

QUESTION 46

The Beginning of Duration for Created Things

The next thing to consider is the beginning of duration for created things. On this topic there are three questions: (1) Have creatures always existed? (2) Is it an article of the Faith that creatures began to exist? (3) In what sense is God said to have created heaven and earth ‘in the beginning’?

Article 1

Has the universe of creatures always existed?

It seems that the universe of creatures (*universitas creaturarum*), which goes by the name ‘the world’ (*mundum*), did not begin to exist, but has instead existed from eternity:

Objection 1: Everything that began to exist is such that before it existed, it was possible for it to exist; otherwise, it would have been impossible for it to come into existence. Therefore, if the world began to exist, then before it began to exist, it was possible for it to exist. But that which is such that it is possible for it to exist is matter, which is in potentiality both to existing (which occurs through form) and also to not existing (which occurs through privation). Therefore, if the world began to exist, then matter existed before the world did. But matter cannot exist without form, and the matter of the world with form just *is* the world. Therefore, the world existed before it began to exist—which is impossible.

Objection 2: Nothing that has the power to exist at all times is such that it exists at one time and not at some other time; for the power of a given thing [to exist] is as extensive as the length of time for which it does exist. But every incorruptible thing has the power to exist at all times, since it does not have a power to exist that is for a set length of time. Therefore, nothing incorruptible is such that it exists at one time and not at some other time. But everything that begins to exist is such that it exists at one time and not at some other time. Therefore, nothing incorruptible begins to exist. But there are many incorruptible things in the world, e.g., the celestial bodies and all intellectual substances. Therefore, the world did not begin to exist.

Objection 3: Nothing that is ungenerated began to exist. But in *Physics* 1 the Philosopher proves that matter is ungenerated, and in *De Caelo et Mundo* 1 he proves that celestial bodies are ungenerated. Therefore, it is not the case that the whole universe of things began to exist.

Objection 4: A vacuum is a place where a body does not exist but where it is possible for a body to exist. But if the world began to exist, then the place where the body of the world now exists is such that a body did not exist there beforehand. And yet a body was able to exist there; otherwise, it would not exist there now. Therefore, before the world existed, there was a vacuum—which is impossible.

Objection 5: Nothing begins to move anew except because some mover or some movable thing is now different from the way it was before. But what is now different from the way it was before is such that it is moving. Therefore, before any motion that begins anew, there was some previous motion. Therefore, motion has always existed. Therefore, it has likewise always been the case that a movable thing exists, since motion exists only in a movable thing.

Objection 6: Every mover is either a natural mover or a voluntary mover. But neither of these begins to effect motion unless some previous motion has existed.

For nature always operates in the same way, and so unless some change has previously occurred either in the nature of the mover or in the thing moved, no motion that did not previously exist will begin to exist by the agency of a natural mover.

On the other hand, in the absence of any change within itself, the will puts off doing what it plans to do; but this change within itself occurs only because of some imagined change, at least on the part of

time itself. For example, if someone wills to build a house tomorrow and not today, he expects that something will be the case tomorrow that is not the case today. At the very least, he expects that today will pass and tomorrow will come—which does not occur in the absence of change, since time is a measure of motion (*numerus motus*).

Therefore, it follows that before any motion that begins anew, there was some other motion. And so we reach the same conclusion as before.

Objection 7: If something is always at its own beginning (*semper in principio*) and always at its own end (*semper in fine*), it can neither begin to exist nor cease to exist. For that which begins to exist is not at its own end, and that which ceases to exist is not at its own beginning. But time is always at its own beginning and always at its own end, since none of time exists except the *now*, which is the end of the past and the beginning of the future. Therefore, time can neither begin to exist nor cease to exist. And, consequently, motion, of which time is a measure, likewise cannot begin to exist or cease to exist, either.

Objection 8: God is either (a) prior to the world only in nature or (b) prior in duration as well. If He is prior to the world only in nature, then, since God exists from eternity, the world likewise exists from eternity. On the other hand, if He is prior to the world in duration, then since the prior and posterior in duration constitute time, it follows that time existed before the world did—which is impossible.

Objection 9: Once a sufficient cause is posited, its effect is posited; for a cause that is not followed by its effect is an incomplete cause that stands in need of something else in order for its effect to follow. But, as is clear from what was said above (q. 44, aa. 1 and 3 and 4), God is a sufficient cause of the world: He is a sufficient *final* cause by reason of His goodness; He is a sufficient *exemplar* cause by reason of His wisdom; and He is a sufficient *efficient* cause by reason of His power. Therefore, since God exists from eternity, the world likewise existed from eternity.

Objection 10: A thing whose action is eternal is such that its effect is likewise eternal. But God's action is His substance, which is eternal. Therefore, the world is likewise eternal.

But contrary to this: John 17:5 says, “Glorify me, Father, with Yourself, with the glory which I had before the world was made.” And Proverbs 8:22 says: “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His ways, before He made anything at the beginning.”

I respond: Nothing except God existed from eternity. And this claim is not impossible to uphold.

For it was shown above (q. 19, a. 4) that God's will is a cause of things. Therefore, a thing exists necessarily to the extent that it is necessary for God to will it, since, as *Metaphysics* 5 says, the necessity of an effect depends on the necessity of its cause. But it was shown above (q. 19, a. 3) that, absolutely speaking, it is not necessary for God to will anything except Himself. Therefore, it is not necessary for God to will that the world should have always existed. Rather, the world exists for the length of time that God wills it to exist for, since the world's existence depends on God's will as its cause. Therefore, it is not necessary that the world should always exist. Hence, it cannot be demonstratively proved that the world has always existed.

Nor is it the case that the arguments Aristotle adduced for this conclusion are absolutely demonstrative; instead they are demonstrative only relatively speaking, viz., as refutations of the arguments of those ancients who held that the world began to exist in certain ways that are in fact impossible. This is apparent from three considerations:

First, in *Physics* 8, and again in *De Caelo* 1, Aristotle lays out certain opinions, e.g., those of Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and Plato, and adduces contrary arguments against them.

Second, whenever he talks about this topic, he adduces the testimony of the ancients—something that is characteristic not of one who is giving a demonstration (*non demonstratoris*), but of one who is giving a persuasive probabilistic argument (*sed probabiliter persuadentis*).

Third, in *Topics* 1 he expressly says that there are certain dialectical problems that we do not have answers (*rationes*) for, such as whether the world is eternal.

Reply to Objection 1: Before the world existed, it was possible that the world should exist, not because of any passive potentiality (*potentia*), i.e., matter, but rather because of God's active power (*potentia*).

The world was also possible in the sense in which something is said to be *absolutely* possible—i.e., possible not because of any sort of potentiality [or power] (*non secundum aliquam potentiam*), but solely because of the relationship between the terms (*ex sola habitudine terminorum*), which are not incompatible with one another. As is clear from the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 5, it is in this sense that the possible is opposed to the impossible.

Reply to Objection 2: That which has the power to exist at all times is such that, once it has this power, it does not exist at some times and not at other times. However, before it had this power, it did not exist. Hence, this argument, which Aristotle proposes in *De Caelo* 1, does not prove the simple conclusion that incorruptible entities did not begin to exist; rather, it proves that they did not begin to exist in the natural way in which generable and corruptible things begin to exist.

Reply to Objection 3: In *Physics* 1 Aristotle argues that matter is ungenerated by appealing to the fact that matter does not have a subject from which to be made. On the other hand, in *De Caelo et Mundo* 1 he argues that a celestial body is ungenerated by appealing to the fact that a celestial body does not have a contrary from which to be generated. Hence, it is clear that the two arguments establish only that matter and the celestial bodies did not begin to exist through generation—as some had claimed, mainly in the case of the celestial bodies. By contrast, as is clear from what was said above (q. 45, a. 2), we ourselves are claiming that matter and the celestial bodies were brought into existence through creation.

Reply to Objection 4: A vacuum is not just that in which nothing exists. Rather, as is clear from Aristotle in *Physics* 4, a vacuum must be a space that is capable of holding a body but in which there is no body. We ourselves, however, are claiming that neither place (*locus*) nor space (*spatium*) existed before the world did.

Reply to Objection 5: The first mover is always in the same state, whereas the first movable thing is not always in the same state, since it begins to exist after not having previously existed. However, this occurs not through change but instead through creation—which, as was explained above (q. 45, a. 2), is not a change. Hence, it is clear that the present argument, which Aristotle puts forth in *Physics* 8, is effective against those who—as is clear from the opinions of Anaxagoras and Empedocles—had posited an eternal movable thing but not an eternal motion. We, on the other hand, are claiming that motion has always existed from the moment at which movable things began to exist.

Reply to Objection 6: The first agent is a voluntary agent, and even though He had an eternal volition to produce an effect, He did not produce an eternal effect.

Nor is it necessary to presuppose any [previous] motion—not even a motion that invokes imaginary time. For a *particular* agent, which presupposes one thing and causes something else, must be thought of differently from a *universal* agent, which produces the totality. Because a particular agent produces a form while presupposing the matter, it must induce a form that is properly proportioned to the matter. Hence, in the case of a particular agent it makes sense to think that it induces a form in this sort of matter and not in another sort because of the difference of the one matter from the other. But it does not make sense to think this way in the case of God, who produces the form and the matter at the same time. Rather, in the case of God it makes sense to think that He produces a matter that is suitable for the form and for the end.

Now a particular agent presupposes time in the same way that it presupposes matter. Hence, in the

case of a particular agent it makes sense to think of it as acting at a later time and not at an earlier time, invoking the imagined succession of one time after another. By contrast, in the case of a universal agent, which produces both the entity and time itself, one ought not to think of Him as acting now after not having acted, invoking the imaginary succession of one time after another—as if His action presupposed the existence of time. Instead, in His case one must say that He gave His effect the temporal extent He wanted to (*dedit effectui suo tempus quantum voluit*), and that He did this in a way that was appropriate for demonstrating His power—since the world leads us more clearly to a cognition of God’s creative power if it has not always existed than it would if it had always existed. For it is manifestly clear that everything that has not always existed has a cause, whereas this would not be as clear in the case of something that had always existed.

Reply to Objection 7: As *Physics* 4 puts it, the earlier and the later exist in time in the way that the earlier and the later exist in motion. Hence, the beginning and the end in the case of time should be thought of in the same way they are thought of in the case of motion.

Now if we assume that a motion is eternal, then each moment of that motion must be thought of as the beginning of one motion and the end of another, whereas this is not necessary if the motion begins to exist. And this same line of reasoning holds for the temporal *now*. So it is clear that the stated conception of the present instant, according to which it is always the beginning of a time and always the end of a time, presupposes that time and motion are eternal. Hence, in *Physics* 8 Aristotle uses this argument against those who had claimed that time is eternal but had denied that motion is eternal.

Reply to Objection 8: God is prior to the world in duration. But ‘prior’ here designates the priority of eternity and not a temporal priority.

An alternative reply is that ‘prior’ here designates an eternity of imagined time and not an eternity of really existing time—just as, when someone says, “There is nothing above the heavens,” the word ‘above’ designates only an imagined place, insofar as it is possible to imagine further dimensions added to the dimensions of the body of the heavens.

Reply to Objection 9: As is clear from what was said above (q. 19, a. 4 and q. 41, a. 2), just as an effect follows from a naturally acting cause in a way consonant with the cause’s form, so too an effect follows from a cause that acts through its will in a way consonant with the form that has been preconceived and decided upon by the agent. Therefore, even though God was from eternity a sufficient cause of the world, the world produced by Him does not have to be posited except in the way that His will predetermined it—so that, namely, it would have existence after non-existence in order to point more clearly to its author.

Reply to Objection 10: Once an action is posited, its effect follows according to the demands of the form that serves as the principle of the action. But in the case of agents who act by their will, what the agent conceives of and predetermines is thought of as the form that serves as the principle of the action. Therefore, from the fact that God’s action is eternal it does not follow that His effect is eternal. Rather, the effect is as God willed it to be—so that, namely, it would have existence after non-existence.

Article 2

Is it an article of the Faith that the world began to exist?

It seems that it is not an article of the Faith, but instead a demonstrable conclusion, that the world began to exist:

Objection 1: Each thing that is made has a beginning of its duration. But it can be

demonstratively proved that God is an efficient cause of the world, and, indeed, the best philosophers have asserted this. Therefore, it can be demonstratively proved that the world began to exist.

Objection 2: If it is necessary to claim that the world was made by God, then it was made either from nothing or from something. But it was not made from something, since in that case the matter of the world would have preceded the world—a claim against which Aristotle argued effectively when he showed that the celestial bodies are ungenerated. Therefore, it must be the case that the world was made from nothing. And so the world had existence after non-existence. Therefore, it must be the case that the world began to exist.

Objection 3: As is clear in the case of all artifacts, everything that is done through an intellect is done from a starting point (*a quodam principio*). But God acts through His intellect. Therefore, He acts from a starting point. Therefore, the world, which is His effect, has not always existed.

Objection 4: It is manifestly obvious that certain crafts, along with the inhabitation of certain regions, began at a determinate time. But this would not be the case if the world had always existed. Therefore, it is manifestly obvious that the world has not always existed.

Objection 5: It is certain that nothing is God's equal. But if the world had always existed, then it would be God's equal in duration. Therefore, it is certain that the world has not always existed.

Objection 6: If the world has always existed, then infinitely many days have preceded this present day. But it is impossible to traverse infinitely many things. Therefore, we would never have arrived at this present day—which is manifestly false.

Objection 7: If the world were eternal, then generation would likewise have occurred from eternity. Therefore, one man would have been generated by another *ad infinitum*. But as *Physics 2* says, a father is an efficient cause of his child. Therefore, it is possible to proceed to infinity among efficient causes. But this is disproved in *Metaphysics 2*.

Objection 8: If the world and generation had always existed, then infinitely many men would have preceded us. But the human soul is immortal. Therefore, infinitely many souls would now actually exist. But this is impossible.

Therefore, it can be known with certainty that the world began to exist, and this is not held by faith alone.

But contrary to this: The articles of the Faith cannot be demonstratively proved, since “faith is of things that are not apparent,” as Hebrews 11:1 puts it. But it is an article of the Faith that God is the creator of the world in such a way that the world began to exist. For [in the creed] we say, “I believe in one God, etc.”

Again, in *Homilia 1 in Ezechiel* Gregory says that Moses prophesied about the past when he said that “in the beginning God created heaven and earth”—a verse in which the world's newness (*novitas*) is taught. Therefore, the world's newness is had only through revelation. And so it cannot be demonstratively proved.

I respond: That the world has not always existed is held by faith alone and cannot be proved demonstratively—just as was explained above about the mystery of the Trinity (q. 32, a. 1).

The reason is that the world's newness does not admit of a demonstration from the side of the world itself. For the principle of a demonstration is what a thing is (*quod quid est*). But as far as the concept of its species is concerned, each thing abstracts from the here and now, and it is for this reason that universals are said to exist always and everywhere. Hence, it cannot be demonstrated that men or celestial bodies or rocks have not always existed.

Similarly, the world's newness does not admit of a demonstration from the side of an agent cause who acts through his will. For God's will cannot be ascertained except with respect to those things which are such that it is absolutely necessary for God to will them. But, as has been explained (q. 19,

a. 3), what He wills with respect to creatures is not of this sort.

However, God's will can indeed be made known to man through revelation, which the Faith depends on. Hence, that the world had a beginning is something to be held on faith (*credibile*), and is neither demonstrable (*demonstrabile*) nor scientifically knowable (*scibile*). Moreover, it is advantageous to dwell on this point, lest someone, presuming to demonstrate what belongs to the Faith, should put forth unconvincing arguments (*rationes non necessarias*) that would present non-believers with an occasion for ridiculing us if they thought that it is because of arguments of this sort that we believe the things that belong to the Faith.

Reply to objection 1: As Augustine explains in *De Civitate Dei* 11, there were two opinions among the philosophers who claimed that the world is eternal.

Some of them claimed that the substance of the world is not from God. The error of these philosophers is unsupportable, and so it is refuted by a compelling argument.

However, others held that the world is eternal while still claiming that the world was made by God: "They want the world to have a beginning not of time, but of its creation, so that in some scarcely intelligible way the world is made at all times." And as the same Augustine puts it in *De Civitate Dei* 10, "They have discovered a way to understand this: 'If a foot', they say, 'had always been planted in the dust from eternity, there would always have been a footprint underneath it, which no one would doubt was made by someone treading on the dust. In the very same way, the world has always existed, just as the one who made it has always existed.'" To understand this, note that an efficient cause that acts through motion must temporally precede its effect, since the effect exists only at the end of the action, whereas every agent has to exist at the beginning of the action. However, if the action is instantaneous and not successive, then the maker need not be prior in duration to what is made; this is clear in the case of the act of illumination. Hence, they claim that it does not necessarily follow that if God is an active cause of the world, He is prior in duration to the world. For as was explained above (q. 45, a. 2), creation, by which He produced the world, is not a successive change.

Reply to objection 2: Those who claim that the world is eternal would assert that the world was made by God *from* nothing—not in the sense that it was made *after* nothing (which is what we ourselves understand by the name 'creation'), but in the sense that it was not made from anything. And it is even the case that some of them do not shy away from the name 'creation', as is clear from Avicenna in his *Metaphysica*.

Reply to objection 3: This is the argument of Anaxagoras that is set forth in *Physics* 3. But it does not prove its point except in the case of an intellect that inquires about what to do by deliberating, which is similar to a motion. However, even though the human intellect is like this, God's intellect is not—as was shown above (q. 14, a. 7).

Reply to objection 4: Those who claim that the world is eternal assert that any given region has changed infinitely many times from being uninhabitable to being inhabitable, and vice versa. Similarly, they claim that because of various catastrophes and accidents, the crafts have been discovered and then lost infinitely many times. Hence, in *Meteorologia* Aristotle says that it is ridiculous to base one's opinion about the newness of the whole world on particular changes of this sort.

Reply to objection 5: As Boethius says at the end of *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, even if the world had always existed, it would not be on a par with God in its eternity, since God's *esse* is an *esse* that is a simultaneous whole, without succession, whereas this does not hold for the world.

Reply to objection 6: A traversal (*transitus*) is always understood as being from one terminus to another. But given any designated past day, there are finitely many days from that day to this present day, and so they could have been traversed. The objection, by contrast, proceeds on the assumption that once the [two] termini are posited, there are infinitely many items between them.

Reply to objection 7: It is impossible to proceed to infinity *per se* among efficient causes, i.e., it is impossible for causes that are required *per se* for a given effect to be multiplied to infinity—as, for instance, if a rock were being moved with a stick, and the stick were being moved by a hand, and so on *ad infinitum*.

By contrast, it is not impossible to proceed to infinity *per accidens* among agent causes, i.e., it is not impossible if all the causes that are multiplied to infinity belong to a single order (*ordinem*) of causes and if their multiplication is incidental (*per accidens*)—as, for instance, if a craftsman were to use many hammers incidentally, because one after another kept breaking. In such a case, it is incidental to any given hammer that it acts after the action of a given one of the other hammers. In the same way, it is incidental to this man, insofar as he generates, that he himself was generated by another. For he generates insofar as he is a man and not insofar as he is the son of some other man, since all the men who generate belong to the same order (*gradum*) of efficient causality, viz., the order of a particular generating cause. In this sense, it is not impossible for man to be generated by man *ad infinitum*.

However, it would indeed be impossible for the generation of *this* man to depend upon *that* man, and upon an elemental body, and upon the sun, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Reply to objection 8: Those who claim that the world is eternal try to evade this objection in various ways.

Some do not think it impossible that there should be infinitely many souls in actuality. This is clear in the *Metaphysica* of Al-Ghazali, who claims that this is a *per accidens* infinity. But this claim was disproved above (q. 7, a. 4).

Again, some claim that the soul is corrupted with the body. And others claim that only a single one of all the souls remains. Finally, as Augustine reports, to avoid this objection others claimed that there is a recirculation of souls, so that after a set interval of time, souls that have been separated from bodies once again return to bodies. All of these positions will be discussed in what follows (q. 75, a. 6 and q. 76, a. 2 and q. 118, a. 6).

Note, however, that the objection in question is a particular argument. Hence, someone could reply that the world has always existed or, at least, that some creature such as an angel has always existed, but that men have not always existed. For we ourselves mean to be asking *in general* whether some creature might have existed from eternity.

Article 3

Did the creation of things occur at the beginning of time?

It seems that the creation of things did not occur at the beginning of time:

Objection 1: That which does not exist in time does not exist at any time. But the creation of things did not exist in time, since it is the substance of things that was brought into existence through creation, whereas time does not measure the substance of things, especially incorporeal things. Therefore, creation did not occur at the beginning of time.

Objection 2: The Philosopher proves that everything that is made was once being made, and so every instance of *being made* has a *before* and an *after*. But in the case of the beginning of time there is no *before* or *after*, since the beginning of time is an indivisible. Therefore, since *being created* is a certain sort of *being made*, it seems that things were not created at the beginning of time.

Objection 3: Time itself is also created. But it cannot be created at the beginning of time, since time is divisible, whereas the beginning of time is an indivisible. Therefore, the creation of things did

not occur at the beginning of time.

But contrary to this: Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.”

I respond: This passage from Genesis 1 (“In the beginning God created heaven and earth”) is given three readings in order to rule out three errors.

Some have held that the world has always existed and that time does not have a beginning. To rule out this error, “in the beginning” is interpreted to mean “at the beginning of time.”

On the other hand, some have claimed that there are two principles of creation, one a principle of good things and the other a principle of evil things. To rule out this error, “in the beginning” is interpreted to mean “in the Son.” For just as being an efficient principle is appropriated to the Father because of His power, so being an exemplary principle is appropriated to the Son because of His wisdom, so that when it is said, “You have made all things in wisdom” [Psalm 103:24], this is understood to mean that God has made all things in the beginning, i.e., in the Son. Accordingly, in Colossians 1:16 the Apostle says, “In Him (*read: the Son*) were all things created.”

Finally, others have claimed that corporeal entities were created by God through the mediation of spiritual creatures. In order to rule out this error, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” is interpreted to mean that God created them *before* all things. In other words, four things are claimed to be created simultaneously, viz., (a) the empyrean heaven (*caelum empyreum*), (b) corporeal matter (which is called ‘earth’ here), (c) time, and (d) angelic nature.

Reply to objection 1: Things are said to have been created at the beginning of time not in the sense that the beginning of time is the measure of creation, but rather in the sense that heaven and earth were created together with time.

Reply to objection 2: The passage cited from the Philosopher has to do with the sort of *being made* which occurs through motion, i.e., which is the terminus of a motion. For since in the case of every motion there is a *before* and an *after*, it follows that prior to any designated point within a designated motion—i.e., as long as the thing is in the process of being moved or being made—there is a *before*; and likewise there is something *after* the *being moved* or the *being made*. For what exists either at the beginning of the motion or at its end is not in the process of being moved.

However, as was explained above (q. 45, aa. 2 and 3), creation is neither a motion nor the terminus of a motion. Hence, a thing is created in such a way that it was not previously in the process of being created.

Reply to objection 3: Nothing is made except in a way consonant with what it is. But nothing of time exists except the *now*. Hence, time cannot come into existence except with respect to some *now*—not because time *consists in* that first *now*, but rather because time *begins from* that *now*.