New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12603

Creation in Aquinas: *ex nihilo* or *ex deo*?

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Abstract

While the Christian emphasis on creation as a free and gracious gift is often juxtaposed with Neoplatonic notions of world-production as the emanation of being from the First Cause, I argue in this essay that there is no obvious contradiction between the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and emanation *ex deo* in Aquinas's thought. This is partly because the Christian teaching that the world is created 'from nothing' was never intended to deny that it was from God, but to deny that it was made from anything other than God. By drawing on the *Liber de Causis* to support his explanation of creation as the emanation of all being from the universal cause, Aquinas provides us with a way to foreground a doctrine which belongs to the foundations of Christian faith but which rarely receives sufficient attention in systematic theology – namely, the omnipresence of the God who is *in* everything.

Keywords

Creation ex nihilo, Emanation ex deo, Aquinas, Neoplatonism, Liber de Causis

Production *ex materia* versus creation *ex nihilo* in Christian thought

The force of the Christian doctrine of creation *from nothing* can best be understood in contrast with philosophical systems which explain the world as the product of some sort of *pre-existent* cause.[1] Indeed, some scholars put this point more strongly: that creation *ex nihilo* was developed as an ontological doctrine *precisely* as an antithesis to the idea of world-formation from eternal matter.[2] Whether in the

[1] Simon Oliver, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 36-38.

[2] Gerhard May, *Creation Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*. Translated by A.S. Worrall, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), xii.

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12603 Published online by Cambridge University Press

shape of primordial material elements in the Pre-Socratics, intelligible Ideas in Plato, or prime matter in Aristotle, a marked preference for some analogue of production *ex materia* had been established in Greek philosophy long before Christian theologians began to contemplate the kind of causality involved in creation.[3] Indeed, some early Christian Fathers, shaped by Platonic cosmogonies, also regarded creation primarily as the ordering of unformed matter and accepted, along with Greek thinkers at least as far back as Parmenides, that being does not arise from non-being (*ex nihilo nihil fit*).[4]

Influential Christian thinkers, such as Irenaeus (130-202 CE), Theophilus of Antioch (d.183-185 CE), and Origen (184-253 CE), however, gradually began to develop a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* in opposition to these widely-accepted notions of the production of the world *ex materia*. Indeed, Christian theology and later (i.e. 'neo') Platonism came close to each other in late Antiquity precisely on this point – viz. the denial of pre-existing matter. Both Christian and pagan (Neoplatonist) thinkers criticised the sort of cosmogony found in Plato's *Timaeus* (i.e. that the demiurge or creator god works with already existent materials) because they saw such productivity as placing limitations on the divine power.[5] Motivated by a recognition of the sheer contingency of existence (i.e. the fact that the world cannot provide the sufficient reason for its own existence) and of the unlimited power of the sovereign God, key figures in the early and medieval Church, such as Augustine, Boethius, and Anselm followed this lead and established creation *ex nihilo* as the authoritative Christian understanding of originative causality. According to a standard reading of the doctrine,

> …creation is a thrusting into being, so to speak, of a *reality* not existing qua being hitherto…of being that had not pre-existed or remained hidden qua being before the creative act (except in the loose and related senses of being objectively possible to God and existing in him as seminal ideas). Thus, creation, in this understanding, is not an emanation

[3] May (Ibid, 39) suggests that the question of the creation of the world was not focused on seriously by Christian thinkers until well into the second century.

[4] E.g. Clement and Justin, who both accepted the existence of eternal unformed matter. Cf. Andrzej Maryniarczyk, 'Philosophical Creationism: Thomas Aquinas' Metaphysics of Creatio Ex Nihilo', *Studia Gilsoniana* 5 (2016): 217–68 (here, 231) and May (Ibid, 179).

[5] Theo Kobusch, *Selbstwerdung und Personalität: Spätantike Philosophie und ihr Einfluss auf die Moderne.* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 274-5. Some scholars attribute these sorts of conceptual resonances to the direct influences of Christianity and Neoplatonism on each other, but I do not intend to enter into these debates here. For more on this, see R. Chiaradonna, 'Plotinus' account of demiurgic causation and its philosophical background' in Anna Marmodoro and Brian D. Prince, eds., *Causation and Creation in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 31-51, and H. Tarrant, 'Platonism before Plotinus' in Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, Vol. I, online version (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 63-99.

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> or transformation of pre-existing reality, but, by the power of God, the emergence of something real from the void.[6]

Before we too quickly assume, however, that the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is the paradigmatic example of a metaphysics of causality in which the effect (the world) is *not* ontologically existent in its cause and that, therefore, creation *ex nihilo* must be diametrically opposed to any sort of notion of emanation *ex deo*, we would do well to remember that disjunctive binaries tend to divert attention away from the subtler conceptual convergences and disagreements in seemingly opposed systems by forcing their basic premises into preconceived schemas. The problems occur when we stop at the schemas and forget the Aristotelian principle (used also by Thomas) that *eadem est scientia oppositorum* – affirmations and their corresponding negations only make sense against some kind of shared background. In this case, I want to suggest, somewhat provocatively, that creation *ex nihilo* – by categorically ruling out the possibility of any-thing other than God being the cause of the world – becomes synonymous with emanation *ex deo*.

Aquinas's understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*

The Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* clearly teaches that there is no pre-existent entity *other than God* out of which the world is produced (whether atoms, water, ideas, or matter, to mention a few of the candidates ruled out by creation *ex nihilo*). Indeed, it was precisely in opposition to this sort of interpretation of originative causality in Greek philosophy that *ex nihilo* was formulated – i.e. to insist that the creation of the world was 'not-from-some-thing'. This point is made by Augustine and Anselm,[7] and is abundantly clear in Aquinas, as the following passages show:

> Those who posit an eternal world would say that the world is made by God from nothing, not because it was made after nothing (which is how we understand the term 'creation'), but because it was not made from something.[8]

> If someone holds that something besides God could have always existed, in the sense that there could be something always existing and yet not made by God, then we differ with him: such an abominable error is

[6] Julius J. Lipner, 'The Christian and Vedāntic Theories of Originative Causality: A Study in Transcendence and Immanence', *Philosophy East and West* 28 (1978): 53–68 (here, 54, with original emphasis).

[7] Cf. *Monologion* 8.

[8] ST.I.46.2.2. Cf. also, SCG II.16: '*Deus in esse res produxit ex nullo praeexistente sicut ex materia*'.

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> contrary not only to the faith but also to the teachings of the philosophers, who confess and prove that everything that in any way exists cannot exist unless it be caused by him who supremely and most truly has existence.[9]

In other words, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, as understood by Aquinas (and all orthodox Christian theologians) is couched in terms more of a denial than an affirmation. It does not pretend to explain precisely *how* the world came into being, but merely rules out certain doctrinal errors – in particular, that of thinking that God produced the world from some-thing.[10] The danger of forgetting this apophatic nature of the doctrine is that 'nothingness' can become a rarefied kind of some*thing*, an essentialised substratum 'out of which' God then makes, fashions, or crafts the world – which is precisely the kind of dualistic thinking between God and not-God in the creative process that the doctrine was originally formulated to reject.[11] A. Maryniarczyk is correct in saying that

> …the theory of *creatio ex nihilo* does not mean that being was called into existence "out of non-being," but that the Creator is the cause of everything that is – form, matter, properties, and substance – and that nothing exists apart from Him that did not come from Him. The universe was and is a work of creation (*creatio continua*).[12]

On this point, then, we can be clear: there is no-*thing* 'out of which' the world is produced. Creation, as Lipner puts it, '…is a thrusting into being, so to speak, of a *reality* not existing qua being hitherto…of being that had not pre-existed or remained hidden qua being before the creative act'.[13] In his discussion of the question of whether God could cause something that has always existed, Aquinas seems to confirm Lipner's point:

> …notice that before an angel is made, we may say, in a certain manner of speaking, that the angel cannot be made, since no passive potentiality precedes its being, for an angel is not made from pre-existing matter [*quia non praeexistit ad eius esse aliqua potentia passiva, cum non sit factus ex materia praeiacente*]. Nevertheless, God was able to make the angel, and he was able to cause the angel to be made, for God made it, and it was made.[14]

[9] Aquinas, *De Aeternitate Mundi*.

[10] Cf. Kobusch, ibid, 273: '*Die aus dem frühen Christentum stammende Formel der, Schöpfung aus Nichts*' *ist sicher als kritische Reaktion auf die platonische Vorstellung der Formung einer vorliegenden Materie zu verstehen*'.

[11] Cf. Rudi Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 154-159 on creation *ex nihilo* and participation.

[12] Maryniarczyk, ibid, 240.

[13] Lipner, ibid, 54.

[14] Aquinas, *De Aeternitate Mundi*.

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It is clear that what Aquinas is rejecting in this passage is the position that created effects (whether angels or otherwise) are made from pre-existing matter and that, prior to their creation by God they possess some kind of 'passive potentiality'. In other words, 'being made' or 'being caused' should not be understood as the pre-existence of a passive potentiality (as if the essence of a creature could 'exist' separately from its being) 'out of which' things are produced by God. Rather, Aquinas is affirming that, *notwithstanding* the absence of any-*thing* to 'work with', God is somehow able to make the angel. This is why when reading Lipner's characterisation of *creatio ex nihilo* as 'the emergence of something real from the void'[15] we must be careful not to imagine 'the void' itself as a subtle abyss of passive potentiality existing as a dialectical nothingness with respect to or alongside God. The 'void' here – and more generally 'nothingness' – signals not an ontic space over and above God, or in addition to God, but merely a logical space which has to be invoked by human categorical understanding to make contrastive sense of the *nihil* in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.[16]

Equally crucially, Aquinas cannot be affirming that created effects arise from pure non-dialectical nothingness either, for, if he were to allow for that, none of his Five Ways of demonstrating the existence of God could get off the ground (for if something could come from sheer nothingness, there would be no need to invoke a first mover or first cause). It is not quite as clear-cut, then, as Simon Oliver's seemingly common-sense contention makes it sound, that creation *ex nihilo* '…clearly contradicts the classical philosophical maxim first articulated by Parmenides…*ex nihilo, nihil fit*'.[17] Admittedly, Aquinas does suggest that this 'common opinion' of ancient philosophers (viz. *ex nihilo nihil fit*) '…has no place in the first emanation from the universal principle of things',[18] but, nonetheless, in his 3rd Way, Aquinas makes his rejection of creation from 'pure' nothingness abundantly clear:

> …if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence [*nihil fuit in rebus*]. 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 [*quia quod non est, non incipit esse nisi per aliquid quod est*]. 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

[15] Lipner, ibid, 54.

[16] Cf. Gavin Hyman, 'Augustine on the 'nihil': an interrogation', *Journal for Culture and Religious Theory* 9.1 (Winter 2008): 35-49 – here, 41: '…the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* depends on the "nihil" being conceived literally as nothing, as no form of substance or quasi-substance, and as having no ontological referent whatsoever'.

[17] Oliver, ibid, 36.

[18] ST.I.45.2, ad.1.

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> existence—which is absurd [*si igitur nihil fuit ens, impossibile fuit quod aliquid inciperet esse, et sic modo nihil esset, quod patet esse falsum*].[19]

Aquinas's solution to this problem, of course, is that there never was a time when there was sheer *nothingness* understood as complete absence of being. The existence of the contingent order now (or at any point) can only be explained by the sustaining presence of a necessarily existent cause – and that, as Aquinas pithily concludes, is what all people call 'God'. On closer inspection, then, we can see that the *nihil* in the Christian doctrine of creation is more mysterious than it first appears: it must not be understood as a dialectically structured 'nothingness' which precedes some-one-thing (the sort of 'passive potentiality' we have seen Aquinas reject), let alone as a kind of physical/spatial nothingness, but it is also difficult to render it as sheer absence of being, as well.[20] The *nihil* seems to dissolve into a merely logical or grammatical constellation of Christian teachings, the essence of which is that the world is non-existent without and but for God even though God does not become ontologically diffused into or dispersed across the world.

What kind of cause is God?

We have seen that the primary meaning of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was precisely the denial of ontological dualisms – *non ex materia sed ex nihilo* – and the corresponding affirmation of the non-contrastive transcendence of God over every sort of dependence and limitation.[21] This sets Christian teaching on originative causality apart from the mainstream Greek philosophical traditions which tended to understand creation as a process dependent upon some sort of pre-existent reality alongside of and extraneous to God (at least up until the Middle Platonist period, in any case). Divine causality in Christian theology is more radical as it answers the question of why there is any-*thing* at all. God is not merely the efficient cause of the world because '…according to Aquinas, God is not simply a being among other beings, albeit of the most perfect kind. He is Being Itself (*ipsum esse per se subsistens*),

[19] ST.I.2.3. Cf. also SCG II.34.6: '…some people say that created things must always have existed; in so saying they contradict the Catholic faith, which affirms that *nothing besides God* has always existed [*nihil praeter Deum semper fuisse*], but that all things, save the one eternal God, have had a beginning' (my emphasis).

[20] ST.I.45.1, ad.3.

[21] L. Gilkey, 'Creation, Being, and Nonbeing' in Burrell and McGinn, eds., *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 226. See also Ian A McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 19 n.65.

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and as such He comprises in himself the fullness of being'.[22] This is why when created effects are produced, there are more beings but not more Being (*plura entia sed non plus esse*), since nothing can be added to God who is, as Anselm describes God, 'that than which a greater cannot be thought'. Oliver, too, repeatedly insists that creation should not be understood as the change from there being one thing (God) to there being two things (God + world).[23]

This theme is potentially problematic for a Christian theologian, though, because if the world (as effect) emerges neither from sheer nothingness (as we see in Thomas's 3rd Way) nor from any pre-existent some-thing, it seems that the world must emerge *ex deo* – i.e. from God, the only possible cause, the One-without-a-second, and that the world is, therefore, 'of one being' with God.[24] Aquinas seems to reject this conclusion when, for example, he castigates David of Dinant for teaching the 'absurd thesis' that God is prime matter.[25] His objection is that God cannot enter into composition with anything, either as a formal or as a material principle since this compresence would impinge on God's simplicity and immutability. As long as we are careful, however, not to assume that a material cause has to be some kind of physical 'stuff', there seems to be no reason why we cannot speak of God being the 'material cause' of the world: i.e., the innermost Cause that provides the whole substantial reality of the creature.[26] The creature as created, Aquinas writes, is not the essence of God but its essence is from God (*non est ex essentia Dei, sed est ex Deo essentia*).[27]

Indeed, Etienne Gilson has pointed out that few formulations occur more often in Aquinas's writings than *omne agens agit sibi simile* (causes can only produce effects which are similar to themselves).[28] This does not mean that there is necessarily a physical likeness between effect and cause, but that the power to produce the effect must be present within the cause – which Aquinas takes to mean the same

[22] Rudi te Velde, 'God and the Language of Participation' in Harm Goris, Herwi Rikhof, and Henk Schoot, eds., *Divine Transcendence and Immanence in the Work of Thomas Aquinas*, (Leuven - Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2009), 20.

[23] Oliver, ibid, 48, 62, 72.

[24] Kobusch, ibid, 277, describes this question of whether creation is 'out of God' or 'out of nothing' as, at first sight, one of the key differences between Neoplatonic and early Christian understandings of creation. He argues, however, (as I do) that the *prima facie* difference between creation *ex deo* and creation *ex nihilo* dissolves under closer scrutiny.

[25] ST I.3.8.

[26] See, e.g., ST.I.13.11 where Aquinas approvingly cites St John Damascene (De Fide Orth. i): 'HE WHO IS, is the principal of all names applied to God; for comprehending all in itself, it contains existence itself as an infinite and indeterminate sea of substance'.

[27] ST I.41.3.2.

[28] Etienne Gilson, *L'Esprit de la Philosophie Médiévale* (Paris: Vrin, 1989), 97. For instances of this principle in Aquinas, see, for example: *In III Sent*. 23.3.1.1; De Pot. 2.2; SCG II.21.8; ST I.5.3, 45.6.

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as saying that the effect, in an ontological sense, is pre-contained in or always already exists in its cause:

> As every agent causes something similar to itself, the effect of the agent must necessarily in some way be in the agent.[29]

> The effects proceed from the efficient cause insofar as they pre-exist in it, as every agent causes something similar to itself.[30]

> The effect pre-exists virtually in the efficient cause.[31]

These passages seem to suggest, then, that Aquinas's understanding of causality is a variation on creation *ex deo*. It might be objected, however, that God is not a cause like any other and that divine originative causality is *sui generis* – such that the principle *omne agens agit sibi simile* cannot be applied to the God-world relation. This just does not seem to be applicable to Aquinas, though. Indeed, his whole justification for *theo-logia* rests on the principle that created effects (viz. the world) resemble their supreme cause (God); we would simply not be justified in speaking about God at all if there were no such *analogia entis*.[32] In other words, it is because God is – in some sense (which I will clarify in the following section) – entitatively immanent in all created effects that we can say anything at all about God. This style of immanence does not obliterate the ontological distinction between creatures and Creator, but, in fact, relies upon it and reinforces it – for it is precisely the *non*-contrastive nature of the distinction which allows God, as cause, to be both transcendent to *and* immanent to the world. Far from being an exception to the rule, the God-world relation is *the* most important example of the principle *omne agens agit sibi simile* because God is *the* primary cause and, as such, produces effects which analogically resemble God.[33] It is only a short logical step from here (if any kind of step at all) to affirm that all created effects (viz. the world) must be pre-contained in their supreme cause (God) or, to put it in the slightly more daring terms not unknown to some medieval Christian mystics, that the world exists 'in' God. Effects cannot emerge out of sheer nothingness, and *creatio ex nihilo* insists that the world does not come from some-one-thing either: it can, therefore, only come from God. It seems that *creatio ex nihilo* is synonymous with *creatio ex deo*.

[29] *Commentum in IV libros Sententiarum*, lib. IV, dist.1, qu.1, art.4, ad 4: '*…quia omne agens agit sibi simile, ideo effectus agentis oportet quod aliquo modo sit in agente*'.

[30] ST I.19.4: '*Secundum hoc enim effectus procedunt a causa agente, secundum quod praeexistunt in ea, quia omne agens agit sibi simile*'.

[31] ST I.4.2: '*Effectus praeexistit virtute in causa agente*'.

[32] See Te Velde, ibid, 92-93 for how this notion of causal participation in Thomas is influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius (especially his *Divine Names*). On the role of the *omne agens* principle in Aquinas, see 98-99.

[33] Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 93. See also *In I Sent*. 3.1.3, SCG I.29, ST I.4.2.

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Creation as Emanation: Aquinas and Neoplatonism

Aquinas's formulation of the doctrine of creation was a thoroughly interreligious exercise, influenced by Greek, Jewish, and Islamic philosophical thinking.[34] A key metaphysical question within these medieval Abrahamic contexts was how to conceive of the relation of God to the universe if the universe was eternal, as it had been held to be by the majority of Greek thinkers, including Plato and Aristotle. Islamic thinkers like Al Farabi (875-930) and Avicenna (980-1037) who accepted this picture of the eternal world but refused to see the world as somehow existing independently 'alongside' God explained creation in terms of an eternal overflowing or 'emanation' out of God – an ontological metaphor influenced by the work of Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus (204/5-270) and Proclus (412-485).[35] Others, such as Al Ghazali (1058-1111) and Maimonides (1135-1204), through whom Aquinas learned of these debates, argued that an eternal world was the antithesis of a created world and rejected the concept of emanation as contrary to their belief in divine freedom. The problem was that creation by emanation sounded too much like a necessary 'unfolding' or 'bubbling over' of God into the world and also, in Neoplatonic schemes, tended to involve various hypostatic intermediaries in the creative process. The debate became framed disjunctively as one between *necessary* emanation and *free* creation. The reason why these debates are interesting for our dialectical situation is because thinking of creation as emanation *ex deo* seems to be a natural corollary of the sort of interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* for which I have been arguing – namely, that the effect (world) exists 'in' and is empirically distinct from, but metaphysically not-other-than, its cause (God).

While Aquinas denies that God is a material substance; that creation is effected via intermediaries; that God is changed or transformed in creating;[36] or that creation is necessary and constrained rather than free and sovereign, Aquinas sees 'creation' and 'emanation' as complementary ideas rather than as bipolar alternatives. It is worth quoting the relevant section of Aquinas's exposition of creation in full:

> As said above (I.44.2), we must consider not only the emanation of a particular being from a particular agent, but also the emanation of all being from the universal cause [*emanationem totius entis a causa*

[34] Steven E. Baldner and William E. Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies Press, 1997), 12-13, 22.

[35] For a concise overview of different metaphors of emanation in Neoplatonist and Christian thinkers, see Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 17-27.

[36] Cf. SCG II.18.2-3. 'For creation is not a change, but the very dependency of the created act of being upon the principle from which it is produced. And thus, creation is a kind of relation'.

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> *universali*], which is God; and this emanation we designate by the name of creation [*et hanc quidem emanationem designamus nomine creationis*]. Now what proceeds by particular emanation, is not presupposed to that emanation; as when a man is generated, he was not before, but man is made from 'not-man', and white from 'not-white'. Hence if the emanation of the whole universal being from the first principle be considered, it is impossible that any being should be presupposed before this emanation [*Unde, si consideretur emanatio totius entis universalis a primo principio, impossibile est quod aliquod ens praesupponatur huic emanationi*]. For nothing is the same as no being [*Idem autem est nihil quod nullum ens*]. Therefore, as the generation of a man is from the 'not-being' which is 'not-man', so creation, which is the emanation of all being, is from the 'not-being' which is 'nothing' [*ita creatio, quae est emanatio totius esse, est ex non ente quod est nihil*].[37]

Here, we see Aquinas clearly affirming that particular effects emanate from particular agents and that the world (viz. 'all being') emanates from God, the 'universal cause'. He is also careful to explain that this emanation does not mean that the world existed as distinct from God 'in' God prior to its production, any more than a particular man exists prior to his generation, for this would contradict his belief in creation *ex nihilo* – i.e., that the whole of being emanates from God, not from anything else, including something merely potential. Nevertheless, this is not an affirmation of creation from sheer nothingness either, for the power to produce the effect must exist *in* the cause. That is why man is made from 'not-man', white from 'not-white', and, more generally, being from 'not-being' (i.e. man cannot be made from 'not-tree', for example). In other words, 'prior' to creation, there simply was no being (no-*thing*) at all other than God, who, alone, had the power to produce being. This is made even clearer by Aquinas in a passage in his *De Potentia*:

> …now all created causes have one common effect which is *being,* although each one has its peculiar effect whereby they are differentiated: thus heat makes a thing *to be* hot, and a builder gives *being* to a house. Accordingly, they have this in common that they cause *being,* but they differ in that fire causes fire, and a builder causes a house. There must therefore be some cause higher than all other by virtue of which they all cause being and whose proper cause is *being*: and this cause is God [*Oportet ergo esse aliquam causam superiorem omnibus cuius virtute omnia causent esse, et eius esse sit proprius effectus. Et haec causa est Deus*]. Now the proper effect of any cause proceeds therefrom in likeness to its nature. Therefore, *being* must be the essence or nature of God [*Proprius autem effectus cuiuslibet causae procedit ab ipsa secundum similitudinem suae naturae. Oportet ergo quod hoc quod est esse, sit substantia vel natura Dei*]. For this reason, it is stated in *De Causis*

[37] ST.I.45.1.

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> (prop. ix) that none but a divine intelligence gives being, and that *being* is the first of all effects, and that nothing was created before it.[38]

Again, to emphasise, this is only teasing out the entailments of certain convictions that Aquinas holds as axiomatic: that the world cannot have emerged *ex nihilo* if this means from sheer nothingness, and that it did not emerge *ex materia* either – rather, the world emanates from God, '…for comprehending all in itself, [God] contains existence itself as an infinite and indeterminate sea of substance'.[39] Moreover, there is no reason to conclude that creating places any kind of constraint on divine freedom because it is a free act of love entirely consistent with God's nature. It is no coincidence that Aquinas's treatment of creation in the First Part of his ST follows immediately upon his extended discussion of God as Trinity (Q.27-43) because it is in seeing creation as a reflection of the inner life of God that creation can be understood both as an unmediated extension of God's nature and as entirely free.[40] Aquinas summarises much of what I have been arguing in the following passage from Q.45 on creation:

> To create is, properly speaking, to cause or produce the being of things. And as every agent produces its like [*omne agens agit sibi simile*], the principle of action can be considered from the effect of the action; for it must be fire that generates fire. And therefore, to create belongs to God according to His being, that is, His essence, which is common to the three Persons.[41]

It is instructive here to turn to the Nicene distinction between 'making' and 'begetting'. The difference between these two manners of production is that one can *make* something unlike (in fundamental nature) oneself (as, for example, a builder makes a house), whereas one can only *beget* something of the same kind (as a human begets a human). God the Son is 'eternally begotten' of (rather than created or made by) God the Father, which is why the Creed affirms that Jesus the Christ (the incarnate Son) is 'consubstantial' with the Father. The Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* seems opposed to this if we interpret it as an example of 'making' and not of 'begetting', and, from there, draw the inference that what God 'makes' is not of the same nature as God – i.e. that the world is not 'of one being' (*homoousios*) with God (or that

[38] De Pot. 7.2.

[39] John Damascene, quoted by Aquinas in ST.I.13.11.

[40] David Burrell and Ian McFarland make this point in greater detail. See Burrell in T. Weinandy, D. Keating, and J. Yocum, (eds.), *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 40-42, and McFarland, ibid, 86. For a full treatment of the issues involved, see G. Emery, *La Trinité Créatrice: Trinité et Création dans les Commentaires aux Sentences de Thomas d'Aquin et de ses Précurseurs Albert le Grand et Bonaventure* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1995).

[41] ST.I.45.6 (see Article 7 of the same question also).

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God is not entitatively immanent in it).[42] Indeed, Aquinas emphasises this very point when commenting on St Paul's Letter to the Romans, in which Paul says that 'everything there is comes from him and is caused by him and exists for him':[43]

> It should be noted that another Latin word for 'from' is *de*, which seems to suggest the same relationships; however, *de* always designates a consubstantial cause. For we say that the knife is from [*de*] the iron, but not from [*de*] the maker. Therefore, because the Son proceeds from the Father as consubstantial with Him, we say that the Son is from [*de*] the Father. But creatures do not proceed from God as consubstantial with Him; hence, they are not said to be from [*de*] Him but from [*ex*] Him [*Creaturae vero non procedunt a Deo tamquam ei consubstantiales; unde non dicuntur esse de ipso, sed solum ex ipso*].[44]

However, given Aquinas's insistence on the principle that *omne agens agit sibi simile* (which applies pre-eminently to God as the non-contrastive cause of the world) and his explicit use of the language of emanation, I would suggest, somewhat arguing with Aquinas against him, that we can also talk, in some sense, of God 'begetting' being and, therefore, of God's creating as a kind of 'begetting' in which the effect (the world) analogically shares the nature of the cause (God), but not *vice versa*. The reason we cannot speak univocally of creatures and Creator (i.e., talk of them as being 'con-substantial') is not, I would argue, because they possess two independent natures (since the creature independent of the Creator would not 'be' at all), but because:

> …every effect which is not an adequate result of the power of the efficient cause, receives the *similitude of the agent not in its full degree, but in a measure that falls short*, so that what is divided and multiplied in the effects resides in the agent simply, and in the same manner; as for example the sun by exercise of its one power produces manifold and various forms in all inferior things. In the same way, as said in the preceding article, all perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied, pre-exist in God unitedly.[45]

There *is*, in other words, an 'ontological distinction' between creatures and Creator (they are not straightforwardly 'con-substantial' as God the Son *is* con-substantial with God the Father) but it is not a distinction between two *different* ontological orders separate from or in

[42] Cf. Kobusch, ibid, 277: '*Das Christentum kennt zwar auch den Unterschied zwischen dem göttlichen Hervorbringen aus Nichts und dem Hervorbringen aus sich selbst, aber dieser Unterschied markiert die Grenze zwischen dem "Erschaffen" der Welt und der "Zeugung" des Sohnes. So ist nach den christlichen Autoren die Zeugung ein selbstursprüngliches Hervorbringen eines Gleichwesentlichen, während die Schöpfung aus Nichts ein Hervorbringen von außen her*' (*exôthen*) *darstellt*'.

[43] Romans 11.36.

[44] Aquinas, *Super Romanos* 11.5.

[45] ST.I.13.5 (my emphasis).

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competition with each other. At the same time, I am not suggesting that this conception implies that God and creatures are positioned on differently graded rungs of the *same* ontological ladder either. The distinction remains non-contrastive and asymmetrical. This is why I think that we can speak of God 'begetting' the world *in a sense*, but I would not want to push this language too far lest it sound like the world is ontologically *continuous* with God. It is not really a case of ontological *continuity* between the world and God because there are not ultimately two different and metaphysically independent realities to be continuous with each other on a shared ontic backdrop. The key to the distinction between the world and God is the world's ontological nothingness apart from God. It is this radical and non-reciprocal dependence which explains both the ontological 'distance' between the world and God, and also why the world is intelligible only if God *is* entitatively immanent in it.

It is important to notice at this stage how deeply indebted Aquinas's metaphysics of divine originative causality is to the philosophical-theological thought-worlds of Neoplatonism. This is evident not only in his use of the language and the ontology of emanation and participation, but also in his striking use of the Neoplatonic *Liber de Causis* to explain what it means to say that God is the 'cause of being'.[46] As David Burrell has noted, the strategy that this enigmatic text offered Aquinas was '…a description of that emanation in which the One first created *being* [*esse* = 'to-be'], and through this *being* everything else that is'.[47] So, in his commentary on Proposition 4 of the *Liber de Causis* ('The first of created things is being and there is nothing else created before it'), Aquinas affirms that created being is one since it is produced by God, but comes to be multiple because of the presence in it of intelligible forms.[48] This is clearly not a straightforward case of 'making' something of a different nature, since the reason why 'being' is the first created effect is because God is 'to-be' and has the power to produce this effect: 'For God himself is goodness itself and "to be" [*esse*] itself, encompassing virtually in himself the perfections of all beings'.[49] It is, however, not a straightforward case of 'begetting' either, since God 'is' in a different way to which all effects 'are', as

[46] De Pot.7.2 (above).

[47] David Burrell, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2004), xv-xvi.

[48] Commentary on *LdC* Prop.4. Aquinas also cites Pseudo-Dionysius (*Divine Names*, V) in support of his commentary. All references are to the following version: Vincent A. Guagliardo, Charles R. Hess, and Richard C. Taylor, trans., *Commentary on the Book of Causes/St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

[49] Aquinas, Commentary on *LdC* Prop.10 in Guagliardo *et al.* (1996), 76. See also Prop.18: '…the first being is at rest and the cause of causes. If it gives being to all things, then it gives it to them by way of creation. And the first life gives life to those which are under it, not by way of creation, but by way of form,' and ST.I.4.2.

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Aquinas explains by citing Pseudo-Dionysius: 'For God is not somehow existent, but he prepossesses the whole of being in himself in an absolute and uncircumscribed way'.[50] In other words, God is entitatively immanent in the world in the non-contrastive sense that Being is what all effects have in common, but there is no ontological continuity or univocity as such because each being (*ens*) only 'has' in a finite, limited, and particularised way what God unqualifiedly 'is' (*esse*): 'So, it is necessary that *the cause* be *in* the effect *in the mode* belonging to the effect and that the effect be in the cause *in the mode belonging to the cause*'.[51] The nature of divine transcendence allows God to be fully immanent in the world without being straightforwardly identical to or ontically exhausted by it. As Dionysius puts it, 'It is not that He is this and not that, but that He is all, as the cause of all'.[52] The concepts of identity and distinction between creature and Creator are mutually implicating and mutually implicated.

Conclusion – much ado about nothingness?

It is tempting to see the doctrine of creation from nothingness as inevitably drawing the Christian theologian towards an emphasis on the transcendent *otherness* of God to the world. Yet, the Christian also wants to talk of God as the God in whom 'we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). I have argued that a more nuanced understanding of the doctrine provides ample philosophical and theological grounds for a Christian to underline God's immanence to the world. If creation *ex nihilo* is taken seriously, it means precisely that God is present, at all times and in all places to all things, sustaining every contingent effect in being.

It is more helpful, therefore, to see transcendence and immanence as mutually constituting concepts, rather than to set them against each other as bipolar alternatives. While the characteristic imageries of transcendence involve the dimension of 'height' and those of immanence the dimension of 'depth', we should keep in mind that neither dimension applies, strictly speaking, to God who is not localisable as either *here* or *there*. Indeed, it is precisely *because* God is understood to be transcendent to creatures in a non-contrastive sense in Christian theology that God can also be said to be intimately present to and in them – in the way that, according to the Chalcedonian definition,

[50] Aquinas, Commentary on *LdC* Prop.3 in Guagliardo *et al.* (1996), 23, (citing *Divine Names*, V.4).

[51] Aquinas, Commentary on *LdC* Prop.12 in Guagliardo *et al.* (1996), 90. See also Prop.24 (Guagliardo, 137).

[52] *Divine Names* V, cited by Aquinas in *ST*.I.4.2. resp.

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divine and human natures co-exist in the undivided person of Jesus the Christ without separation or confusion.

It might be objected that introducing the doctrine of incarnation into this discussion is a red herring – that it has unique application and that the ontological non-difference between God the Father and God the Son, who are co-*eternal* and *con-substantial*, cannot be extrapolated to explain the simultaneous distinction-and-relation between God and every *created* effect. The crucial difference is that, according to the Nicene creed, Jesus the Christ was 'one in being with the Father' (*homoousios*) because he was, in his divine nature, 'begotten, *not made*'. As a result, the fact that God is incarnate in the human individual Jesus of Nazareth (i.e., they are 'one in being') does not entail that God is one in being (*con*substantial) with the world. As Lipner argues, a Christian theologian can certainly speak of 'God dwelling in the creature', in the sense of 'keeping it in existence' or 'being present to it', but this does *not* mean, he claims, that God is 'constitutive of its [very] being'.[53] The most that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* allows for is what Lipner calls 'de-entitative immanence',[54] which differs crucially from entitative immanence in the following way:

> We are assured by Aquinas, and most Christian thinkers would make the same point, that the theory of creation allows for no entitative union whatsoever between the divine being and the created order…the accent remains [in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*] on God's presence within and to his creature, rather than on his being its very ground of existence, the wellspring of its reality. The overriding emphasis in the Christian teaching on creation is on the impassable gulf between the infinite and the finite.[55]

I want to suggest that Lipner is correct when he says that the 'accent' and the 'overriding emphasis' of Christian teaching on creation indeed tends to be on the ontological *difference* between ultimate reality (God) and mundane reality (the world). I have argued, however, that if we keep in mind the fundamentally non-contrastive nature of this difference, creation *ex nihilo* and *creation ex deo* are much more closely aligned than they first appear to be. That is to say, the finite world and the infinite (*non*-finite) divine reality should not be contrastively posited as two individuals pulling away at two opposite ends of the same piece of rope, such that the former is only an enumerative addition to, or a quantitative extension, of the latter; rather, the latter non-contrastively encompasses, envelopes, and encapsulates the former by sustaining it in its very finitude. Interpreted thus, I contend that there is a sense in which it is possible to talk of the world as emanating from

[53] Lipner, ibid, 56.
[54] Lipner, ibid, 56-7.
[55] Lipner, ibid, 58. Cf. ST.I.28.1.ad.3.

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God (*ex deo*) even while holding to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. More specifically, in the distinctive ways in which divine causation is understood by Aquinas, I have shown that creation *ex nihilo* can be seen as a form of creation *ex deo*.

The echoes of the *Liber de Causis* in some of Aquinas's best-known metaphysical tropes (e.g., that God is the First Cause, giving being [*esse*] to others by way of creation; that Being [*esse*] is the first created thing and the most proper effect of God; and that God is innermostly present in all things as their Cause, preserving each thing in being) are undeniable.[56] While we should not exaggerate the specific role of this text in his formulation of these concepts (since many of these ideas were part of a common and developing intellectual heritage from Antique pagan philosophy into medieval Christian theology), it is striking that Aquinas took the time towards the end of his life to write a detailed commentary on this Plotinian and Proclan-inspired Arabic work.[57] Perhaps what motivated him was the metaphysical structure it offered for explaining how God could, in a sense, be *in* all things without being pantheistically reduced to them.[58] For the First Cause is not 'Being' shared out amongst creatures, but 'above being inasmuch as it is itself infinite "to be" [*esse*]…'.[59] Language cannot adequately describe this Cause which is beyond any genus but I have argued that the unique manner of divine originative causality which Christians call creation 'from nothing' is much closer conceptually to the idea of creation 'from God' than first appearances might suggest.

I would also suggest that the macrocosmic question, 'How is God related to the created world?', can be answered by borrowing some language from 5th century Christian attempts to answer the microcosmic question of how human and divine natures are related in the one person of Christ: the world and God are distinguished-and-related 'without confusion, without change' – thus steering away from an undiluted pantheism,[60] and 'without separation, without division' – thus moving

[56] See the Introduction by Guagliardo (1996) for further thematic resonances (xxx-xxxi).

[57] His *Commentary on the Book of Causes* was one of Aquinas's last works (1272) and written while he was still busy with the ST and his commentaries on Aristotle (Guagliardo, 1996: ix.)

[58] He was also, no doubt, influenced by the fact that his teacher had written a commentary on the LdC. See Therese Bonin, *Creation as Emanation: The Origin of Diversity in Albert the Great's On the Causes and the Procession of the Universe* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

[59] Aquinas, Commentary on *LdC* Prop.6 in Guagliardo et al. (1996), 51-2.

[60] In the Chalcedonian Creed, the phrases 'without confusion, without change' are usually understood as being directed against the Monophysite denial (associated with Eutyches) of two distinct natures (human and divine) in Christ.

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away from a deistic dualism.[61] In the case of creation *ex nihilo*, as in the case of Chalcedon, we cannot pronounce clearly on what creation is, but only stutter about what creation is not.

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[61] The phrases 'without separation, without division' are supposed to have been directed against Nestorianism which was understood as having claimed that the divine nature of Christ and the human nature of Christ are not simply two natures but are, in fact, two persons.

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