



David Reiter and
Nathanael Johnston
ERSKINE COLLEGE, USA

Aquinas on the Eternality and Necessity of the World

Abstract

In this note, we present a new observation of relevance to Aquinas's third way. Scholars have noted that Aquinas recognizes the existence of a multiplicity of necessary beings, but it has not been recognized that Aquinas's views concerning the eternity of the world commit him to the epistemic possibility that *the world itself* is a necessary being. We explain how Aquinas is committed to this possibility and explore its bearing on the success or failure of the third way as a demonstration of God's existence.

In this note, we present a new observation of relevance to Aquinas's third way. Various commentators have correctly noted that Aquinas's argument is considerably more complicated and nuanced than is generally recognized. For example, commentators have observed that the argument is composed of two stages. Much of the discussion has focused on the first stage of the argument, which is concerned to establish the existence of a necessary being. The more neglected but certainly critical second stage of the argument seeks to prove the existence of an *intrinsically* necessary being, as opposed to a *derivatively* necessary being. In connection with this second stage of the argument, scholars have noted that Aquinas recognizes the existence of a multiplicity of necessary beings, including angels, human souls, celestial bodies, and prime matter.¹ What has not been recognized is that Aquinas's views concerning the eternity of the world commit him to the epistemic possibility that *the world itself* is a necessary being. If we are correct that Aquinas is committed to this possibility, it naturally raises the question of whether this presents a serious problem for the success of the third way. Without insisting on its soundness, we now present and explain a plausible argument for the conclusion that this is indeed a very serious problem for the third way as a cosmological demonstration. Even if this conclusion is mistaken, we contend that it is an important point that Aquinas is committed to the epistemic possibility that the world itself is a necessary being.

The following argument explains the connection between Aquinas's views concerning the eternity of the world and the failure of the third way as a cosmological demonstration. The argument runs as follows:

1. If it is not demonstrable that the world is not eternal, then it is epistemically possible that the world is eternal.

1. See Alfred Freddoso's comments on the five ways at [<http://www.nd.edu/~{a}freddos/courses/417/summa1,2{-}13.htm>]. Also see P.T. Geach 'Commentary on Aquinas' in Donald R. Burrill, *The Cosmological Arguments* (Garden City 1967), and William Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton 1975), 40.

2. If it is epistemically possible that the world is eternal, then it is epistemically possible that the world is necessary.
- So 3. If it is not demonstrable that the world is not eternal, then it is epistemically possible that the world is necessary. [Hypothetical syllogism from 1 and 2.]
4. If it is epistemically possible that the world is necessary, then the third way fails as a cosmological demonstration.
- So 5. If it is not demonstrable that the world is not eternal, then the third way fails as a cosmological demonstration. [Hypothetical syllogism from 3 and 4.]

Line 3 is a valid inference from premises 1 and 2, and the final conclusion of the argument follows validly from 3 and 4. Thus, the argument considered as a whole is valid. We now turn to the required discussion of premises 1, 2, and 4.

Premise 1. If it is not demonstrable that the world is not eternal, then it is epistemically possible that the world is eternal. Let us first comment on the antecedent of premise 1, and its connection to Aquinas's second way. In the second way, Aquinas argues that there must be a first and uncaused cause, since there cannot be an infinite regress of causes and effects. But it is well-known that according to Aquinas, the regression ruled out by reason is not a *temporal* regression.² In Question 46, article 1, Aquinas clearly affirms that the world had a temporal beginning—it is not eternal.³ In article 2, he discusses whether it is an *article of faith* that the world had a beginning. His answer is affirmative: 'By faith alone do we hold, and by no demonstration can it be proved, that the world did not always exist, as was said above of the mystery of the Trinity.'⁴ Thus, according to Aquinas, God has revealed that the world is not eternal, and this proposition cannot be demonstrated by reason. Thus, Aquinas affirms the antecedent of premise 1.

Now concerning the consequent of premise 1, to say that a proposition is epistemically possible is to say simply that it is logically consistent with what is known. And for Aquinas, a proposition *p* is knowable only if *p* can be demonstrated on the basis of reason.⁵ Thus, if *p* is not demonstrable, it follows that not-*p* is logically consistent with the body of what constitutes knowledge. Accordingly, if the non-eternality of the world is not demonstrable, then its eternality is epistemically possible.

Premise 2. If it is epistemically possible that the world is eternal, then it is epistemically possible that the world is necessary. The justification for this premise is based on the principle that if *p* implies *q*, and it is epistemically possible that *p*, then it is also epistemically possible that *q*. We have already noted that according to Aquinas, it is epistemically possible that the world is eternal. Let us now

2. Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy: Volume II Medieval Philosophy, Augustine to Scotus* (Westminster, 1950), 341, 366.

3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (I, Q. 64, Art. 1), (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947).

4. Aquinas, *Summa* (I, Q. 64, Art. 2).

5. Aquinas, *Summa* (II-II, Q. 1, Art. 5).

explain the justification for the claim that if the world is eternal, then the world is necessary. The justification for this conditional is derived from Aquinas's defense of the third way. Of course, the overall thrust of the third way is that there must be a necessary being (which is God), since it is absurd to suppose that all beings are contingent. At this point, it should be noted that the type of contingency (and necessity) in question here is not the contemporary modal type, according to which a contingent being is a being which exists in some but not all possible worlds.⁶ Rather, a contingent being (in the relevant sense) is a being *which has within itself the potential for generation and corruption*. Freddoso points out that angels would be considered as contingent beings in the contemporary modal sense (since God does not create them in every possible world), but they are non-contingent (or necessary) in the sense Aquinas is using here.⁷ Thus, to say that *x* is necessary in the relevant sense is to say that *x* does not have within itself the potential for generation and corruption.

In the midst of arguing for the absurdity of the supposition that all beings are contingent, Aquinas claims '... it is impossible for these [things that are possible to be and not to be] always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not.'⁸ In other words, Aquinas claims that if *x* is a contingent being, then there is some time at which *x* does not exist. It follows by logical contraposition that if there is no time at which *x* does not exist, then *x* is not a contingent being. Or, more positively, it follows from Aquinas's claim (by contraposition) that if *x* is eternal, then *x* is necessary. Thus, if the world is eternal, then it is necessary. And therefore (by the principle mentioned above), if it is epistemically possible that the world is eternal, then it is also epistemically possible that the world is necessary. This point deserves emphasis. As mentioned above, scholars have recognized that Aquinas countenances the existence of a variety of necessary beings, but the discussion of this paragraph shows that Aquinas is logically committed to the epistemic possibility that *the world itself* is a necessary being.

Premise 4. If it is epistemically possible that the world is necessary, then the third way fails as a cosmological demonstration. Let us define *cosmological demonstration* as any argument which attempts to demonstrate the existence of God on the basis of (our knowledge of) the existence of the world. In accordance with the traditional understanding, a cosmological demonstration tries to prove the existence of God (the cause) as the creator of the world (the effect). We propose two additional necessary conditions for cosmological demonstrations. First, in order for the argument to count as a *demonstration*, each premise of the argument must itself be a deliverance of reason (as opposed to being an article of faith). Thus, each premise of the argument must be either self-evident or demonstrable from propositions that are known. Secondly, in order for the argument to count as a successful demonstration of *God's existence*, it must demonstrate the existence of a being *that is known to be distinct from the world*. Suppose argument A proves

6. We are grateful to a referee for emphasizing the importance of this point.

7. See Freddoso's comments on the relevant sense of necessity at [<http://www.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/417/summa1,2-13.htm>].

8. Aquinas, *Summa* (I, Q. 2, Art. 3).

the existence of a being x , but for all we know, it may be that x is identical with the world itself. Argument A may be a very important argument for its proof of the existence of x , but according to the necessary condition we have suggested, argument A does not constitute a successful cosmological demonstration of the existence of *God*. It may be claimed that the second necessary condition we have suggested amounts to a rejection of a pantheistic conception of God, according to which God is identical with the world itself. This is correct, but we think that the proposed necessary condition is quite reasonable in light of the overall history of the theistic proofs. After all, on the pantheistic conception, it is a very trivial matter to demonstrate the existence of God as follows:

1. The world exists.
2. God is identical with the world.

So 3. God exists.

Now let us apply the remarks about cosmological demonstrations to our discussion of premise 4. Let us grant for the sake of argument that Aquinas's third way demonstrates the existence of a necessary being.⁹ However, as long as it is epistemically possible that the world itself is a necessary being, then from the mere fact that a necessary being exists, we cannot infer the existence of a being known to be distinct from the world. In other words, the claim of premise 4 is that as long as it is epistemically possible that the world itself is a necessary being, then the third way cannot succeed as a cosmological demonstration. This completes the exposition of the overall argument. We conclude with some brief evaluative comments.

The overall argument we have presented is *prima facie* plausible, but is it ultimately sound? It seems that the 'weak link' in the argument is premise 4, precisely because it may not give adequate consideration to argumentative resources of the third way's second stage. As mentioned above, the second stage seeks to argue from the existence of necessary beings in general to the existence of an *intrinsically* necessary being. Thus the following crucial question emerges: Even if it is epistemically possible that the world is a necessary being (as shown above in paragraph 5), is it also epistemically possible that the world is an *intrinsically* necessary being? The answer to this question will partially determine whether the third way succeeds as a cosmological demonstration. And regardless of how this may come out, we think it is an important point that Aquinas is committed to the epistemic possibility that the world itself is a necessary being.

9. It should be noted that serious scholars have responded effectively to many of the popular objections against the third way—especially to the objections raised against the first stage of the argument. See Freddoso's comments on the third way and the insightful work of Thomas D. Sullivan and Russell Panier on Aquinas's arguments.