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The Problem of the Beginning of the World in the Interpretation of Saint Thomas Aquinas

Abstract

This paper deals with Saint Thomas's view of the problem of the world's beginning, which consists in an alleged contradiction between religious truth about the creation of the world by God and Aristotle's concept of the eternal existence of the world. According to Aquinas, such a contradiction is apparent, because the idea of creation is fundamentally different from the idea of beginning. The discussion of this issue is divided into three parts. At first, the historical background of the whole problem is presented. Then, Saint Thomas's solution of the difficulty – included in his book *De aeternitate mundi* – is briefly discussed. Finally, it is argued that this solution can be inspiring for contemporary theologians.

Keywords

St. Thomas, Aquinas, creation, beginning of the world.

One cannot deny that the philosophy of Saint Thomas is sometimes claimed to be obsolete and outdated. However, many sensible reasons can be surely found

to show that this assessment is not entirely warranted.¹ The intellectual artistry and a kind of philosophical and theological foresight, which can be found by the present-day reader in the works of Aquinas, seem to be most important factors that should be mentioned in this context. The best example may be the method Saint Thomas uses to solve the problems that occur between science and religion; in particular, to remove contradictions between these two domains. A theologian has three possibilities of dealing with a situation when the revealed truth seems to be in contradiction with a scientific worldview. Firstly, he can ignore the whole problem; he may not notice the contradiction, or he can pretend not to see it. Such an attitude is the easiest way out for a theologian, and, in addition, can be easily justified by simply saying: “my job is to analyse and to interpret the Bible and I don’t have to be interested in scientific news”. Secondly, a theologian can question or reject a scientific worldview. The best known historical example of this approach is the so-called “Galileo affair” – when theologians rejected heliocentrism because it seemed to be in contradiction with some Biblical verses about the immovable Earth. Thirdly – and this is the solution of Saint Thomas – a theologian can analyse and reinterpret the revealed truth in such a way that removes a contradiction between faith and a scientific worldview. Even if all the other aspects of Aquinas’s philosophy actually were outdated (today such an assessment would be certainly difficult to justify), this solution makes his ideas still highly relevant. In short, contemporary theologians do have difficulties with a scientific worldview; Saint Thomas shows them how to deal with these difficulties. In particular, he shows them how to construct an adequate philosophical and theological interpretation of the problem of the world’s beginning.

1. Historical background of the problem

The theological truth concerning the beginning of the world is enclosed in a simple sentence “God created the world”. For a long time and for many different reasons this seemed to remain in contradiction with scientific truth about such beginning. For obvious reasons, in the times of Saint Thomas there were no sciences in the modern sense of this term. Instead, there was a system of Aristotle’s

¹ Cf. B. Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford 1992; S.L. Brock, *The Philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas. A sketch*, Eugene 2015; G.K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Mineola 2009; E. Gilson, *Tomizm. Wprowadzenie do filozofii św. Tomasza z Akwinu*, Warszawa 1960.

physics, of the philosophy of nature and of cosmology, which provided some worldview. According to the standards of those times, it was a “scientific” (in the modern sense of the world) worldview. An important aspect of this view was the eternal existence of the world: in Aristotle’s system the matter exists eternally and is eternally moved by the First Mover.² For Christian theology, the problem was not that the First Mover exists and that he exists eternally (the First Mover can be easily identified with the Christian God), but that the matter he moves is eternal. This seems to be in conflict with a theological truth about creation, as the eternal existence of the matter means that the world has no beginning, whereas the very idea of creation seems to demand such a beginning. It is advisable to take a look at the historical context of this issue to understand how Saint Thomas solved the problem in question.

Everything Aquinas did as a scholar was a response to a situation of conflict which appeared in the 13th century theology.³ There were many contributing factors to this situation, but one of the most important was an essential dissimilarity between two great philosophical traditions – Platonic and Aristotelian – which clashed with each other in the minds of European thinkers at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries. From the very beginning, most Christian theologians considered the system of Plato as the most appropriate for theological interpretation.⁴ There were of course exceptions to this rule but theology was cultivated in the spirit of the Platonic tradition until the end of the 12th century generally. However, at the beginning of the 13th century, Christian theology began a long and complex process of retreat from Plato’s to Aristotle’s philosophy.⁵ The main reason for this state of affairs was the fact that just in this period the whole scientific world of the medieval Europe (not only its theological representation) became fascinated with Aristotle. In a sense, it was a result of “the discovery” of some important Aristotle’s works previously unknown in the circle of the Latin culture. As a result of the ignorance of the Greek language in medieval Europe, the scholars became acquainted with these works through the Arabic translations and comments – which unexpectedly became the main source of information about the Greek science and philosophy. Aristotle was a central

² Arystoteles, *Fizyka*, I, 7–9; VIII, 1–6.

³ Cf. M. Heller, *Ostateczne wyjaśnienia wszechświata*, Kraków 2008, p. 169–172.

⁴ Cf. E. McMullin, *Ewolucja i stworzenie*, Kraków 1993, p. 11–13.

⁵ Cf. O. Pedersen, *Konflikt czy symbioza? Z dziejów relacji między nauką a teologią*, Kraków – Tarnów 1997, p. 178–187.

figure of both these domains. His works concerning logic, metaphysics, ethics, philosophy of nature – translated from Arabic to Latin – contributed to his authority more and more. It is no wonder that within a short time at the European universities, Aristotle gained the name of the greatest philosopher in the entire history of mankind. But this fascination with Aristotle's philosophy did not bode well for Christian theology, which had thus far been associated with a worldview built on the Platonic philosophy. Changing the worldview to a new one seemed to threaten the consistency of theological interpretations of many fundamental truths of faith. One of the most important difficulties concerned a theological truth about creation, which seemed to be in contradiction with the Aristotelian thesis about the eternal existence of the world.⁶

The comments of Arabic philosophers such as Averroes, who enjoyed the greatest respect in medieval Europe, played an important role in the process of “discovering” unknown works of Aristotle.⁷ These comments not only explained the original texts of Aristotle, but also lent them some interpretation because of the emphasis on certain theses. The eternal existence of the world was one of such theses. It is no wonder that the interpretation of Averroes seemed to make it impossible to use the works of Aristotle in the Christian theology. When the popularity of Averroes's comments started to grow dangerously in the middle of the 13th century, it became clear that the crisis was deepening.⁸ In a short time the church authorities implemented some interventions concerning the teaching of theology and philosophy by “the Latin Averroists”. In particular, these interventions took the form of a number of condemnations of the new philosophy. The most famous one took place in 1277, when Etienne Tempier, the bishop of Paris, announced a list of 219 theses inconsistent with the Christian doctrine, which should be excluded from teaching at universities.⁹ One of the condemned theses was the statement about the eternal existence of the world.

There was no doubt that the situation called for a radical reconstruction or even reinterpretation of the key philosophical concepts on which the whole

⁶ Cf. M. Heller, T. Pabjan, *Stworzenie i początek wszechświata. Teologia – filozofia – kosmologia*, Kraków 2013, p. 67–73.

⁷ Cf. I. Rushd, *Averroes: his Life, Works and Influence*, London 2014.

⁸ Cf. M. Heller, Z. Liana, J. Mączka, W. Skoczny, *Nauki przyrodnicze a teologia: konflikt i współistnienie*, Tarnów 2001, p. 115–122.

⁹ E. Gilson, *Historia filozofii chrześcijańskiej w wiekach średnich*, Warszawa 1966, p. 379–417.

theological doctrine of Christianity rested. This distinctive task was undertaken by Saint Thomas.¹⁰ An important reason mobilizing him to become interested in this subject was his own experience of criticism aimed at Aristotelian thesis about eternal existence of the world. At least from the fifties of the 13th century Aquinas taught that although God created the world which has its beginning in time, He could also create it as the eternal reality – without temporal beginning. So the criticism aimed at the doctrine of Aristotle affected his own interpretation of the truth about creation. Today, it is difficult to determine if Saint Thomas was aware that the future of Christian theology depended on his response. But the historical evidence indicates that the crisis was resolved thanks to his intellectual efforts.¹¹

2. *De aeternitate mundi*

Saint Thomas formulated his own solution to the problem in a short work entitled *De aeternitate mundi* (*On the Eternity of the World*).¹² The later tradition has added a subtitle *Contra murmurantes* (*Against the Murmurers*), which speaks volumes about the reception of this work among its readers. Aquinas dealt with the two main problems in his paper. The first one – less important and previously developed by others scholars – is whether or not time flowed before the creation of the world, and whether or not one can sensibly ask about God's "inactivity" before the moment of creation. This issue was repeatedly analyzed by theologians of the Ancient Church¹³ – e.g. Origen and Saint Augustine – and Thomas refers to their conclusions. In particular, he recalls the Augustine's argument concerning the time understood as a kind of attribute of the created world, and the eternity – a timeless "way of existence" which shall be entitled only to God. Aquinas finds an important argument for accepting such a solution in the Aristotelian definition of time. According to this definition, time is a measure of change. Before the creation there was no matter subjected

¹⁰ Cf. E. Gilson, *Historia filozofii chrześcijańskiej w wiekach średnich*, p. 355–375.

¹¹ Cf. J.B.M. Wissink (ed.), *The Eternity of the World in the Thought of Thomas Aquinas and his Contemporaries*, Leiden 1990.

¹² All quotes will be taken from the Polish edition of this book: Tomasz z Akwinu, *O wieczności świata*, in: *Dzieła wybrane*, Warszawa 2001, p. 277–285.

¹³ Cf. M. Heller, T. Pabjan, *Stworzenie i początek wszechświata*, p. 54–66.

to change. Therefore, there was no time. Therefore, there is no point asking what God was doing “before” the moment of creation. The second problem Thomas paid attention to was how one should understand the act of creation and how this act relates to time. In particular, Aquinas wanted to find the answer to the question whether or not God could create an eternally existing world.

The starting point for Thomas’s argumentation is the theological truth about creation: “Let us assume, in accordance with the Catholic faith, that the world had a beginning in time. The question still arises whether the world could have always existed”.¹⁴ To find an answer to that question one should examine whether or not a contradiction exists between the two sentences – about a creation of the world and about its eternal existence: “We thus ought to determine whether there is any contradiction between these two ideas, namely, to be made by God and to have always existed”.¹⁵ To resolve this issue one must analyze the very conception of creation. In Thomas’s – as well as in Aristotelian – metaphysics, the idea of creation is related to the concept of a substance, which is a key term in this system. No wonder that Aquinas understands creation in this way: creation consists in “producing a whole substance of a thing”.¹⁶ With such an understanding of the term “creation”, the basic problem to be solved takes the form of a question: “whether to be created in a whole substance by God and not to have a beginning in time are contradictory terms”.¹⁷ The essence of the argument that includes the answer to this question is as follows: God is the cause which does not have to precede in time its own effect. According to Saint Thomas, “no cause instantaneously producing its effect necessarily precedes the effect in time. God, however, is a cause that produces effects not through motion but instantaneously. Therefore, it is not necessary that he precede his effects in time. (...) Further, if, granted a cause, its effect does not immediately exist as well, this can only be because something complementary to that cause is lacking: the complete cause and the thing caused are simultaneous. God, however, never lacks any kind of complementary cause in order to produce an effect. Therefore, at any instant at which God exists, so too can his effects, and thus God need not precede his effects in time. (...)”

¹⁴ Tomasz z Akwinu, *O wieczności świata*, p. 277.

¹⁵ Tomasz z Akwinu, *O wieczności świata*, p. 279.

¹⁶ Tomasz z Akwinu, *O wieczności świata*, p. 280.

¹⁷ Tomasz z Akwinu, *O wieczności świata*, p. 279.

Thus it is clear that there is no contradiction in saying that something made by God has always existed”¹⁸.

The whole of Aquinas’s reasoning is based on a fundamental assumption that the idea of beginning should be clearly distinguished from the idea of creation: the beginning is a kind of temporal category and can only be applied to an entity which exists in time, whereas the creation is something completely different – it is not the initiating of something in time, but a fundamental dependence or relation between Creator and creature. Importantly, it is not a physical but metaphysical (ontological) relation, which is independent of time and which extends on the entire period of existence of the created entity. This is why the idea of creation of the world should not be related exclusively to the first moment of its existence, but to every single moment of its history as well. Therefore, instead of saying “God created the world” one should instead say “God continuously creates the world”, because the created world could not even exist for a moment without its Creator.¹⁹ The relation between God and the created world is independent of time, because the Creator is the cause that does not have to precede its effect in time. Thus one can, without contradiction, say that God creates the world which has no beginning, i.e. which exists eternally.

It is important to note that Aquinas is not saying that the world created by God really is eternal. He only argues that the eternity of the world is not contradictory with the very idea of God’s creation.²⁰ In other words: Thomas claims that God is a Creator of the world, which both can have its beginning in time and exist eternally. In this case, the whole analysis concerns the possibility itself of the eternal existence of the world, and not its actual eternity. According to Aquinas, neither one of these two possibilities can be proven – one can neither be sure that the world exists eternally nor that it has its temporal beginning.²¹ One can have no certainty in this matter and therefore one should rely on Revelation which is the foundation of faith. The Revelation says that the world had its beginning. This is why the argumentation of Saint Thomas begins with the words: “Let us assume, in accordance with the Catholic faith, that the

¹⁸ Tomasz z Akwinu, *O wieczności świata*, p. 279, 280, 282.

¹⁹ Saint Thomas refers in this point to the well-known argument of Saint Augustine who several centuries earlier was talking about “continuous creation” (*continua creatio*); cf. Saint Augustine, *De Genesi Ad Litteram*, 4.12.

²⁰ Cf. E. Gilson, *Elementy filozofii chrześcijańskiej*, Warszawa 1965, p. 182–183.

²¹ Cf. E. Gilson, *Tomizm*, p. 214–218.

world had a beginning in time. The question still arises whether the world could have always existed”²² The whole analysis leads to the conclusion: one cannot *know* that the world has its beginning, but one can *believe* in it.

Aquinas’s interpretation of this issue has not been quickly accepted by the theologians – it is not without reason that the subtitle “Against the Murmurers” was added to his paper. The objections of “the murmurers” were numerous and determined and it is no wonder that merely three years after the death of Thomas (he died in 1274) the condemnation of Etienne Tempier took place. Among many others claims of Aquinas, his following thesis was recognised as heretical too: it is impossible to settle the philosophical arguments for the eternity of the world.²³ This condemnation was withdrawn only after the canonisation of Thomas, which took place in 1323. But the philosophical and theological disputes about the correctness of his interpretation lasted until the 15th century.²⁴

3. From Aquinas to the contemporary cosmology

Can the present-day theology be inspired by the solution proposed by Saint Thomas? At first glance it seems that a theologian does not need such a solution today. A contemporary theologian – just like a scholar in 13th century – has to appeal to some worldview, but the difference is fundamental: a present-day worldview comes not from the philosophy of Aristotle that says the world is eternal, but from the modern sciences – especially from the relativistic cosmology which says that the world has its beginning in the Big Bang. This indicates that there is no contradiction between the revealed truth about creation and a scientific worldview (both of them say that the world has its beginning), and the whole argumentation of Saint Thomas is unnecessary. Nothing further from the truth. The interpretations proposed by Aquinas are still valid and actual for at least two reasons.

The first reason concerns some misunderstanding which appears in the contemporary theological discussions about the discoveries of cosmology. The difficulty comes from the fact that the Big Bang – the beginning of the present

²² Tomasz z Akwinu, *O wieczności świata*, p. 277.

²³ Cf. O. Pedersen, *Konflikt czy symbioza?*, p. 196.

²⁴ Cf. M. Heller, Z. Liana, J. Mączka, W. Skoczny, *Nauki przyrodnicze a teologia: konflikt i współistnienie*, p. 123–125.

phase of the universe's evolution – is too clearly identified with the creation of the world. Such identification is made by both supporters of the idea of creation and its opponents. But the weakness of this approach is that it very often leads, on the one hand, to questionable “concordism” between theology and science (the cosmology provides proof for the creation of the world, because it speaks about its beginning), and on the other – to some kind of naive argumentation (there will be no “place for God” when the beginning of the universe is removed²⁵). In order to avoid such misunderstandings, one only needs to remember a distinction underlined by Saint Thomas: the idea of beginning and the idea of creation are two quite different concepts. The creation consists in a fundamental (ontological) and a-temporal relation or dependence which lasts in every moment of the existence of the world, while the beginning is simply the first temporal moment of the existence of something that does not exist eternally. It is just for this reason, treating the Big Bang as a scientific evidence of creation, and treating a cosmological model without the Big Bang as evidence that there is no God, is unacceptable.²⁶

The second reason results from the fact that in the present-day cosmology it is claimed that the Big Bang is not the “absolute” beginning of the universe – it is just the beginning of the present phase of the universe's history. It is not impossible that “before” the Big Bang (“before” in the sense of logical and not temporal precedence²⁷) there were “earlier” stages of the universe's history. The difficulty is that the General Theory of Relativity allows cosmologists to describe and to reconstruct the whole history of the universe. However, the very beginning – the so called Planck epoch – remains a mystery. It is because of the

²⁵ One can find such an argumentation in the books of Stephen Hawking, who built a cosmological model in which the universe has no beginning in time. According to Hawking, such a universe does not have to be created by God: “There would be no singularities at which the laws of science broke down, and no edge of space-time at which one would have to appeal to God or some new law to set the boundary conditions for space-time. (...) The universe would be completely self-contained and not affected by anything outside itself. It would neither be created nor destroyed. It would just BE. (...) So long as the universe had a beginning, we could suppose it had a creator. But if the universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place, then, for a creator?”; S.W. Hawking, *Krótką historią czasu. Od Wielkiego Wybuchu do czarnych dziur*, Warszawa 1993, p. 130, 134.

²⁶ Cf. M. Heller, *Filozofia i wszechświat. Wybór pism*, Kraków 2006, p. 413–416, 468–471.

²⁷ According to the Standard Cosmological Model, time starts flowing in the original singularity (the Big Bang), so one cannot speak literally about the “earlier” stages of the universe's history, because before the original singularity there was no time.

quantum effects of gravity which appear in this epoch. To describe and explain these effects, the General Theory of Relativity must be combined with Quantum Mechanics. So far no physicist has succeeded in finding such combined theory (it is sometimes called the Theory of Quantum Gravity), but if someone finds it in the future, it may turn out that “before” the Big Bang there were indeed “earlier” epochs of the history of the universe.²⁸ If this happens, theologians will be able to take advantage of the work of Saint Thomas one more time: they will know that there’s no contradiction between the idea of creation and the idea of the eternal existence of the world, and that one can sensibly talk about God who creates a world which has no beginning in time.

A contemporary theologian does not differ much from his colleague from the past. In the same way as in the 13th century he has to “translate” the revealed truth into the language of the people who are familiar with the actual worldview. It is for this reason that a theologian cannot do without a worldview – especially when he talks about the creation of the world by God. But the present-day worldview is fundamentally different from the one of Aquinas’s time, because today it is not philosophy but science that decides how the world is perceived by its people. In many aspects, a scientific worldview seems to be more difficult to reconcile with theology than the philosophical one. This is why a contemporary theologian must not overlook the brilliant solutions of crucial problems, found by his predecessors long ago. The problem of the beginning of the world certainly belongs to such difficulties and the solution found by Saint Thomas certainly can be considered brilliant and theologically useful. The precise distinction between the beginning and the creation will help to avoid misunderstandings in theological and philosophical discussions. Similarly, the idea of the eternally existing world, which is created by God, will help to remove the contradiction between faith and science, if the would-be Theory of Quantum Gravity proves that the world has no beginning.

²⁸ Cf. M.A. Liddle, *Wprowadzenie do kosmologii współczesnej*, Warszawa 1999; F. Adams, G. Laughin, *Ewolucja wszechświata*, Warszawa 2000.

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