

Theological and Philosophical Dependencies in St. Bonaventure's Argument Against an Eternal World and a Brief Thomistic Reply

by Matthew D. Walz

For better or for worse, St. Bonaventure's more pastoral and mystical writings, rather than his strictly philosophical and theological ones, have become his best-known.¹ For this reason, he is often disregarded as a significant philosophical-theological mind of the thirteenth century with whom the succeeding generations of Scholastics had to reckon. As soon as one encounters (for example) his *Commentaria* on Peter Lombard's *Sententiae*, however, not only does his deep grounding in the Fathers and especially St. Augustine manifest itself, but his perceptive reading of Aristotle and the other pagan philosophers also becomes quite evident. Moreover, soon after St. Bonaventure's academic career ended, numerous sections of his *Commentaria* quickly acquired distinction as *loci classici* from which the later medieval thinkers received their bearings.

One example of a Bonaventurian *locus classicus* is his magisterial treatment of the possibility of an eternal world at *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2. Anyone who doubts St. Bonaventure's ability to muster rigorous philosophical argumentation à la Aristotle's *Analytica Posteriora* needs only to examine this article, which is nicely accompanied by the Seraphic Doctor's usual rhetorical skill. In this *quaestio*, St. Bonaventure presents a concise summary of the traditional (that is, Augustinian) view of the eternal world *aporia* along with

¹For example, many who encounter St. Bonaventure's thought do so through his *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, which is a splendid example of Franciscan thought and spirituality, but lacks the rigor of Scholastic philosophical and theological argumentation.

something of a critique of the then-novel Aristotelian position, which appeared dangerous to the Christian worldview. A critical consideration of this *quaestio* and the one preceding it, which inquires about the causal principle behind reality, allows us not only to observe the brilliance of this oft-neglected thinker, but also to examine his understanding of the limits of philosophy and of our need for revelation if we are to avoid straying from truth.

The interpretation of St. Bonaventure's position presented in this paper tries to show that his argument against an eternal world has a twofold dependence: a theological dependence on Scripture, about which the Seraphic Doctor is rather clear, and a philosophical dependence on at least one argument concerning the nature of the infinite, which appears to give his position complete vindication against any seemingly-plausible philosophical alternatives. The interpretation in this paper might be seen as an attempt to develop the reading of St. Bonaventure's argument given by Stephen Baldner.² Baldner points out that "the whole force of Bonaventure's *quaestio* on the eternity of the world is simply to make the point that 'being created' and 'being eternal' are privative or mutually exclusive terms."³ Moreover, Baldner correctly recognizes the argument's reliance on the revealed datum that the world is not beginningless.⁴ With regard to the Seraphic Doctor's philosophical approach to this problem, Baldner thinks that "[t]he most that Bonaventure will claim for reason is

²Stephen Baldner, "St. Bonaventure on the Temporal Beginning of the World," *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989): 206-28. Also, see "St. Bonaventure and the Demonstrability of a Temporal Beginning: A Reply to Richard Davis," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1997): 225-36. (This latter paper was a reply to Richard Davis's critique of Baldner's interpretation in "Bonaventure and the Arguments for the Impossibility of an Infinite Temporal Regression," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 70 [1996]: 361-80.) The interpretation found in this present essay was completed and submitted prior to the publication of Baldner's second article. I have subsequently made some amendments to account for Baldner's more recent article, although the bulk of the paper is still based on his older piece. It is no doubt presumptuous on my part to claim that this paper "develops" Baldner's already well-developed and perspicuous reading of St. Bonaventure on this issue. At the least, I hope that this paper does justice to Baldner's interpretation and perhaps clarifies a few points. Moreover, I hope that the concluding Thomistic critique of the Seraphic Doctor's position indicates the significant matters to which the eternal world debate gives rise.

³Stephen Baldner, "St. Bonaventure on the Temporal Beginning of the World," 216.

⁴Stephen Baldner, "St. Bonaventure and the Demonstrability of a Temporal Beginning: A Reply to Richard Davis," 230-1.

that it does not contradict faith.”⁵ Consequently, Baldner does not think that St. Bonaventure's position relies on the arguments against an actual infinity. “The evidence,” Baldner writes, “that Bonaventure regarded arguments [against an actual infinite] as demonstrative is far from convincing.”⁶ It is my belief, however, that St. Bonaventure's argument against an eternal world, if it is to be seen as thorough and integral, does depend on the arguments opposing an actual infinite.⁷ Thus, the development of Baldner's reading will proceed, first, by taking a closer look at the structure of this *quaestio* in order to appreciate the solidity and density of its reasoning⁸ and, second, by trying to demarcate more definitively just how much St. Bonaventure looks to both theology and philosophy for help in this matter. We will conclude this essay with a short critique of St. Bonaventure's position, not as a slight to the Seraphic Doctor's manifest brilliance, but as a possible corrective learned from another sage Doctor who flourished soon after St. Bonaventure's academic career ended, namely St. Thomas Aquinas.

I.

Do Things Have a Productive Principle? A Theological Answer: In his *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2, the question immediately preceding his discussion of the possibility an eternal world, St. Bonaventure takes up a more basic inquiry as to whether things have a

⁵Stephen Baldner, “St. Bonaventure on the Temporal Beginning of the World,” 218.

⁶*Ibid.*, 216.

⁷In other words, St. Bonaventure's argument could stand without a position against an actual infinite, although it would lack the proper philosophical support to cover all the objections. Hence, if we wish to see his argument as “thorough and integral” (that is, as showing that the Christian solution is not merely true, but even, in the end, the only likely alternative), then I think the interpretation offered in this paper should be used.

⁸Fernand Van Steenburghen, in “Saint Bonaventure contre l'éternité du monde,” *S. Bonaventura: 1274-1974* (Roma: Collegio S. Bonaventura, 1974), 259-78, and Antonius Coccia, O.F.M.Conv., in “De Aeternitate Mundi apud S. Bonaventuram et Recentiores,” *S. Bonaventura: 1274-1974*, 279-306, offer two very good summaries of this *quaestio*, although neither of them connect it closely enough to the question preceding it, which is an indispensable step in coming to grips with the whole of the Seraphic Doctor's argument against the possibility of an eternal world.

causal principle.⁹ While introducing this question, he notes that the Saints and philosophers, for a variety of reasons, have consistently recognized a productive principle behind the world. Given this fact, St. Bonaventure thinks it appropriate to inquire more precisely “whether things are produced *wholly*, that is, according to both a material and a formal principle, or only according to *one* of [these] principles.”¹⁰ In the *Respondeo*, the Seraphic Doctor relates the solutions that the pagans offered to this difficulty. He briefly delineates four basic positions taken by the Greeks, each improving on its predecessor: (1) The Eleatic position that the world is God; (2) Anaxagoras’s position that the world is produced from pre-existing principles (that is, pre-existing matter *and* form); (3) Plato’s position that the world is produced from pre-existing matter; and (4) Aristotle’s position that the world was produced by God, but not from pre-existing principles.¹¹ Concerning this last position, St. Bonaventure admits his uncertainty concerning Aristotle’s exact solution. Yet, whatever the Aristotelian stance, he does think it marked a genuine progression toward the truth. “Whether [Aristotle] posited that form and matter were made from nothing,” St. Bonaventure concludes his short historical sketch, “this I do not know. I believe, however, that he did not arrive at this.... And for this reason, even Aristotle himself fell short, though less than the others.”¹² With these words, St. Bonaventure crowns the Philosopher prince of the Greek thinkers, at least regarding this question, since among them Aristotle comes closest to the truth regarding the world’s production.

The Seraphic Doctor then provides his own solution concerning whether things have a productive principle. More precisely, he provides Sacred Scripture’s solution, for only through God’s Word, he thinks, are we men able to discover the truth about the world’s production. “Where the expertise of the philosophers falls short,” St. Bonaventure asserts, “Sacred

⁹*Commentaria in II Sententiarum* [= *In II Sent.*], d. 1, p. 1, q. 1, a. 1 [II, 14]: “Utrum res habeant principium causale.” Texts from St. Bonaventure’s works will be taken from *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia* (Quaracchi: Ad Claras Aquas, 1882-1902) and will include the volume and page numbers in brackets. All translations are mine.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, [II, 14]: “Utrum res sint productae omnino, hoc est secundum principium materiale et formale, an tantum secundum alterum principiorum.”

¹¹*Ibid.*, [II, 16-17].

¹²*Ibid.*, [II, 17]: “Utrum autem posuerit materiam et formam factam de nihilo, hoc nescio; credo tamen, quod non pervenit ad hoc, [sicut melius videbitur in problemate secundo]: ideo et ipse etiam defecit, licet minus quam alii.”

Scripture comes to aid us." God's Word informs us that "all things are created and produced in existence according to the whole of what they are."¹³ Hence, the only valid answer concerning the coming-to-be of the world derives from Scripture, not reason. To be sure, although the answer of creation is not reasoned to, it is reasonable. Thus, although he came closest to a feasible solution, Aristotle could never have given the correct answer without Revelation. In order to arrive at the truth in this matter, reason requires the merciful succor of a *Deus loquens*, a God who discloses to man His loving act of *creatio ex nihilo*. Hence, for St. Bonaventure, the positive answer about the production of the world in existence depends on God's Word, not on philosophical reasoning.¹⁴ This is the important conclusion of the first question of his *Commentaria in II Sententiarum*, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, on which the principal argument of the second question depends.

II.

On the Possibility of an Eternal World: In the next question, St. Bonaventure undertakes an investigation into the possibility of an eternal world. Given that God has produced the world, has He done so from all eternity? Or does the world have a limited past?¹⁵ The Seraphic Doctor's answer agrees with the creation account in Genesis, namely that God produced the world in time, that is, with a definite temporal starting point.

¹³Ibid., [II, 17]: "Ubi autem deficit philosophorum peritia, subvenit nobis sacrosancta Scriptura, quae dicit, omnia esse creata et secundum omne quod sunt in esse producta." Throughout this paper I have tried to maintain a consistent translation of 'esse' as 'existence' when St. Bonaventure seems to be talking about the very perfection *that* a thing is with little or no implication of *what* it is. If the reader thinks this a mistranslation, or at least a misleading translation, then he is asked to see 'esse' in every instance of 'existence' and follow St. Bonaventure's reasoning accordingly.

¹⁴Francis Kovach, in his in-depth analysis of the history of the eternal-world question along with his more focused examination of the views of St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas presents the question on two levels, the level of fact and the level of possibility. This *positive answer* is St. Bonaventure's answer on the former level, and, as we will see, it is for him the only viable candidate (all things considered) on the latter level as well. See Kovach, "The Question of the Eternity of the World in St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas (A Critical Analysis)," *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1974): 141-72.

¹⁵The phrasing of the question is "Utrum mundus productus sit ab aeterno, an ex tempore" (*In II Sent.*, d. 1, p. 1, q. 1, a. 2 [II, 19]).

To grasp better St. Bonaventure's argument for this Christian position, it is best for us first to lay out the structure of the entire *quaestio*.

St. Bonaventure begins with six arguments objecting to the Christian position of a world with a beginning in time. He marshals the usual arguments from Aristotle's *Physics* based on the natures of motion (or, more broadly, change) and time, providing a pair of arguments for both, each pair consisting of one direct proof (*ratio ostensiva*) and one indirect proof (*ratio per impossibile*). He then concludes with two objections, again a *ratio ostensiva* and a *ratio per impossibile*, based on the nature of a productive cause. Following this, he presents six arguments that support the Christian view. The first five proceed from suppositions concerning the nature of the infinite in an attempt to show how the eternal world position self-destructs, as it were, by contradicting indisputable *dicta* concerning the infinite. Following these five arguments comes the last of the arguments for the Christian view, which we will refer to as St. Bonaventure's "Main Argument," a proof grounded on the notion of what it is to be a creature, that is, on the *ratio creaturae*. This argument is the centerpoint of the *quaestio*, around which the other components of the *quaestio* revolve and in relation to which they find their ultimate meaning. In the Main Argument, the Seraphic Doctor reveals his solution's dependence on the theological conclusion of the preceding question, in which Scripture was invoked as decisive evidence for God's production of things in their entirety. St. Bonaventure follows the Main Argument with his *Respondeo*, where he spells out the two chief solutions to the eternal world *aporia*, namely the Christian view and the Aristotelian view. The discussion in the *Respondeo* requires us to backtrack to at least one of the philosophically-grounded infinite arguments in order to see how St. Bonaventure thinks that the Christian position is thoroughly vindicated because all other reasonable options are ultimately implausible. Finally, the *quaestio* concludes with replies to the opening objections. In our discussion below, we begin with a quick review of the objections and their replies, followed by a close examination of the Main Argument, the *Respondeo*, the arguments concerning the infinite, and the various relations between these components of the *quaestio*.

III.

Objections and Replies: The first pair of objections to St. Bonaventure's position are taken from motion (*sumtis a motu*). The first

of these is a direct proof along the following lines. Everything that begins, begins through motion. Consequently, prior to the existence of each thing, there is motion. This motion, however, was not able to be before itself, nor before its own movable. Hence, it is impossible for it to begin. Therefore, there must be a beginningless motion, which, in accord with medieval cosmology, is identified with the circular motion of the heavens. This celestial motion, being the most perfect motion, is first, and so it has always existed.¹⁶ The second objection taken from motion is an indirect proof. This argument invokes the principle that if a motion comes into existence, it does so through motion or change (*per motum vel mutationem*). Given this fact, one can either go back *ad infinitum* in motions or else posit some motion without beginning (*ponere aliquem motum sine principio*). The former option is excluded for reasons that are obvious, at least to the medieval thinker, since an infinite regress of moving causes must be avoided. The latter option makes for an eternal world, for if there is a motion without a beginning, then it has a corresponding movable without beginning, which we call the world.¹⁷ Thus run the two arguments taken from motion. St. Bonaventure resists them both by pointing out the unique sort of *mutatio* that creation introduces. The event of creation is wholly distinct from any motion one might encounter in the world. Creation presents a prior and supernatural *mutatio* in which the *motus* and its *mobile* come into existence at once.¹⁸ Therefore, rules applicable to the kinds of motion met with in the world become meaningless in relation to the unique event of creation.

¹⁶Ibid., [II, 19].

¹⁷Ibid., [II, 19].

¹⁸St. Bonaventure's general strategy against the two objections based on the nature of motion is clearest in his answer to the first argument: Quod ergo obiicitur primo de motu, quod est primus inter omnes motus et mutationes, quia perfectissimus; dicendum, quod loquendo de motibus et mutationibus naturalibus, verum dicit et non habet instantiam; loquendo autem de mutatione supernaturali, per quam ipsum mobile processit in esse, non habet veritatem. Nam illa praecedit omne creatum, et ita mobile primum, ac per hoc et eius motum (Ibid., [II, 23]). St. Bonaventure here recognizes the strength of these motion arguments from a natural point of view. It is only the introduction of the supernatural point of view that ultimately makes them ineffective. Concerning the simultaneous coming-into-existence of the motion and the movable, the Seraphic Doctor writes: ... motus non exit in esse per se, sed cum alio et in alio. Et quoniam Deus in eodem instanti mobile fecit et ut motor super mobile influxit; ideo motum mobili concreavit (Ibid., [II, 23]).

The two arguments based on the nature of time proceed in a similar fashion. The first, a *ratio ostensiva*, begins with the apparently self-evident claim that each thing that begins either begins in time or in a given instant. Hence, if the world begins, it begins in time or in a given instant. But before every time there is time, just as if someone *is running*, then of necessity he *was already running*. Moreover, before every instant there is time, since the instant, which can also be designated as the “now,” is aptly characterized as the “beginning of the future” and the “terminus of the past,” and thus by definition has some past time prior to it.¹⁹ The second argument is a *ratio per impossibile*. If time is produced, it is produced in time or in a given instant. It cannot be the latter, for time does not exist in a given instant. Hence, time must be produced in time. But for every time one can point out a before and an after (in other words, a past and a future). Now suppose time were produced (that is, began to exist) in time. Before that time there must also have been a time. Thus, it is impossible for time to begin to exist in time.²⁰ Time, therefore, must not be produced in time, but must exist from all eternity.

St. Bonaventure handles these arguments by making two distinctions. Dealing with the first argument, he distinguishes between the “now” coming to be in the very production of time and the “now” as we usually encounter it, as already existing and situated between past and present time. The former type of “now” does not require a preceding time, for it is the very first “now.” It is analogous to the point at which one begins drawing a circle. No point on a circle can be said to lack points on both of its sides, yet there was a first point where the circle began to be drawn. Such is the case with the “now” of time. When we consider the “now” in the midst of time, it is surrounded by past and present. Yet it is certainly possible that there was a first “now” that did not need any time prior to it in order to be.²¹

¹⁹Ibid., [II, 19-20]. See Aristotle’s *Physics* IV.13.222^a10-12: “The ‘now’ is the link of time, as has been said (for it connects past and future time), and it is a limit of time (for it is the beginning of the one and the end of the other).” Translations of Aristotle’s writings are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

²⁰Ibid., [II, 20]. This argument clearly employs Aristotle’s definition of time as “*numerus motus secundum prius et posterius*.” See Aristotle’s *Physics* IV.11.219^b1: “For time is just this—number of motion in respect of ‘before’ and ‘after’.”

²¹Ibid., [II, 23].

Against the second argument, the Seraphic Doctor distinguishes between time according to its essence and time according to its existence. According to its essence, time is the "now" itself, and this "now" begins to exist along with some movable thing and not within some other "now." According to its existence, time began with the *motus variationis*, that is, the motion of changeable things, since time, being a measure of motion, requires the existence of some (logically) prior motion.²² Hence, this second objection concerning time, although it might work in the case of time-according-to-its-existence, is not successful in the case of time-according-to-its-essence. Here again Bonaventure recognizes that the event of creation involves unique rules inapplicable to typical encounters with motion and time in the world. These rules, although never experienced by us who live in the midst of past and future, nevertheless are not incoherent, and thus cannot be excluded as impossible. In other words, Aristotle's arguments from the *Physics* simply fail to recognize all the possibilities.²³

The last pair of objections to the Christian view, unlike the previous two pairs "taken from the perspective of the world itself" (*sumtae a parte ipsius mundi*), are "taken from the perspective of the productive cause"

²²Ibid., [II, 23].

²³Robert Grosseteste, whom St. Bonaventure undoubtedly read, employed a similar form of argument against the Aristotelian position, trying to show that the Philosopher neglected some genuine possibilities. Grosseteste writes: "Furthermore, [the following] division is inadequate: 'either motion is beginningless and without beginning or it was after it had not been.' For under neither part of this disjunction falls the world or time or motion or something whose being is being with time, since none of these is without a beginning, notwithstanding the fact that none of these things has its beginning under the order of time. Yet the division is necessary for one whose imagination posits that 'to be without a beginning' and 'to have being extended throughout an infinite duration' are the same thing" (*The Treatise on the Finitude of Time and Motion*, n. 5; translation by Timothy B. Noone, from a forthcoming collection of translated selections from St. Bonaventure's philosophical writings to be entitled *God and Creatures* [St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute]). In a similar fashion, St. Bonaventure attempts to show in his replies to the initial objections that Aristotle failed to see the real possibility of a temporally first motion and a first "now," which led the Philosopher to presume their impossibility. As St. Bonaventure's *Respondeo* will show, however, this presumption was not totally unreasonable given that Aristotle did not have knowledge of the revelation of creation. Grosseteste, on the other hand, who was much more critical of the Aristotelian enterprise than the Seraphic Doctor, implies in the passage above that Aristotle lacked not only Scripture, but even imagination!

(*sumuntur ex parte causae producentis*).²⁴ The first argument is based on a reduction of all sufficient and actual causal beings to agents that produce their effects necessarily. The false principle used in the argument is this: "Given a sufficient and actual cause, its effect is supposed."²⁵ From this premise it follows that God must have always produced His effect (namely, the world) from eternity, for He is actual and sufficient to do so from all eternity. St. Bonaventure responds by making a clear distinction between beings that act merely by nature, and those that act through will and reason. God is the latter type of agent, and so He can will to create in time, which indeed He did.²⁶

The last objection against the Christian position is a *ratio per impossibile* that attempts to show the absurdity of a God who produces in time. Any production, the argument maintains, implies a transition from inactivity to activity (*ab otio in actum*) in the producer. Thus, any production implies a change in the one who produces. But it is blasphemy to suppose that God changes. God has never made a transition from inactivity to activity; rather, He has always been producing.²⁷ In reply to this argument, St. Bonaventure distinguishes between an agent to which something is added when it acts or produces and an agent that is its action and so does not reach its fulfillment by acting or producing. God indeed is His action. The objector's argument fails because it does not recognize the possibility of such an agent. Most philosophers, in fact, do consider God to be the most simple agent to whom nothing is added by His creative action. The conception of an unchanging, most simple, and yet productive agent, however, is difficult to achieve in our minds (and even impossible in our imaginations). In order to arrive at any intellectual grasp of such a being, St. Bonaventure notes, we must withdraw from the senses and regard only intelligible realities. In our reflection, we must try to contemplate the

²⁴Ibid., d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1 [II, 20]. In "St. Bonaventure and Arabian Interpretations of Two Aristotelian Problems," *Franciscan Studies* 37 (1977): 219-28, John Quinn regards St. Bonaventure's replies to the objection *ex parte causae producentis* as directed against the interpretations of Aristotle given by the Arabian philosophers, chiefly Avicenna. Although the Seraphic Doctor is not the submissive disciple of Aristotle as Averroes and Avicenna claim to be, Quinn tries to show that St. Bonaventure is nonetheless a better interpreter of the Philosopher's texts than they.

²⁵Ibid., d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1 [II, 20]: [P]osita causa sufficienti et actuali, ponitur effectus.

²⁶Ibid., [II, 23].

²⁷Ibid., [II, 20].

coherence of a being that is most perfect and yet most simple. Only through arduous contemplation can one begin to lay hold intellectually of the Creative Agent.²⁸

IV.

The Main Argument: After the six objections raised against the Christian view on the eternity of the world, there follow five arguments for St. Bonaventure's Christian position, which are based on the nature of the infinite, and then his Main Argument. It is my contention in this paper that the true purpose of the infinite arguments, especially the fifth one, in the *quaestio* as a whole is revealed only after one understands how the Main Argument and the *Respondeo* work. Hence, we should begin with a discussion of the Main Argument and the *Respondeo* prior to considering where the infinite arguments fit into the picture.

The Main Argument runs as follows:

The last argument for this position [that is, the non-eternity of the world] is the following:

- (1) It is impossible for what has existence after non-existence to have eternal existence, for here there is the implication of a contradiction.
- (2) But the world has existence after non-existence.
- (3) Thus, it is impossible for it to have eternal existence.

That "(2) The world has existence after non-existence" is proved as follows:

- (i) Each thing that has existence after non-existence entirely from something is produced out of nothing by that something.
- (ii) But the world has existence entirely from God. (iii) Hence, the world is produced out of nothing. But the world is not produced out of nothing taken in a material sense [that is, as if the nothing were in fact the matter]; rather, it is produced out

²⁸Ibid., [II, 24].

of nothing taken in the sense of an original source [that is, nothing is really what the world came from].

Now [the major premise of this argument], that “(i) each thing that is produced entirely by something differing from it in essence has existence out of nothing,” is clear. For (a) that which is produced entirely is produced according to its matter and form. (b) But matter does not have anything out of which it is produced, because it is not produced out of God. (c) So it is clear that it is produced out of nothing.

Furthermore, the minor premise, that “(ii) the world is produced entirely by God,” is clear from the other problem.²⁹

After close analysis of this argument, it becomes clear that almost every premise is proven, either in this argument or, in the case of the all-important premise (ii), by allusion to the preceding question. We must recall, however, that the conclusion of the last question, that the world is produced out of nothing according to the entirety of what it is, which is premise (ii) above, can be verified only with reference to Scripture. Because it depends on the conclusion of the previous question, St. Bonaventure’s Main Argument against an eternal world, thus acquires a theological dependence, for it employs a key premise known only because God has revealed it.³⁰

²⁹Ibid., [II, 22]: Ultima ratio ad hoc est: impossibile est quod habet esse post non-esse habere esse aeternum, quoniam hic est implicatio contradictionis; sed mundus habet esse post non-esse: ergo impossibile est esse aeternum. Quod autem habeat esse post non-esse, probatur sic: omne illud quod totaliter habet esse ab aliquo, producitur ab illo ex nihilo; sed mundus totaliter habet esse a Deo: ergo mundus ex nihilo; sed non ex nihilo materialiter: ergo originaliter. Quod autem omne quod totaliter producitur ab aliquo differente per essentiam, habeat esse ex nihilo, patens est. Nam quod totaliter producitur, producitur secundum materiam et formam; sed materia non habet ex quo producatur, quia non ex Deo; manifestum est igitur, quod ex nihilo. Minor autem, scilicet quod mundus a Deo totaliter producatur, patet ex alio problemate.

³⁰This is what St. Bonaventure himself indicates when he concludes his Main Argument by saying that the minor premise, or premise (ii), “is clear from the other problem” (*patet ex alio problemate*). The “other problem” can only refer to the preceding

Moreover, we just stated above that almost every premise in this Main Argument is proven, for the major premise, that “(1) It is impossible for what has existence after non-existence to have eternal existence, for here there is the implication of a contradiction,” remains unproven. We naturally wonder: whence this premise? The answer may be found at the opening of all the six arguments supporting St. Bonaventure’s Christian position. There he says, “In opposition [to the six objections that favor an eternal world], there are arguments from propositions that are self-evident according to reason and philosophy.”³¹ Therefore, St. Bonaventure considers premise (1) to be self-evident because, as it itself claims, “there is the implication of a contradiction” in asserting that what has *esse post non-esse* exists without a beginning. According to the Seraphic Doctor, then, for something to receive its existence from another *in toto* entails a beginning in time for that something, in this case the world. St. Bonaventure simply accepts this statement as an indisputable philosophical *propositio per se nota*. A look at the all-important *Respondeo* will help clarify his position further.

V.

The Respondeo; Leading Back to the Infinite Arguments: At the outset of the *Respondeo*, St. Bonaventure points to the “last argument” (which we are calling the “Main Argument”) as the one that shows that maintaining the eternity of a world produced out of nothing is “against truth and reason.” In fact, it is so much against truth and reason, the Seraphic Doctor notes, that he finds it hard to believe that anyone, however slight of intellect, has ever held this view.³² For St. Bonaventure, then, being eternal and being produced out of nothing constitute an unmistakable either/or disjunct. If a being is eternal, it is not produced out of nothing; and if a being is produced out of nothing, it is not eternal. As of yet, though, we have seen only the second disjunct to be possible. Its possibility is presumed from its actuality, for Scripture reveals that the world has, in fact, been produced out of nothing. Besides this revealed possibility, is the first

quaestio concerning whether things have a productive principle.

³¹*In II Sent.*, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1 [II, 20], “Sed ad oppositum sunt rationes ex propositionibus per se notis secundum rationem et philosophiam.”

³²*Ibid.*, [II, 22].

disjunct, considered from a philosophical perspective, a genuine possibility? St. Bonaventure thinks so, at least to an extent. This extent ends, however, when manifest philosophical errors result from the spelling-out of the implications of this position.

Perhaps surprisingly, St. Bonaventure spends the larger part of his *Respondeo* defending the feasible aspects of an Aristotelian position that contends that the world is eternal because matter is eternal. As the Seraphic Doctor notes, “[g]iven the eternity of matter, positing an eternal world seems reasonable and intelligible.”³³ Two analogies follow to illustrate this position, namely an eternal impressing of a footprint in eternal dust and an eternal casting of a shadow given an eternal, opaque object that blocks rays emanating from an eternal source of light.³⁴ To be sure, in such a world there would be no “Creator,” for the act of creation is the production of the world out of nothing taken in the sense of an original source. Rather, as St. Bonaventure says twice in these analogies, the being behind a materially-eternal world would be merely an “Author.” Aristotle’s arguments, then, might have arrived at an “Author” of an eternal world, but never could they arrive at a “Creator” of a temporally finite world.

An obvious question comes to the fore: philosophically speaking, why should one prefer the revealed Christian position to the Aristotelian

³³Ibid., [II, 22]: Ponere autem mundum aeternum, praesupposita aeternitate materiae, rationabile videtur et intelligibile. I place emphasis on the “seems” (videtur) here because I do think St. Bonaventure is withholding full philosophical sanction of Aristotle’s arguments, for reasons that will be clear below.

³⁴Ibid., [II, 22]. St. Bonaventure seems to take the first analogy from St. Augustine’s *The City of God*, Book X, Chapter 31. Addressing the arguments of the Platonists for an eternal world, St. Augustine writes: “For as if a foot,” they say, “had been always from eternity in dust, there would always have been a print underneath it; and yet no one would doubt that this print was made by the pressure of the foot, nor that, though the one was made by the other, neither was prior to the other; so,” they say, “the world and the gods created in it have always been, their Creator always existing, and yet they were made.” (Translation from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, Series 1, Volume II [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 201). It was brought to my attention by an alert reviewer of this paper that Augustine’s analogy here, as well as the shadow analogy mentioned in St. Bonaventure’s text, can also be found in William of Auvergne’s work *De Universo*. The reviewer also thinks that William, in turn, found the analogies in the works of Avicbron. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discover all the connections between the various citations of these analogies, yet it is quite clear that such analogies were an oft-used illustration of the possibility of an eternal world.

position? To be sure, the fact that God has told us that an event of creation occurred is sufficient for the believer. But from a philosophical perspective, we must seek for more. An answer to this question is required if the solution of this *aporia* is to be thorough and integral, as we mentioned above. The reason the Christian position should be preferred, St. Bonaventure thinks, is that the Aristotelian position, which is the best alternative out there, ultimately results in certain philosophical errors. What errors result from Aristotle's eternal matter position? There seem to be a couple of possibilities. Given the eternity of the world, Aristotle would have to posit either an actual infinity of existing human souls or a finite number of existing souls. The latter alternative, combined with an Aristotelian world in which species are eternal, including mankind, would demand one of three options: the corruption of human souls, the existence of only one soul, or the transmigration of a finite number of souls. Each of these options is implausible. The first opposes the very nature of the human soul (since it is incorruptible by nature); the second opposes the fact that each man alone has one soul; and the third opposes the fact that each soul is associated with a particular body and no other.³⁵ Moreover, each of these options obliterates the possibility for heavenly bliss, a dreadful error that causes Aristotle's position to "have a bad beginning and the worst end."³⁶

But what about the possibility of an actual infinity of souls in an Aristotelian world? Why is this not a plausible philosophical solution?³⁷ This is where St. Bonaventure's solution shows a philosophical dependence upon at least one of the infinite arguments. Unlike theology, which provides a positive answer to the question of the world's production, philosophy provides, as it were, a negative answer by showing the ultimate

³⁵In the *Respondeo* itself, St. Bonaventure does not explain the difficulties with maintaining the corruptibility, oneness, or transmigration of souls. As we will see, however, he does touch upon these problems in the fifth infinite argument. See note 39 below.

³⁶In *II Sent.*, d. 1, p. 1, a.1, q. 1 [II, 22]: Unde iste error et malum habet initium et pessimum habet finem.

³⁷I am presuming here, of course, that for St. Bonaventure positing an actual infinite is troublesome. In the *Respondeo*, he simply assumes that Aristotle would want to avoid positing an actual infinite ("Ad vitandum autem infinitatem actualem . . ." *In II Sent.*, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1 [II, 23]). The assumption that an actual infinite should be avoided is also made in *Collationes in Hexaëmeron* VI.4 [V, 361]. Moreover, as we will see just below, St. Bonaventure considers the impossibility of an actual infinite to be self-evident. (See notes 31 and 39 taken together.)

implausibility of a solution that may *prima facie* seem plausible. As St. Bonaventure claims, the infinite arguments, along with the Main Argument, begin with “self-evident propositions according to reason and philosophy.”³⁸ Now, the philosophical problem with Aristotle’s materially-eternal world is that it implies an opposition to the impossibility of an actual infinity, which is the self-evident opening premise of the fifth infinite argument. The whole of this important argument runs as follows:

The fifth argument is this: It is impossible that an infinite number of things exist simultaneously. But if the world is eternal without beginning, and since it does not exist without man—for in some sense all things exist for the sake of man—and since each man survives only for a finite time, then there would have existed an infinite number of men. Furthermore, there would have existed just as many souls as men. Hence, there would have existed an infinite number of souls. Yet there would exist now as many souls as would have existed previously, because souls are incorruptible forms. Hence, there would exist now an infinite number of souls.³⁹

³⁸See note 31.

³⁹*In II Sent.*, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1 [II, 21-22]: Quinta est ista. Impossibile est infinita simul esse; sed si mundus est aeternus sine principio, cum non sit sine homine—propter hominem enim sunt quodam modo omnia—et homo duret finito tempore: ergo infiniti homines fuerunt. Sed quot fuerunt homines, tot animae rationales: ergo infinitae animae fuerunt. Sed quot animae fuerunt, tot sunt, quia sunt formae incorruptibiles: ergo infinitae animae sunt.

At the conclusion of his most recent article (“St. Bonaventure and the Demonstrability of a Temporal Beginning: A Reply to Richard Davis,” 235-6), Baldner lists four propositions that must be necessarily true for this fifth infinite argument to be demonstrative. He says two of the four propositions are certainly necessary in St. Bonaventure’s eyes, whereas the status of the other two is dubious. The dubious ones are the following: “The species man would always have existed in an eternal world,” and “There cannot be an actual infinity of spiritual substances.” I think that St. Bonaventure holds the second of these to be necessary since (1) in the *Respondeo* and in other works he simply assumes that Aristotle must avoid it (see note 37 above) and (2) he indicates that the impossibility of an actual infinite is self-evident, given the status of the opening premise of all the infinity arguments, including that of the fifth, namely, “Impossibile est infinita simul esse.” The remaining problem, then, seems to be whether mankind would have always existed in an eternal world or not. Certainly it seems that such would be the case in an Aristotelian world. Nevertheless, the necessity of this is quite doubtful. It is this small opening that perhaps allows there to be for St. Bonaventure another possible, even if unlikely, philosophically acceptable solution to this problem besides the Christian solution.

This fifth argument, then, holds the key to the final dismissal of the Aristotelian position, for in it not only does St. Bonaventure completely deny the possibility of an actual infinite, but he also provides brief indications as to why all other conceivable paths to avoid an actual infinity—the corruptibility of souls, the possibility of the transmigration of souls, and the oneness of all souls—are also philosophically implausible.⁴⁰

Now we begin to see the remarkable structure of this *quaestio*. The objections and replies couch the principal arguments with which St. Bonaventure is concerned. In the center of the *quaestio* is the Main Argument. This is preceded by five arguments concerning the infinite, the last of which offers the requisite support for a complete philosophical refutation of the eternal world position. But the need for these arguments becomes clear only after reading the *Respondeo* that follows the Main Argument. There St. Bonaventure charitably defends the Philosopher to the best of his ability but in the end must concede reason's limits in offering a tenable solution within the framework of an eternal world. Hence, St. Bonaventure not only offers the Christian answer as a reasonable answer, but further, by exposing the inability of any previous philosopher to arrive at a wholly-defensible solution, he offers the Christian answer as the only likely and plausible answer. Aristotle, the greatest of philosophers, provides a solution that is *per se* reasonable and intelligible;⁴¹ yet even this solution falls prey to reason's analysis when its hidden implications are brought to light. Aristotle's solution is, one might say, *per*

If St. Bonaventure, however, is viewing philosophy from a sort of historical perspective (that is, insofar as it is the summation of man's past and present thinking about the world), then perhaps he could say that philosophy necessarily falls short with regard to the eternal world question, especially since he thinks that the proof of a Creator (in the fullest sense of the word) neither was nor can be obtained by philosophy, but must rely on God's self-disclosure in Scripture.

⁴⁰Ibid., [II, 21-22]: [Animae] sunt formae incorruptibiles. . . . Si tu dicas propter hoc, quod circulatio est in animabus, vel quod una anima est in omnibus hominibus; primum est error in philosophia, quia, ut vult Philosophus, "proprius actus est in propria materia": ergo non potest anima, quae fuit perfectio unius, esse perfectio alterius, etiam secundum Philosophum. Secundum etiam magis est erroneum, quia multo magis minus una est anima omnium.

⁴¹This is why, the Seraphic Doctor can say that Aristotle's position is "verum" and that "rationes eius sumtae a motu et tempore sunt efficaces" (Ibid., [II, 23]). Even so, Aristotle's position necessarily leads to error because he lacks the illumination of the inspired *Verbum Domini*.

accidens unreasonable. In this way, philosophy reveals itself as inadequate to resolve this *aporia*.

In summary, then, St. Bonaventure's answer to the eternal world question is a theological argument that demands philosophical reasoning to reveal the shortcomings of any other competing answer. As noted at the outset of this paper, recognizing this twofold dependency on Revelation and on natural reason is necessary for a thorough and integral reading of St. Bonaventure's solution. One can only be impressed by the rigorous beauty of this *quaestio*. It is little wonder that it became one of the many *loci classici* written by the Seraphic Doctor and pored over by the later Scholastics.

VI.

Was St. Bonaventure Right? St. Bonaventure, of course, was not the last to deal with the possibility of an eternal world. In fact, many who came after him endeavored to show the inadequacies of his arguments. Hence, we conclude this paper by contrasting the Bonaventuran solution with some aspects of St. Thomas's solution, utilizing a few intriguing texts from the latter's late treatise *De aeternitate mundi*, in which he affords what seem to be his last thoughts on this *aporia*. Although St. Thomas may not have been responding directly to St. Bonaventure's opinions, many of his arguments are quite applicable to the Seraphic Doctor's view. We will briefly present below how St. Thomas treats both the positive theological answer and the negative philosophical answer given by St. Bonaventure.

Let us look first at St. Thomas's treatment of the positive theological answer given by St. Bonaventure. As we saw above, St. Bonaventure thinks that, in the end, only Revelation provides a wholly reasonable solution to the eternal-world question. St. Thomas, on the other hand, wants to (and thinks he can) answer the question on purely philosophical grounds. The first point to be gleaned from St. Thomas's *De aeternitate mundi* is that the central issue at stake is "whether being created by God and not having a beginning of duration are incoherent with each other or not."⁴² St. Thomas does think it to be a reasonable possibility that a thing

⁴²St. Thomas, *De aeternitate mundi* (hereafter *Dam*) (found in *Sancti Thomae Opera Omnia* [Leonine Edition], Vol. XLIII, pp. 85-89) [86]: In hoc ergo tota consistit quaestio, utrum esse creatum a Deo secundum totam substantiam et non habere durationis principium,

be both created out of nothing and beginningless. As we saw above, St. Bonaventure thoroughly rejects this possibility. If something is produced from nothing, the Seraphic Doctor asserts, then it cannot be eternal, and vice versa. The Angelic Doctor retorts by maintaining that there is no conceptual incoherency (*repugnantia intellectuum*) in thinking of a created, eternal world.⁴³ His argument depends on the key premise that "no cause producing its effect instantaneously necessarily precedes its effect in duration."⁴⁴ We arrive at this truth through induction. It is only because we are accustomed to consider causes that act through motion, which always evidence a priority in duration on the part of the mover, that we have difficulty accepting the fact that a cause need not precede its effect temporally. Yet after we gather enough experience, we arrive at this truth more easily.⁴⁵ Hence, in the Angelic Doctor's view, there are three philosophical possibilities: a world created in time out of nothing, an eternal matter position (as St. Bonaventure reads Aristotle), and an eternal world created out of nothing. This last option was absent from St. Bonaventure's account since, in his view, being created entails a finite past. By excising this feature from natural reason's grasp of the *ratio creaturae*, St. Thomas bestows on philosophy the ability to arrive at the genuine

repugnant ad invicem, vel non. (The page number of the Leonine Edition will be given in brackets for all citations from this treatise.)

⁴³St. Thomas is rather insistent about this lack of a *repugnantia intellectuum* in a world's being both eternal and created out of nothing. In fact, St. Thomas displays a rare sarcasm toward those who hold that such an incoherency exists. He concludes his arguments against their position by saying: "... ergo illi qui tam subtiliter eam [praedictam repugnantiam intellectuum] percipiunt soli sunt homines, et cum illis oritur sapientia." (*Dam* [88]) Harsh words indeed, especially from a saint! One wonders what drove St. Thomas to make such an uncharacteristic comment. At least two reasons come to mind. First, St. Thomas abhors any limits placed on God's omnipotence; yet anyone who, knowingly or unknowingly, presents a genuine possibility as impossible necessarily limits the Almighty's power. Second, he may think that man himself loses out intellectually when he excludes as impossible things God really could have done. For by knowing what God actually chose over against what He did not choose but could have chosen, man better understands the present world and what God wants to teach him through His creative decisions.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, [86]: ... nulla causa producens effectum suum subito necessario precedit duratione effectum suum.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, [86-87]: Repugnat in causis producentibus per motum effectus suos, quia oportet quod principium motus precedat finem eius. Et quia homines sunt assueti considerare huiusmodi factiones que sunt per motus, ideo non facile capiunt quod causa agens duratione effectum suum non precedat; et inde est quod multorum inexperti ad pauca respicientes facile enuntiant.

possibility of a beginningless world created out of nothing.⁴⁶ The Angelic Doctor, of course, upholds the Christian doctrine of creation out of nothing in time, yet he shifts the debate by not having to refer to Revelation in order to find a wholly plausible answer. In other words, St. Thomas recognizes that coherent positive answers to the eternal world question can be found in philosophy, even if philosophy cannot provide a definitive solution.

To conclude, we should consider St. Thomas's last thoughts (or reservations, as we will see) concerning actual infinities, the impossibility of which provides essential support for St. Bonaventure's negative philosophical answer, that is, his total rejection of the seemingly-plausible Aristotelian solution by showing its erroneous implications. St. Thomas takes up this difficulty near the end of his treatise. After showing that many of the great minds, including authorities like Boethius and St. Augustine, did not see any incoherence in an eternal world position, St. Thomas concludes by saying:

[Those men who contend against the possibility of an eternal world] bring forth in their defense arguments that the philosophers have touched upon and solved. Among these, a more difficult one deals with an infinite number of souls. For if the world always existed, then there would necessarily exist right now an infinite number of souls. But this argument is not to the point, for God could have made the world without men and without souls. Moreover, He could have made men at the point when he did make them, even if He had made the whole rest of the

⁴⁶For a fuller development of the uniqueness of Aquinas's position and his reading of the philosophers, see Timothy B. Noone's "The Originality of St. Thomas's Position on the Philosophers and Creation," *The Thomist* 60, (1996): 275-300. As Noone notes, for St. Thomas "[t]he heart of creation is total ontological dependence, not temporal finitude" (299). This change in perspective significantly altered the entire debate of the eternal world question in the late Middle Ages. The Angelic Doctor is well aware that this is not the way we look at creation from the perspective of faith. Creation from the perspective of faith clearly includes a beginning in time. St. Thomas recognizes these two ways of looking at creation, from a purely philosophical perspective and from a perspective of faith, in *De potentia* 3.14 ad 8 in oppositum: "[D]e ratione aeterni est non habere durationis principium; de ratione vero creationis habere principium originis, non autem durationis; nisi accipiendo creationem ut accipit fides."

world from eternity. In this case, after [quitting their] bodies, an infinite number of souls would not remain. And besides, up to now *it has not been demonstrated that God cannot make it be that an actual infinite number of things exist.*⁴⁷

This last statement leaves the philosopher pondering. Is it possible that God create an actual infinite number of things?⁴⁸ Or is such an idea absurd? Does it imply manifest contradictions? Is its absurdity self-evident, as St. Bonaventure supposes? St. Thomas does not think so; for if its absurdity were self-evident, then it certainly would not need to be demonstrated, as he says it does.

Adherents to the Bonaventurian view, however, have put forth “justifications” for their position against the possibility of an actual infinity. We do not call them “demonstrations,” because an actual infinite number of things is seen by them to be internally incoherent, and thus its impossibility is seen as self-evident. From this point of view, then, the best one can do is imitate St. Bonaventure’s *reductiones ad absurdum* and attempt to show the unhappy consequences of presuming the possibility of an infinite number of things existing at once. Bernardino Bonansea, in an attempt to justify the Seraphic Doctor’s position, offers an opinion that seems to sum up the objections against an actual infinity based on its self-evident incoherency:

I must say that I find it difficult to accept the idea of a multitude of distinct, individualized, and therefore determined beings, that would not be able to be measured in terms of numerical units. If an infinite material body cannot exist because its constitutive

⁴⁷*Dam* [89]: Addunt etiam rationes pro se, quas etiam philosophi tetigerunt et eas soluerunt, inter quas illa est difficilior que est de infinitate animarum: quia si mundus semper fuit, necesse est modo infinitas animas esse. Sed hec ratio non est ad propositum; quia Deus mundum facere potuit sine hominibus et animabus, vel tunc homines facere quando fecit, etiam si totum mundum fecisset ab eterno: et sic non remanerent post corpora anime infinite. Et preterea non est adhuc demonstratum quod Deus non possit facere ut sint infinita actu. (Emphasis added in translation)

⁴⁸St. Thomas seems to answer this question in the negative in various places, especially in *ST* I.7.4. Given the fact, however, that *Dam* is a later work, we can see the doubt posed here as St. Thomas’s reconsideration of an issue with which he struggled his whole life.

elements are all limited and well determined and the resulting compound cannot be of a different nature than the elements themselves ... then I fail to see how an infinite multitude of equally limited and distinct beings (whether material or spiritual is irrelevant) could possibly exist in concrete reality.⁴⁹

The basic argument that the Thomist must face, then, seems to be this: there cannot be an infinite number of things because each unit in the group is countable and thus the entire group is countable.

Near the end of his *De aeternitate mundi* St. Thomas seems to point out the question-begging character of justifications like this one by Bonansea. This justification simply presupposes that all multitudes of things are countable, that is, finite. It then tries to persuade by using principles applicable to finite numbers.⁵⁰ But why is there a presumption that all multitudes are finite? St. Thomas is simply saying that such a presumption cannot be made; it must be demonstrated. Until this is done, an actual infinite must still be considered a genuine possibility.⁵¹ St. Thomas no doubt saw the difficulty of conceiving an actual infinite or an uncountable multitude, yet he astutely realized the important fact that inconceivability by a mere human mind does not entail internal incoherency. To be sure, Bonansea's justification above points out quite well the difficulty of conceiving an infinite multitude, yet he does not arrive at any conceptual incoherency in the notion itself. One can show the self-contradiction of "square circle" through the definitions of "square" and "circle"; yet, no matter how hard it is to envision, one cannot show that the conceptual elements of actual infinite multitude are internally incoherent through their

⁴⁹Bernardino Bonansea, O.F.M., "The Question of an Eternal World in the Teaching of St. Bonaventure," *Franciscan Studies* 34 (1974): 7-33. This remark is found on page 21.

⁵⁰Francis Kovach ("The Question of the Eternity of the World in St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas," 161-62) seems to make a similar mistake by presuming that the rules of addition applicable to finite numbers are also applicable to infinite sets. Fernand Van Steenburghen ("Saint Bonaventure contre l'éternité du monde," 271-76) also seems to presume the applicability of normal arithmetical rules to infinite numbers. St. Bonaventure himself uses such reasoning in his first infinity argument, which begins, "Impossible est infinito addi" (*In II Sent.*, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2 [II, 20]).

⁵¹For arguments along these lines, see P. M. Périer's "A propos du Nombre infini," *Revue pratique d'apologetique* 27 (1919): 739-57; and A.-D. Sertillanges' *L'Idée de Création et ses Retentissements en Philosophie* (Paris: Aubier, 1945), 5-42.

definitions. In short, incoherency entails inconceivability, but inconceivability does not entail incoherency.

In fact, modern set theory takes off exactly at this point, as seen in the groundbreaking work of Georg Cantor.⁵² Cantor commences his set theory with the other presumption, that infinite sets are indeed possible, and then begins to work out the consequences. Among other things, Cantor discovers that there are species of infinite sets, just as there are species of finite numbers. Moreover, he makes a clear distinction between the nature of the elements composing a set and the nature of the set itself. He also sees that the rules of basic arithmetical functions (addition, multiplication, etc.) used in finite sets are not applicable to infinite sets; an infinite set Z can be added to, but it will remain “numerically” the same (that is, $Z + 1 = Z$).⁵³ Also, an ordered relation between Z and some other infinite set N can exist, even though both sets are infinite and equivalent. (Equivalency means that for every member of Z there can be found a corresponding member in N .) For example, if Z is the set of all natural numbers and N the set of all even natural numbers, the sets are still equivalent since Z can be mapped on to N through the function $y = 2x$. For every member of Z , then, there is a corresponding member of N , although at first sight Z appears to have twice as many members as N , since Z is composed of both even and odd numbers, whereas N includes only even numbers. Such discoveries present difficulties for the ostensibly self-evident claims that open St. Bonaventure's infinite arguments, such as “it is impossible to add to the infinite” and “an infinite number of things cannot be ordered.”⁵⁴ But the fundamental disagreement with St. Bonaventure is seeing actual infinite sets as a genuine possibility in the real. Perhaps St. Thomas vaguely glimpsed these discoveries from afar when he challenged the presumed impossibility of an actual infinite number of things existing at once. At the very least, he realized that man's inability to grasp an actual infinite entails neither its internal incoherency nor its impossibility.

⁵²For a good presentation of the basic principles behind Cantor's work and the notion of infinite sets, see Joseph Breuer's *Introduction to the Theory of Sets*, trans. Howard F. Fehr (Edgewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1958).

⁵³It is more accurate to say that the “cardinality” of the new set is the same as the first.

⁵⁴*In II Sent.*, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2 [II, 20-21]. The proposed self-evident premise of St. Bonaventure's first infinity argument is: *Impossibile est infinito addi*. That of his second infinity argument is: *Impossibile est infinita ordinari*.

If an actual infinite is a genuine possibility, then philosophy can be saved and need not fall into error on this point. Thus, it seems that St. Bonaventure's position needs a corrective here from the Angelic Doctor. The Seraphic Doctor is spelling out the more traditional position (at least for the medievals), one that focuses on the limited nature of the creature as a temporal being rather than on its utter dependence on God for its moment-to-moment existence. On the other hand, St. Thomas's metaphysics and his masterful work on creation, which shifted the entire Scholastic debate of this question, conceived of a wholly-transcendent yet intimate Creator whose possibilities far surpass what we can ever imagine. For St. Thomas, then, the philosopher must tread carefully when spelling out the limits of what God can do. Indeed, God's possibilities often call for a serious stretching of the mind, as evidenced by his brief consideration of the prospects for an actual infinite. Since the time of these two Saints, most thinkers have taken the Thomistic path, for not only does it glorify the Creator, upon whose love all men depend, but it also elevates man, whose love of God urges him to grow in knowledge and contemplation of the Almighty and His infinite possibilities.⁵⁵

The Catholic University of America
Washington, DC

⁵⁵ I would like to thank Dr. Timothy Noone for his helpful critique of this paper and for his ever-shining example of Catholic scholarship. Also, I would like to give special thanks to Miss Teresa Heim for her loving patience with me.