST* I.14.8 and ad 3). The deft way Aquinas employs Aristotle’s distinction between *practical* and *speculative* knowing here allows him to utilize the metaphor of artisan critically, and so avoid pitting divine and human knowing against one another. Since God’s knowing brings things into being and sustains them, we need not worry ourselves whether God’s knowing ‘what will have happened’ determines future contingent events, since the knowing that God has of what will have taken place is not propositional in character. God knows what God does; the model is practical knowing. Taking a cue from Aquinas’ strategy

² *ST* I.13.11; I.3.4; I.45.5; I.45.1; I.45. 4 ad. 1.

regarding God's knowledge of singulars, we must say that divine knowledge extends as far as divine activity, for God does not work mindlessly. Yet we can have no more determinate model for divine knowing than that.³

Yet the artisan metaphor for creation might lead one to suspect that the product could subsist without any further action on the part of its maker. So emanation will need to be invoked to remind us of the revolution that the presence of a creator and the act of creation has worked in Aristotle: the very being (*esse*) of creatures is now an *esse-ad*, 'a relation to the creator as the origin of its existence' (*ST* I.45.3; P135-6). Aristotle's definition of substance as 'what subsists in itself' can still function to distinguish substance from accident, but the being inherent to created substances proceeds from another, from the source who alone subsists eternally as the One whose essence is to be. And if substances must now be denominated 'created substances', the causality associated with creating can hardly be comprehended among Aristotle's four causes. For the two contenders, efficient and formal, each fail since an efficient cause without something to work on would be unintelligible to Aristotle, while trying to fit the creator into Aristotle's formal cause would directly foster pantheism, as Aquinas notes in *ST* I.3.8. So a 'cause of being' must be *sui generis*, as we shall see, confirming 'the distinction' of creator from creation, while the founding 'non-reciprocal relation of dependence' will be unique as well, and best characterized by the borrowed expression 'non-duality'.⁴ So the practical knowing involved in creating will be more like *doing* than *making*, suggesting James Ross's prescient image of the 'being of the cosmos like a song on the breath of a singer,' while emphasizing that 'God's causing being can be analogous to many

diverse things without even possibly being the same as any one of them'.⁵

All of this is admirably expressed in Persson's 1957 study, yet the rest of us needed to await the last three decades of sustained attention to Aquinas' *theological* manner of proceeding—ironically enough, in his *Summa theologiae*—for such had been the fixation on Aquinas' *philosophical* acumen throughout most of twentieth-century commentary on his work.⁶ The cumulative effect of this quite recent focus on the theological *telos* of Aquinas' work has been to correct the inevitable distortion to his work when it was touted as primarily 'philosophical' or 'Aristotelian'. In fact, a strong modern bifurcation between 'philosophy' and 'theology' was quite foreign to medieval thinkers; and in speaking of divine things Aquinas was often guided by neo-Platonic texts as well as Jewish and Islamic thinkers influenced by them.⁷ Persson summarizes this dialectical relation in terms of *ratio* and *revelatio*:

Philosophy can do no more than teach us that God is one and the cause of all existence, but unaided reason has no conception at all of God as three in one. But once this truth has been revealed and faith illuminated by reason, a whole new field of activity is opened up for reason; ... interpreting the inner meaning of the truth that has been disclosed (151).

³ *ST* I.14.11. See also my extended treatment of these issues in *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*, pp. 105-19.

⁴ See Sara Grant's comparative study of Aquinas and Shankara for this creative proposal to find a positive way to express the relation attendant upon 'the distinction': *Towards an Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-dualist Christian*, ed. Bradley Malkovsky (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

⁵ James Ross, 'Creation II,' in Alfred Freddoso (ed.), *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 115-41, at 128.

⁶ I am thinking especially of the work of Gilles Emery OP, as exemplified in his *Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, tr. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and his later *The Trinity: an introduction*, tr. Matthew Levering (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), and see also contributions to Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, eds., *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas*, (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

⁷ See my *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

Yet by virtue of his distinction between *essence* and *existing* (as refined from Avicenna), Aquinas can offer a fruitful model for ‘transcendence’, articulating “an unbridgeable gulf between God and creation, between *ipsum esse per se subsistens* and *esse receptum*” (152). This is best displayed in what he

says concerning the nature of the statements that we make about God when we take creation as our starting point. ... What we mean by the term *intellectus* does not apply univocally to man and God [ST 1.13.3], and because of the limitations of our reason it is impossible for us to know what it means when what it describes is identical with *ipsum esse* (152-153).

Yet our statements “really correspond with the truth, they do not apply to God *pure equivoce* but *analogice*, so they are true though inadequate statements” (153). Persson finds “a continual interaction between *ratio* and *revelatio* throughout Aquinas’ theological work:

Revelation is of crucial significance even for the basic outlines of his metaphysics, which means that he defines the relationship between God and the world in a markedly different way from Greek philosophy. On the other hand, he defines the meaning of the knowledge given by revelation ultimately in terms of a rational knowledge that is independent of revelation. In this whole process

two different worlds of thought confront us, since Thomas borrows terms from Greek thought in order to translate the biblical idea of the living God who is at work in his creation without ceasing to be its sovereign Lord. ... He sustains his creation in power by giving life and existence to all animate and inanimate beings in a continuing creative act (154).

So in one fell swoop, as it were, Persson dismisses a polemical reading of Aquinas, which had him substituting ‘Greek thought’ for our biblical heritage, and does so by showing how Aquinas’ effective transformation of Hellenic metaphysics is rooted in the bible. And he does this by following closely and astutely the way Aquinas uses philosophical skills to mine those riches of revelation not evident on the face of biblical texts, which often enough lead in opposing directions. And that is precisely the way Bernard Lonergan introduced students to the way the first five councils of the church creatively originated Christian theology. So to bring these two astute interpreters of Aquinas into nascent conversation is to expose the way Christian intellectual developments utilized human reason as the community attempted to probe the hidden meanings of revelation, showing at the same time how such a fresh understanding of revelation could transform the very categories of reason itself.