

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# THE ALLEGED BIRTHDAY FALLACY IN AQUINAS'S THIRD WAY

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### I. Introduction

In the Third of his celebrated Five Ways in *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 2, a. 3, St. Thomas Aquinas argues for the existence of God from contingency and necessity noting that the world contains possible beings which are able not to be since, being generated and corrupted, they at some time do not exist.<sup>1</sup> He claims to show that there must be some necessary being since it is impossible that all things are possible beings. Aquinas argues that every possible being at some time does not exist, but “if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence.”<sup>2</sup> This would lead to the absurd conclusion that nothing could exist now since “that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing.”<sup>3</sup>

Scholars have long found this part of the Third Way problematic, since it appears that Aquinas is committing a logical fallacy. He seems to be arguing that all members of a group have one common attribute since they each have their own particular instance of that attribute, as one might argue that since everybody has a birthday, i.e., one day on which each was born, therefore, there is one (and the same) day on which everyone was born. Anthony Kenny<sup>4</sup> and Joseph Bobik<sup>5</sup> take the position that this move renders the Third Way invalid, and so it fails to prove that a First Necessary Cause must exist. Starting at least in the 1980's and continuing beyond, the issue was a matter of ongoing debate between John Wippel<sup>6</sup> and Joseph Owens,<sup>7</sup> and as recently as 2004, Wippel contends that no satisfactory solution has been proposed that does not fundamentally alter the sort of reasoning Aquinas employs in basing the argument on temporally limited beings.<sup>8</sup>

This paper will show that the accusation that Aquinas commits the alleged Birthday Fallacy would mean he was arguing for a temporal beginning for all material things, and so believed that such claim was philosophically demonstrable. Aquinas, however, argued against our ability to naturally know physical creation had a beginning in time; such knowledge requires God's revelation of it. Instead, Aquinas in the Third Way is allowing for the possibility that the physical universe could be temporally infinite, as Aristotle argued, but that this possibility would still support Aquinas' contention that some necessary being must exist.

## II. Possible Beings

First of all, it is helpful to be clear on what Aquinas is basing this Third Way on. He begins his argument by asserting,

We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not.<sup>9</sup>

Just what Aquinas means by "possible to be and not to be" has itself been the subject of scholarly debate.<sup>10</sup> Without relating the details of the debate, I take the sense in which a possible being is able "to be and not to be" to refer to a temporal limitation, since Aquinas bases this possibility on possibles not being at some time, presumably in the past. Just for the record, it has been suggested<sup>11</sup> that Aquinas might have in mind another sense of possibility, one he employs in *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 15, where a being that is generated has only a tenuous hold on being and throughout its duration as existing, it is just as equally susceptible to non-being.<sup>12</sup> This fact then necessitates that it must be sustained in being. While this sense of possibility is metaphysically insightful, and I believe a result of the Third Way, like Wippel, I believe if one were to understand Aquinas' use of "possible" in this non-temporal way (or as an on-going fragile hold on reality), it would make nonsense of the conclusion which Aquinas immediately draws.<sup>13</sup> What is this immediate conclusion?

From the limitation of the temporal duration of things which are generated and corrupted, Aquinas draws the very conclusion whose logical cogency is called into question: "Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence."<sup>14</sup>

Wippel explains:

What he is asserting, therefore, is that if all things are possible (capable of existing and of not existing), at some point in the past all things would have been nonexistent. Therefore at that point in the past there would have been nothing whatsoever and consequently there would be nothing now. Since the final supposition is contrary to fact, so is the assumption from which it follows, that is, that all things are possibles.<sup>15</sup>

### III. The Birthday Fallacy

It is just this move that is claimed to be fallacious, for it infers a time in the past empty of existing things merely from the hypothesis that all existing things at some time in the past did not exist. It has been called the “Birthday Fallacy” which argues since everybody has a birthday, i.e., one day on which each was born, therefore, there is one (and the same) day on which everyone was born.

Likewise, it is claimed, Aquinas is wrong to infer that the supposition that all things are possible beings would require that there was a time when each of them (and all of them together) did not exist. Again, Wippel explains:

If we suppose that every individual is a possible and therefore has not existed at some point in the past, how does it follow from this that the totality of existing things will all have been nonexistent at the same point in the past? ... [To] grant that every possible being – every being which comes into existence by generation – exists only after it has been nonexistent . . . hardly leads to the conclusion that the totality of possible beings will all have been nonexistent simultaneously at some point in the past.<sup>16</sup>

Wippel identifies the fallacy as one of composition, or in line with Kenny,<sup>17</sup> as a quantifier shift. In either case, the mistake is to go from granting that for all possible beings there is a time in the past when each did not exist, to supposing that there would have been one time when all possible beings did not exist. And reasoning on the basis of this mistake, it would be a further error for Aquinas to argue that a time when nothing existed would be the logical result of there only being possible beings.

### IV. What Would It Mean If Aquinas *Were Guilty of This Fallacy*

We should not forget, that the intermediate conclusion Aquinas is drawing in the first part of the Third Way is that there must be a necessary

cause, but that such a necessary cause is not necessarily God. Immediately after concluding that not all beings are possible, i.e., that some being is necessary, he then claims that a necessary being may either have a cause of its necessity, or it may be self-necessary.

The hypothetical form of the alleged fallacy claims that if everything were a temporally limited possible being, then there would have been a time when nothing existed. And since the consequent is clearly not true (since nothing would exist now), the necessary being which would result from Aquinas committing the Birthday fallacy would be the cause standing at the head of a chain of temporally successive caused possible beings. But Aquinas is not at this point claiming there is any a-temporal cause of a chain of temporally limited beings. He is only trying to show that not all beings are temporally limited – that there is a non-possible or necessary being. We may think there is evidence for a beginning to this chain from Big Bang cosmology, but Aquinas expressly claims that there is no demonstrative evidence for such a temporal beginning, and there can be none (even though Scripture reveals that this is in fact the case).

In *Summa Theologiae* Ia 46, 2 he says:

Hence that the world began to exist is an object of faith, but not of demonstration or science. And it is useful to consider this, lest anyone, presuming to demonstrate what is of faith, should bring forward reasons that are not cogent, so as to give occasion to unbelievers to laugh, thinking that on such grounds we believe things that are of faith.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise in his small work, *On the Eternity of the World* (apparently completed while he was working on the *Summa*), Aquinas argues that it is not impossible that the world always existed, and since it is not impossible, one cannot demonstrate that is not the case. That is, one cannot definitively conclude based on natural reason alone that world did not always exist, which is to say, that it had a beginning in time.<sup>19</sup>

So, in the logical move that is our concern today, the alleged fallacy, Aquinas is not trying to show that the physical world consisting of possible beings had a cause in a necessary being. Rather, he is allowing for the possibility that the physical universe could be temporally infinite but that this possibility would still support Aquinas' contention that some necessary being must exist.

There is reason to suppose that this is Aquinas strategy in the Third Way since he also argues that supposing the eternity of the world makes the case for God stronger when he presents proofs for the existence of God from motion in the *Summa contra Gentiles* I, 13:

[29] Two considerations seem to invalidate these arguments. The first consideration is that, as arguments, they presuppose the eternity of motion, which Catholics consider to be false.

[30] To this consideration the reply is as follows. The most efficacious way to prove that God exists is on the supposition that the world is eternal. Granted this supposition, [the fact] that God exists is less manifest. For, if the world and motion have a first beginning, some cause must clearly be posited to account for this origin of the world and of motion. That which comes to be anew must take its origin from some innovating cause; since nothing brings itself from potency to act, or from non-being to being.<sup>20</sup>

In the Third Way, in order to make this supposition that the world could be eternal, Aquinas looks at the collection of possible beings, and postulates what would follow if the collection of possible beings was itself a possible being. He draws out the absurd consequence of supposing that only possible beings exist and that this collection of temporally limited beings was itself temporally limited, i.e., that the world of generation and corruption had a beginning in time.

Aquinas employs a similar move also when he is arguing for the cause of terrestrial motion. Christopher Martin<sup>21</sup> shows that Aquinas seeks to explain any given motion on earth through what Martin (following Peter Geach<sup>22</sup>) calls a ‘lumping together’ of all the motions of the world. Aquinas treats every motion of the world as part of the motion of the whole world, and through this lumping together, the motion of the whole world, and therefore all of the motions within the world, depend on a single universal moving cause. This is clear in another text from the *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 13:

[25] It is further evident that, according to the position of Aristotle, some self-moved being must be everlasting. For if, as Aristotle supposed, motion is everlasting, the generation of self-moving beings (this means beings that are generable and corruptible) must be endless. But the cause of this endlessness cannot be one of the self-moving beings, since it does not always exist. Nor can the cause be all the self-moving beings together, both because they would be infinite and because they would not be simultaneous. There must therefore be some endlessly self-moving being, causing the endlessness of generation among these sublunary self-movers. Thus, the mover of the self-moving being is not moved, either through itself or by accident.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, in the Third Way, Aquinas lumps together possible beings, beings generated and corrupted, and which are temporally limited. He then asks, what if this lump was all there were, and it itself were temporally limited? Why, there would be nothing now, since there would

have been a time before the lump came to be when there was nothing.<sup>24</sup> (And of course, nothing comes from nothing.)

Thus, it seems that in trying to explain the existence of possible being, Aquinas leaves us with two possibilities:

Either, (1), the actual lump of temporally limited beings of which we are actually a part, is temporally limited, and so is caused by something that does not belong to the lump called possible beings – a necessary being (a temporal beginning to the material world has an a-temporal non-material cause);

Or (2), the lump of possible beings is NOT temporally limited, so it is not a possible being, but a necessary one.

The latter possibility is the more difficult position from which a Catholic may argue, and from the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, it is clear the Aquinas prefers the greater challenge. Either way, Aquinas is then justified in the drawing his conclusion from the first part of the Third Way: “Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary.”<sup>25</sup> It is from this interim conclusion that he embarks on the second part of the argument by asserting: “But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not.”<sup>26</sup>

## V. Aquinas's Meaning

There is good reason, therefore, to understand Aquinas' words “if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence” not as fallaciously concluding that the temporal limitation inherent in each generated being entails that the collection of all such beings must be temporally limited. Rather, we should understand his words as highlighting the incoherence of supposing a temporal limitation to world of generated beings absent any non-temporally limited being. That is, he is actually granting that the possibility that an eternal world of generated and temporally limited beings would nevertheless not be a possible being, but a necessary being – but one that would still have a cause for its necessity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 2, a.3, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1948), v. 1, 13. “The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence — which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways: St. Thomas Aquinas' Proofs of God's Existence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Bobik, "The First Part of the Third Way," *Philosophical Studies* 17 (1968): 142-60.

<sup>6</sup> John Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic UP, 2000) Ch. XI.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Owens, "Quandoque and Aliquando in Aquinas' Third Way," *New Scholasticism* 54 (1980): 447-475.

<sup>8</sup> John Wippel, "The Five Ways," in *Thomas Aquinas: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 159-226.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 2, a. 3, v. 1, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Wippel, "Five Ways," 174-5.

<sup>11</sup> Owens, 461-4.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, trans., Anton Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame UP 1975) p. 98-9. "We find in the world, furthermore, certain beings, those namely that are subject to generation and corruption, which can be and not-be. But what can be has a cause because, since it is equally related to two contraries, namely, being and non-being, it must be owing to some cause that being accrues to it. Now, as we have proved by the reasoning of Aristotle, one cannot proceed to infinity among causes. We must therefore posit something that is a necessary being. Every necessary being, however, either has the cause of its necessity in an outside source or, if it does not, it is necessary through itself. But one cannot proceed to infinity among necessary beings the cause of whose necessity lies in an outside source. We must therefore posit a first necessary being, which is necessary through itself. This is God, since, as we have shown, He is the first cause. God, therefore, is eternal, since whatever is necessary through itself is eternal."

<sup>13</sup> Wippel, "Five Ways," 176.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 2, a. 3, v. 1, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Wippel, "Five Ways," 176.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Kenny, 57-8.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, v. 1, 243.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *On the Eternity of the World against the Grumblers*, trans. Mary T. Clark in *An Aquinas Reader*, ed. Mary T. Clark, (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1972), 178-85.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 94-5.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Martin, *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations* (Edinburg: Edinburg UP, 1997), 126-8.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Geach, "Aquinas" in *Three Philosophers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1961), 113.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 93.



<sup>24</sup> Wippel seems to have considered this reading, but dismisses it as Aquinas' real strategy. "While Thomas himself does grant the philosophical possibility of an eternally created world, he does so ultimately only under the assumption that there is also an eternal creative cause. While this is true, he cannot assume the existence of such a being at this point in the third way." ("Five Ways," 177) Wippel seems to think that Aquinas only supposes an eternal material world when he assumes a co-eternal creative cause. Rather, even when Aquinas grants that the material world could be (or could have been) infinitely old, it would itself be a necessary being. He then can inquire whether it has a cause of its necessity or is self-necessary.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 2, a. 3, v. 1, 13.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*