

## THINKING OF CREATION

### 1) Foreword

I would like to answer the question whether creation can be proved and chiefly whether it is nowadays a plausible concept and how it ought to be conceivable by us. I believe that an important guide to metaphysical truth is "plausibility in the light of total understanding". The great alternative of explicit or implicit metaphysical thought are the idea of creation and monism in its different forms (from materialism to pantheism). Monism is a continuous temptation to human thought. In fact to perceive being as being makes the whole of being accessible, and that means the absolute (in a wide sense). Whole as whole is absolute, because it does not depend on anything. Although it may be difficult to affirm that the whole of reality coincides strictly with the Absolute, monism, in fact, attempts to unify everything and to project up a material dimension on the whole of reality. Even in the case of spiritual monism, I would stress that the everyday experience of quantity, deeply connected with sense perception, plays the main role in the genesis of monism as Augustine demonstrates and C.S. Lewis argues: "The apparent profundity of Pantheism thinly veils a mass of spontaneous picture-thinking and owes its plausibility to that fact. Pantheists and Christians agree that God is present everywhere. Pantheists conclude that He is 'diffused' or 'concealed' in all things and therefore a universal medium rather than a concrete entity, because their minds are really dominated by the picture of a gas, or fluid, or space itself. The Christian, on the other hand, deliberately rules out such images by saying that God is totally present at every point of space and time, and locally *present in none*". This tendency towards monism as well as the tendency towards creationism has also anthropological and ethical roots, as I will try to argue.

The idea of creation is deeply connected with the religions of the Book and, particularly, with all Christian dogmas. At first sight the concept of creation seems to be less immediate, but deeper than monism. In fact the idea of creation suggests that there is *something else*, or rather *Someone else* at the very root of the universe: can we actually think that there is not *anything else* (that there is only the universe)? It is noteworthy that when speaking of God as something *else* or someone *else*, ontologically different from the universe (transcendence of God), I do not mean something spatially *outside* the world, but, rather, the very *depth* of reality which penetrates everything (immanence of God). From this point of view the idea of creation suggests that what is more perfect in our everyday experience (the personal dimension) must be - in an analogous form - at the very root of reality. Nowadays we need to rethink creation, because the scientific picture of the universe has changed very much in this century and very few important books have been written on this subject from the philosophical and metaphysical point of view during the latter years.

In my opinion there are no strong scientific objections against the idea of creation (although sometimes it might seem that there are), nor indeed *can there be*, because science and metaphysics play different roles. Although we often come across scientific theories that seem to be either sympathetic to the concept of creation (such as the "inflationary universe of the big-bang theory") or not (such as the "quantum cosmology"), nevertheless the idea of creation can neither be proved nor falsified by scientific means. I think that the real objections to the concept of creation have a metaphysical and ethical basis in a kind of implicit metaphysics and ethics of every man and, particularly, of scientists, whose starting point might also be scientific theories.

Therefore, let us now consider what the meaning of creation is, which are the main conditions for thinking of it and which difficulties and facilities we find nowadays in trying to think of it. We shall see that the difficulties facing creation are, basically, the difficulties facing theism.

## 2) The Meaning of Creation

Creation means communication of being to the world by an omnipotent, personal, intelligent and free God "ex nihilo sui et subiecti" ("from nothing", that means without emanation from his reality and without change of a pre-existent matter). We must stress that 'nothing' is in this case 'absolutely nothing' and not what is so called by some current scientific theories. Thomas Aquinas clarifies the meaning of creation in the best way. Only God can create, by communicating the newness of being (*novitas essendi*). He greatly stresses this *newness* (or "freshness" of being). God, by creating, does not change something that pre-exists, as every other cause does, because unlike any other being, only He is the pure Act of existing, infinite Actuality, without any passive potency in himself and, therefore, source of the whole being: "being and not being are infinitely far, but to do something from an infinite distance requires an infinite potency". As Thomas holds, God is pure actuality both if we consider him in himself (because, being simple, he is not compound and therefore there is no passive potency in him: otherwise we should admit another cause upon God) and if we compare him with all other beings, since there is in himself unitedly and eminently every perfection of all created beings that are actuated, but whose essence does not coincide with their act of existing. In fact an act limited by a potency can only actuate a passive potency, which means that it can change something that already exists. Only the pure *Act of existing*, who coincides with his action, does not need passive potency in order to communicate himself and therefore he can act without change. God can create from nothing and, moreover, as Thomas stresses against the mediatism of Avicenna and of the *Liber de causis*, *immediately* (*immediate*), without any mediation. He can create because he is *simple* and therefore *powerful* in the highest degree. This concept of simplicity (as well as the concept of eternity of God as "eternal present") seems to be problematic. Nowadays many theologians and philosophers of religion refuse it. The

doctrine of divine simplicity is not the thesis that God is relatively uncomplicated. Ordinarily when we describe something as "simple" this is to contrast it in point of degree of complexity with other things. But God is not simple in this sense; rather the relevant contrast is between that which is composite and that which is not. This metaphysical concept of simplicity, which means the highest concentration or unification of functions, therefore together complexity and unity without composition, develops - in my opinion - from the starting point of a reflection on the character of *esse* (act of existence) and on the peculiar faculties of a human being (thought and will): "the soul is in a certain way everything" ("*anima quodammodo omnia*"). It is noteworthy that the idea of God as the pure Act of existing suggests on the metaphysical level - that transcends our sense perception - the idea of an infinite concentration of energy which perhaps can find nowadays some pale analogy on the level of atomic physics and cosmology (i.e. big-bang cosmology).

God is simple as he is Spirit, but not as we are spirit. He transcends in his simplicity the material as well the spiritual dimension of our world.

Aquinas holds that, taken as a whole, creation may be considered either from the active point of view of God or from the passive point of view of a creature. If we look at it from the former point of view, creation means the action of God that is his essence together with his relationship to creature (which is not a real relationship, but only a conceptual one). Instead, if we intend it from the latter point of view, creation is "a certain relationship to God together with the newness of being (*novitas essendi*)".

As he creates the world and maintains it in existence, God is transcendent and immanent towards the world. He is immanent as he is transcendent. A naive idea of God's transcendence comes up with the criticism of Hegel according to whom infinity, if considered on the same level of finite beings, becomes itself finite. On the contrary, since the pure Act of existing absolutely transcends the world, he can also be immanent in the world or, rather, the world may be "in God". In fact only what is ontologically different (not only on the level of a spatial transcendence) is able to actually penetrate something ontologically different. From this point of view, the idea of creation, if conceived according to its main principles, saves the main demands of pantheistic monism or acosmism: the transcendent God manifests himself in the world and by the world: the world is a manifestation of God. According to Aquinas, He is immediately (*immediate*) and intimately (*intime*) present in every creature. Creating, knowing and loving the creatures coincide in God. Although a creature would be absolutely nothing without the creative causality of God, still the creature actually has its own being and its own causality. Far more than monism, creationism saves also the instance of the autonomous causality of creatures and, therefore, of scientific knowledge.

### **3) Creation and "human analogy"**

Thinking of creation means thinking of a special kind of causality - of which we have not experience - unlike the mere change of a pre-existent matter. The medieval thinkers and Thomas used the image of light, which, according to the physics of that period, was something between the sphere of matter and that of spirit and which propagated immediately. Although the concept of creation is beyond our experience, we can think of it by means of an analogy with some metaphors that we find out looking at the more perfect acts we know i.e. human mental and voluntary-free acts. Particularly we ought to think of the transcendent-immanent relationship between human mind and signs as well as of mercy in human relationships. It is noteworthy that Aquinas assimilates the metaphysical level of creation to the epistemic, ethical and theological levels: creation, which is the ground of every change inside the world, and the immediate knowledge of the first principles, which is the ground of every (not immediate) scientific deduction, creation and God's mercy ( *miser cordia*), which is the very ground of justice between God and man and also creation and the infusion of Grace.

Some contemporary thinkers use human language, which Thomas uses particularly when dealing with communication within the Trinity, when attempting to describe creation: as words are a novelty ( *novum* ) that manifests immediately man's thought, so, in creating the world, God's will immediately is made manifest. But there are important differences: first of all since God is simple, there is no difference between Him and his action (creation). In fact it does not add anything to Him. The world manifests immediately God's act, that is his very Being-Acting. Secondly, human language is not *created*, because it depends on our previous experience of the world. The same is the case of other so called "creative" human works such as composing music, painting a picture and so on. "Creation" here means something very different from God's creation, although the former can help us in thinking of the latter. To sum up: in order to think of the act of creation, we have to use the concept of efficient causality, but we must consider it from the point of view of human intentional acts, and then we must reread both in an analogous sense: God transcends any other form of causality. He is not the first cause of a chain of causes.

As we can see, God's omnipotence is not sufficient if we want to explain creation: it is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition. If the Absolute, that is transcendent, is not Intelligence and Love, if He is not a "personal" God and therefore if He is not free, creation remains incomprehensible: why should God have created the world, as He does not need anything? Therefore from this point of view the world exists because God creates, knows and loves it in the same act: being is a gift. But we cannot conceive Goodness, Love, Truth beyond being: they would not be at all. Only if God is the Omnipotent Being and at the same time Intelligence, Good-Love, Person , we can actually think of creation.

We must stress the freedom of God in creating because of our being unable to transcend

personal perfection (we cannot think of something more perfect than a person, despite the limits of the human person) as well as for our need of preserving the absoluteness of God, which would be questioned by any necessary modality of deriving the world from the Absolute. This is the case of every kind of emanationism. A God from whom the world came out necessarily would be necessarily dependent upon the world that He creates, therefore no longer "absolute" (according to the Latin etymology of the term). Therefore we need to use the concept of creation in order to preserve both the reality of God and the reality of the world. The fact that God is free in creating means also that He can, if He wants, "contain his omnipotence" (speaking from a very human point of view), causing also very small effects. This is, classically, the case of miracles, which are not interventions from outside creation. The potency and the perfection of the Creator is not apparent only by the greatness of his effects, but also by their smallness, that means by the spiritual character of his act. Moreover, since the personal and free God is trustworthy, as Aquinas affirms, He maintains in its being the world that creates: creation and conservation of the world are the same act.

#### **4) Scientific or metaphysical-ethical objections against creation?**

There are not, as I have just pointed out, scientific objections against creation: in fact neither the discovery of the incommensurable greatness of the universe (that is nevertheless ontologically unlike God) is an objection nor is the evolutionary concept of the universe an objection, because a) it does not exclude an intelligent creator ( see the argument from order and finalism) and b) because it is also difficult to conceive that the more can derive from the less. Also the opinion according to which it seems absurd that the evolution process, being too slow and wasteful, has been guided by God from the beginning is not true, because the Creator, being infinite, cannot miss nor waste anything. Nor might the hypothesis of an eternal universe be an objection, because that does not prevent it from being created by God from eternity (*ab aeterno*). Aquinas thinks that the philosopher can show that the world has an origin - in that it is dependent upon God as its Creator - but the philosopher cannot show that there is a beginning of its duration. The only evidence for this is to be found in the Revelation. Creation (*creatio*) is unlike change (*mutatio*). From a certain point of view evolutionism and big-bang, being coherent with an historical concept of the cosmos, support the idea of an eternal spring of the evolutionary process.

Also the anthropic principle needs an Intelligence at the root of the universe. And this is not all: the evolution of the scientific concept of matter during this century has changed the cartesian and modern concept of the strong spirit-matter opposition, which should therefore be reconsidered. The new concept of matter probably supports more easily a creationist interpretation of the universe, because it can be considered permeable by the divine potency.

Nowadays the difficulties in rethinking creation, which lead us to assume a more or less implicitly monistic type of metaphysics, are the same difficulties in rethinking theism and do not seem to have first of all scientific roots. On the contrary they seem to have pre scientific, cultural and philosophical roots. . I shall attempt to consider these epistemic obstacles and to answer them.

### **5) The whole seen by metaphysics is not the whole seen by science**

First of all nowadays there are great difficulties in thinking of the whole in a strong and metaphysical sense: is it plausible that the universe or the universes coincide with the whole of reality (that means that the universe is Absolute), thus confusing the metaphysical with the physical or scientific level? In fact "a science is never concerned with the entire domain of 'reality'; rather, from this it designates its specific domain of "objects" by resorting to some 'predicates' which can be thought of as representing its 'viewpoint' on reality....The 'choice' of each set of primitive predicates is itself contingent. While this determines the whole of a certain science, it cannot prevent other sciences from being both different and equally legitimate 'viewpoints' upon reality. The choice of such viewpoints is in fact a matter of 'decision' and of 'interest', for no intrinsic necessity could compel one to consider a dog, e.g. from the viewpoint of mechanics rather than of biology or psychology. On the contrary, one would be perfectly right in deciding to consider the dog from all such different viewpoints, and additional ones as well. If we apply this remark to science, we must say that adopting a scientific attitude towards reality amounts to taking the decision to place oneself from the viewpoint of the 'whole of experience'...In particular, one could be interested in investigating reality from the viewpoint, not of the 'whole of experience', but of the 'whole' without further specification. In this case, he would not be obliged to limit himself to statements which could be traced to experience. Such a condition is compulsory for science only because the 'whole of experience' constitutes its specific domain of inquiry , but this cannot be the condition for admitting statements which are concerned with the 'whole' without limitation. If now we qualify metaphysics as the effort to investigate reality from the viewpoint of the 'whole', which is different from investigating the whole of experience, the verification principle cannot constitute an objection because it is simply a 'demarcation' criterion which circumscribes only the domain of science (i.e. the domain of the 'whole of experience'). What does not fulfil this principle can be said to fall outside science, - but not outside all meaningful inquiry". Every normal man can think of the whole in the wider sense (the perception of the greatness of the universe, of the sky, of the mountains, of the sea is very helpful), but perhaps not every man can reflect on it. In order to do so we need to pay attention to the metaphysical level of our everyday experience (and that is not something that only philosophers and metaphysicians can do).

## **6) Thinking of creation means thinking of the act of existing.**

This point is deeply connected with the difficulties of 5). It may be difficult nowadays to reflect deeply on wonder at being and particularly at the act of existing (the newness of being - *novitas essendi*). This particular kind of wonder, which requires a metaphysical insight into reality, has its roots in the experience of multiplicity and uniqueness (the perception of the uniqueness of this day, of this feeling, of this blade of grass), but particularly of change: if nothing changes in our experience, we wouldn't perceive the contingency of being and the act of existing (also my own being that now exists and is not nothing). Also an eternal universe would manifest its contingency due to its process of change. To sum up: it is not amazing that something changes, but can we actually think that the whole of being (in the stronger sense) is changing? This is the problem of the "prima via" of Aquinas which affirms the existence of an unmoved mover.

## **7) Thinking of creation means thinking of simplicity (actual infinity).**

According to Aquinas only the essentially ordered causes and not the accidentally ordered causes cannot be infinite. The essentially or hierarchically ordered causes must all exist simultaneously at the precise moment of causing; accidentally ordered causes need not be simultaneous and need not exist at the moment of causing. It is difficult nowadays to imagine that we can stop the process towards infinity because it is very frequent to think of the infinity only in a quantitative or potential sense (the infinity of quantity). Therefore it becomes impossible to reach God as the infinite and necessary being. In other words it is difficult to think of infinity as *actual infinity (simplicity)*, plenitude "intensive" (that is God), because it is difficult to stop the process towards infinity, since we are not used to thinking of hierarchically ordered causes and beings. I believe that the cause of this difficulty is not first of all a logic or a scientific one, but is connected with our everyday ontological experience. In fact the classical reasons against an infinite causal regress still work. This is true on the ontological as well as on the epistemic and ethical level. Aristoteles and Aquinas hold that there cannot be an infinite regress in sense perception (*sensibile proprium*), first logical principles (as the principle of contradiction), ontological principles (as the unmoved mover) and the principles of practical reason (the desire for happiness and the actual choice). Also the idea of an integral fulfilment of man is deeply connected with the idea of the impossibility of an infinite regress.

Perhaps the difficulty or discouragement in thinking of God as the starting point of everything is deeply connected with the difficulty in conceiving beings as actuated by the act of existing (ontological experience - cfr. § 6) and principally in conceiving a human person as

plenitude and fulfilment. In fact we do not know other experiences of perfection greater than those of the act of existing, which causes the origin of everything including that of a person (actuated and unified by his substantial form-soul). The act of existing as perfection becomes more apparent to us particularly by the symbolical experience of things and mainly by the experience of human person. In a symbol the individual and the universal are, from a certain point of view, the same. Everything - a tree, a house, the moon and so on - may acquire a symbolic dimension in our experience, making us think by means of analogy of the plenitude of being, because everything is actuated by the act of existing. Otherwise knowing the uniqueness of a person and of his acts is looking at a concrete, although contingent infinity, because the human person can know and desire anything: he is a microcosm. Therefore our mother, our friends may acquire a symbolic meaning. The very source of both the experiences of the act of existing and of "person" is the experience of ourselves as existing, living and intelligent, hierarchically compound and actuated by the act of existing beings ("persons"). It is noteworthy that the experience of ourselves is deeply connected with our experience of the world as a whole (that means with our perception of the greatness of the sky, of the mountains, of the sea).

In particular: the act of existing, as it actuates *every* being and every essence or perfection, can make every other perfection infinite (and also that kind of perfection that is a human person). We can find here the source of the idea of the God of theism. To sum up: the experience of the act of existing and the experience of "person" as something unified by form are deeply connected in our thinking of perfection and of God as actual infinity.

Finally it is noteworthy that in the Christian religious experience of western societies Christ and the sacraments of the Church are the main symbols of the Actual infinity of God. It is not amazing that the obscuration of this peculiar religious experience may be nowadays an important cause of our difficulty in conceiving the infinity and simplicity of God.

We must consider also that in post modernity the idea of an infinite God seems to set a limit to the human freedom of interpreting the world and its life (infinity of hermeneutics) and of choosing as he/she likes a certain way of life (ethical relativism). From this point of view the concept of an infinite potentiality (bad infinity - for instance the idea of infinite universes in contemporary cosmology) or even the idea of a finite whole (an universe unbounded, but finite) easily becomes a way to implicitly refuse the idea of a Designer of the universe (God) and also a surrogate for the actual infinity of God, of which nowadays we seldom make experience, about which we are not used to reflect and that we may consider cause of violence and of alienation. Therefore I believe that there are not first of all scientific, but ontological, anthropologic, ethical and religious reasons for our difficulty to acknowledge that there is an Actual infinity, which is God, who creates the world.



## 8) Thinking of order means thinking of a "personal" reason for the universe

Deeply connected with what we are dealing with (the difficulty of reflecting on a rich experience of ourselves, on our typical human actions) is the fact of conceiving an impersonal reason for the universe. In fact an order of the universe is apparent: "In our own day, we reject the cosmology of the heavenly movers, but many physicists would recognize that the precise co-ordination of the laws of physics shows a degree of order and hence of intelligibility, which affirms an underlying purpose in the universe. Some even go so far as to claim that the laws of nature are precisely the laws necessary to produce a universe that can sustain our own lives and the world that we know".

Since it is difficult to think of a universe without rationality, because of the order we can find in it, sometimes it happens that we conceive an impersonal reason as the root of that order (Spinoza, Einstein, many scientists). But is it meaningful to think of an *impersonal reason*? Is it actually conceivable by us? Or is it like a round square? As Stephen Davis writes: "Transcendence, in at least one sense, does seem to be indicated by the evidence of design. It is hard to see how a being that is a part of the process of nature and is subject to its law can account for them or be said to have organised (let alone created) them. If a given being is the universe's designer, I would take that to entail that being cannot be identified with any thing, event, or process that exists or occurs in the physical world. And if that much is true, it also seems to follow that the designer of the universe must be non-physical or incorporeal (which is of course one of the crucial attributes of God)".

I believe that we conceive an impersonal reason when we believe that mere materialism is not enough, but we do not want to become theists. That often happens because of an irrational fear of anthropomorphism in thinking of God. In fact, in my opinion -but it is also the opinion of classical philosophy - we cannot have a more perfect experience than that of the act of existing that actuates our beings. And we cannot make experience of more perfect acts (that means more complex and unified - more "simple" in the classical sense) than those that are typically human. But to conceive an impersonal God, although it might seem a more purified concept of the Divinity, nevertheless means to fall into a concept of the Absolute more reductionist than that which is proper of theism, a concept shaped on the material and quantitative dimension of reality, that we perceive by sense-perception *rather than on the objects of contemporary science*. Augustine stressed this risk against Manicheism. Perhaps nowadays we can find new forms of Manicheism. Therefore instead of conceiving God as *super-personal*, we conceive Him as *sub-personal*, contradicting our everyday experience of order and hierarchy which requires a transcendent reason as the cause of that order: "Pantheist and Christian also agree that God is super-personal . The Christian mean by this that God has a

positive structure which we could never have guessed in advance, any more than a knowledge of squares would have enabled us to guess at a cube. But we can at least comprehend our incomprehension, and see that if there is something beyond personality it ought to be incomprehensible in that sort of way. The Pantheist, on the other hand, though he may say 'super personal' really conceives God in terms of what is sub personal - as though the Flatlanders thought a cube existed in *fewer* dimensions than a square".

In fact there is a risk of stressing in our idea of the world and of ourselves a frame connected with sense perception and technology instead of a frame connected with our original personal experience of ourselves as living and understanding beings. But the latter kind of frame (everyday knowledge) is the very background also of science itself. As it has been noted: "Modern science has for long time overlooked the fact that the individual can be known only within the framework of a universal model. This is due to the fact that scientific inquiry does not start from nothing, but from everyday knowledge, which already singles out individual objects and events thanks to the intervention of certain universals...there is no moment in which our knowledge can dispense with the universal, whether it be because we need the "unity of the multiplicity", or because we must be able to grasp "the permanent in the mutable". From this point of view "the metaphysical realist of Aristotelian-Thomistic persuasion is not concerned to deny that one can adopt a variety of ontologies, or that there is a variety of categories of things. Equally he or she should resist such phrases as such the world "forces us to think of it in a single integrated way'. That is both literally false and liable on interpretation to induce scientific reductionism. There are many 'things' and 'ways of being'. *Nonetheless, among these some (those with objective principles of unity) are more substantial than others*". We call them, hierarchically, mere substances, living beings and intelligent beings ("persons"). What makes this a hierarchy, rather than a mere list, is that the latter types of organism have all the powers of the former, but not viceversa.

Although the concepts of God and of creation transcend our human experience, they are deeply connected with our perception of the ontological hierarchy of beings and with the supremacy of that "whole" which is man. Theism is strongly connected with humanism.

## **9) Conclusion: Humanism and the idea of creation**

To sum up: the questions concerning "who is God?" (*Quid Deus sit?*) and "how creation is conceivable by us?" become nowadays as important as the question "does God exist?" (*an Deus sit?*). From this point of view the more a human person has a strong perception of his/her identity, unity and complexity ("simplicity") and of the whole of being (there is a connection between both perceptions), the more he/she wants to communicate to others his/her experience of fulfilment, and the more creation is conceivable and plausible. On the contrary the loss of a

rich and fulfilled human and ethical experience, in which our individual nature stands up in its originality and is able to communicate to others, the "flattering" of man in the cosmos and in society (political and economic power) support more easily in fact a monistic and impersonalistic approach to the problem of the genesis of the universe. Therefore thinking of creation paradoxically might become more difficult even in a moment in which some scientific theories seem to pay attention to it. If the theological idea of creation of the universe by a personal God is the historical religious ground of a strong concept of human person and of human dignity, the opposite seems also to be true: a strong concept of the human person and an adequate reflection on that pre scientific experience makes it possible, on the philosophical and theological level, to conceive God as a person and his acts as creative acts. Practice of science and ontological, ethical and religious experience are more connected among them than we presume to think of.

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