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Aquinas’ Attribution of Creation *Ex Nihilo* to Plato and Aristotle: The Importance of Avicenna

Aquinas tells us in *Summa Theologiae* (*ST*) I.45.1 that by the name “creation” we designate the emanation of all being from the universal cause, which is God.¹ Since what comes forth from the universal cause is all being, it is impossible that anything is presupposed to this emanation and so creation is *ex non ente quod est nihil*. Taking creation in this sense, the common consensus of scholars is that Plato and

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¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.45.1, in *Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 13. ed. J. Mortenson and E. Alarcon (Lander, WI: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012). “Respondeo dicendum quod, sicut supra dictum est, non solum oportet considerare emanationem alicuius entis particularis ab aliquo particulari agente, sed etiam emanationem totius entis a causa universali, quae est Deus, et hanc quidem emanationem designamus nomine creationis. Quod autem procedit secundum emanationem particularem, non praesupponitur emanationi, sicut, si generatur homo, non fuit prius homo, sed homo fit ex non homine, et album ex non albo. Unde, si consideretur emanatio totius entis universalis a primo principio, impossibile est quod aliquod ens praesupponatur huic emanationi. Idem autem est nihil quod nullum ens. Sicut igitur generatio hominis est ex non ente quod est non homo, ita creatio, quae est emanatio totius esse, est ex non ente quod est nihil.” All translations are my own.



Aristotle did not possess such a doctrine. Yet, in two articles Mark Johnson has noted many texts where Aquinas attributes such a doctrine to Plato and Aristotle.² However, *ST* I.44.2, written between 1266 and 1268,³ appears to be difficult to square with the texts and has led some scholars to deny that Aquinas attributed creation to Plato and Aristotle and has led others to conclude that when composing *ST* I.44.2, Aquinas changed his mind, now denying creation to Plato and Aristotle, before changing it back again in his commentaries on Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. This leaves us with several interpretive issues: Did Aquinas attribute creation proper to Plato and Aristotle or only in a secondary and looser sense? Is *ST* I.44.2 denying creation to Plato and Aristotle? If so, how can this be explained in light of ample evidence that he did attribute creation to Plato and Aristotle at other points in his career? Finally, if Plato and Aristotle do not in fact possess doctrines of creation, why does Aquinas seem to attribute one to them so freely?

It is the argument of this paper that *ST* I.44.2, taken in its immediate context, does not deny a doctrine of creation to Plato and Aristotle. Thus, Aquinas throughout the entirety of his career consistently attributed a doctrine of creation to Aristotle and from the 1260s on attributed such a doctrine to Plato as well.⁴ To showcase the problem, I will first situate the problematic *ST* I.44.2 text in light of the similar *De Potentia* (*DP*) III.5. After this, I will briefly summarize the state of the secondary literature as it pertains to this issue. Third, I will argue that taken in context, *ST* I.44.2 is consistent with *DP* III.5. Finally, I will offer some reflections as to why Aquinas attributed a doctrine of cre-

² Mark Johnson, "Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?," *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989): 129–155. Mark Johnson, "Aquinas's Changing Evaluation of Plato on Creation," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66:1 (1992): 81–88.

³ John Wippel, "Aquinas on Creation and the Preambles of Faith," *The Thomist* 78:1 (2014), 23.

⁴ Johnson, "Aquinas's Changing Evaluation of Plato on Creation," 83.

ation to Aristotle and Plato by considering the importance of Avicenna for Aquinas' understanding of creation.

A Tale of Two Texts

In *DP* III.5 and *ST* I.44.2, we find many similarities. Both texts come from relatively close periods of time. *De Potentia* was composed sometime between 1265–1266, with the *prima pars* coming from roughly 1266–1268.⁵ Both texts deal with the question of creation. *DP* III.5 asks whether there is anything that is not created by God and *ST* I.44.2 asks whether primary matter is created by God. Furthermore, in both texts Aquinas provides a history of philosophy divided into three stages and envisions the third stage as culminating in a proper metaphysical understanding of things, considering things insofar as they have being, and ascending to a knowledge of the cause of being qua being.

In *DP* III.5, answering the question whether there is anything that is not created by God, Aquinas states that the first early philosophers held that all forms were merely accidental and that matter alone was substance. These philosophers thought that matter had no cause and did not consider the efficient cause. Later philosophers, however, began to consider substantial forms and posited certain agent causes, which they called intelligences or attraction and repulsion, which were the cause of the transmutation of matter to this or that form but which did not confer universal being on things. And so according to these philosophers, not all beings came from an efficient cause, but matter was presupposed to the action of the agent cause. Finally, according to Aquinas, Plato, Aristotle and their followers arrived at the consideration of universal being itself and posited a universal cause of all things,

⁵ Wippel, "Aquinas on Creation and the Preambles of Faith," 23.

from which all things come into being (*ipsi soli posuerunt aliquam universalem causam rerum, a qua omnia alia in esse prodirent*). Aquinas then tells us that in this they agree with the Catholic faith (*Cui quidem sententiae etiam Catholica fides consentit*). Aquinas then gives three arguments for this conclusion, which he attributes to Plato, Aristotle and Avicenna.⁶

The argument of Plato:

It is necessary that if some one thing is commonly found in many things, that it is caused in these from some one cause. For it cannot be that that which is common belongs to these in virtue of themselves since each one, according to what it is in itself, is distinguished from the other and a diver-

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei* Q.III A.5, ed. P. Bazzi, M. Calcaterra, T. S. Centi, E. Odetto, and P. M. Pession (Turin: Marietti, 1927): “Dicendum, quod secundum ordinem cognitionis humanae processerunt antiqui in consideratione naturae rerum. Unde cum cognitio humana a sensu incipiens in intellectum perveniat priores philosophi circa sensibilia fuerunt occupati, et ex his paulatim in intelligibilia pervenerunt. Et quia accidentales formae sunt secundum se sensibiles, non autem substantiales, ideo primi philosophi omnes formas accidentia esse dixerunt, et solam materiam esse substantiam. Et quia substantia sufficit ad hoc quod sit accidentium causa, quae ex principiis substantiae causantur, inde est quod primi philosophi, praeter materiam, nullam aliam causam posuerunt; sed ex ea causari dicebant omnia quae in rebus sensibilibus provenire videntur; unde ponere cogebantur materiae causam non esse, et negare totaliter causam efficientem. Posteriores vero philosophi, substantiales formas aliquatenus considerare coeperunt; non tamen pervenerunt ad cognitionem universalium, sed tota eorum intentio circa formas speciales versabatur: et ideo posuerunt quidam aliquas causas agentes, non tamen quae universaliter rebus esse conferrent, sed quae ad hanc vel ad illam formam, materiam permutarent; sicut intellectum et amicitiam et litem, quorum actionem ponebant in segregando et congregando; et ideo etiam secundum ipsos non omnia entia a causa efficiente procedebant, sed materia actioni causae agentis praesupponebatur. Posteriores vero philosophi, ut Plato, Aristoteles et eorum sequaces, pervenerunt ad considerationem ipsius esse universalis; et ideo ipsi soli posuerunt aliquam universalem causam rerum, a qua omnia alia in esse prodirent, ut patet per Augustinum. Cui quidem sententiae etiam Catholica fides consentit.”

sity of causes produces a diversity of effects. Since therefore being is found as common to all things, which according to what they are in themselves are distinct from one another, it follows of necessity that being is granted to them not from themselves but from some one cause. And this seems to be the argument of Plato, who held that before every multitude is some unity, not only according to number but also in reality.⁷

The argument of Aristotle:

The second argument is that when something is found in many things by participation in different ways it is necessary that from that in which it is found most perfectly it is granted to all others in which it is found imperfectly. For those things which are said positively according to greater or lesser, they have this in so far as they approach, some farther away and some nearer, something one. For if to each of these it belonged in virtue of itself, there is no reason why it is found more perfectly in one than in another, such as when we see that fire, which is the extreme in heat, is the principle of heat in all hot things. There is, however, one being which is more perfectly and truly a being, which was proved because there is some mover which is in every way immobile and most perfect, as the philosopher proved. It is necessary therefore that all things which are less perfect receive being from it, and this is the argument of the Philosopher.⁸

⁷ *De Potentia*, Q. III, A. 5: "Oportet enim, si aliquid unum communiter in pluribus invenitur, quod ab aliqua una causa in illis causetur; non enim potest esse quod illud commune utrique ex se ipso conveniat, cum utrumque, secundum quod ipsum est, ab altero distinguatur; et diversitas causarum diversos effectus producit. Cum ergo esse inveniatur omnibus rebus commune, quae secundum illud quod sunt, ad invicem distinctae sunt, oportet quod de necessitate eis non ex se ipsis, sed ab aliqua una causa esse attribuat. Et ista videtur ratio Platonis, qui voluit, quod ante omnem multitudinem esset aliqua unitas non solum in numeris, sed etiam in rerum naturis."

⁸ *Ibid.*: "Secunda ratio est, quia, cum aliquid invenitur a pluribus diversimode participatum oportet quod ab eo in quo perfectissime invenitur, attribuat omnibus illis in

What is interesting here is that from both arguments Aquinas seems to be connecting his metaphysics of *esse* with Aristotle and Plato insofar as these arguments move from *esse* as common to many and participated to a source of *esse*, from which things that merely participate in *esse* receive their being. Aquinas then gives the argument of Avicenna:

The third argument is because that which is through another is reduced to that which is per se as to its cause. Whence if there were one per se existing heat, it would be the cause of all hot things which have heat by way of participation. However, there is a being which is its own being and this was proved because it is necessary that there is some first being which is pure act and in no way composed. Whence it is necessary that all other beings, which are not their own being but have being by participation, are from that one being. And this is the argument of Avicenna. Thus, that all things are created by God is demonstrated by reason and held by faith.⁹

quibus imperfectius invenitur. Nam ea quae positive secundum magis et minus dicuntur, hoc habent ex accessu remotiori vel propinquiore ad aliquid unum: si enim unicuique eorum ex se ipso illud conveniret, non esset ratio cur perfectius in uno quam in alio inveniretur sicut videmus quod ignis, qui est in fine caliditatis, est caloris principium in omnibus calidis. Est autem ponere unum ens, quod est perfectissimum et verissimum ens: quod ex hoc probatur, quia est aliquid movens omnino immobile et perfectissimum, ut a philosophis est probatum. Oportet ergo quod omnia alia minus perfecta ab ipso esse recipiant. Et haec est probatio philosophi.”

⁹ *Ibid.*: “Tertia ratio est, quia illud quod est per alterum, reducitur sicut in causam ad illud quod est per se. Unde si esset unus calor per se existens, oporteret ipsum esse causam omnium calidorum, quae per modum participationis calorem habent. Est autem ponere aliquod ens quod est ipsum suum esse: quod ex hoc probatur, quia oportet esse aliquod primum ens quod sit actus purus, in quo nulla sit compositio. Unde oportet quod ab uno illo ente omnia alia sint, quaecumque non sunt suum esse, sed habent esse per modum participationis. Haec est ratio Avicennae. Sic ergo ratione demonstratur et fide tenetur quod omnia sint a Deo creata.”

Of interest for our purpose here is also Aquinas' response to the second objection where he tells us that from the fact that being (*esse*) is granted to a quiddity, not only the being but also the quiddity is said to be created since before it has being it is nothing, except perhaps in the intellect of the creator.¹⁰ With this response in mind, given that Aquinas attributes to Plato the granting of being to the many from the one and to Aristotle the realization of the fact that all things which merely participate in being must receive being from what is perfect, we can conclude with John Wippel that Aquinas is attributing a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to Plato and Aristotle.¹¹ To Wippel's conclusion, I would further add that in this response, Aquinas uses the same verb he employed in the above arguments assigned to Plato and Aristotle, the infinitive of which is *attribuere*. This further strengthens the conclusion that he means to ascribe a doctrine of creation to Plato and Aristotle. Of course, whether they actually had such doctrines is another matter entirely.¹² Aquinas' attribution of creation to Plato and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*: "Ad secundum dicendum, quod ex hoc ipso quod quidditati esse attribuitur, non solum esse, sed ipsa quidditas creari dicitur: quia antequam esse habeat, nihil est, nisi forte in intellectu creantis, ubi non est creatura, sed creatrix essentia."

¹¹ Wippel, "Aquinas on Creation and the Preambles of Faith," 18. The response to the second objection "appears to be the key that is needed to justify the transition from proving that something receives *esse* to proving that it is created. It must be produced *ex nihilo*, that is to say, from no preexisting subject whatsoever."

¹² Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation* (Oxford University Press: Oxford: 2019), 31–36. After examining the arguments of *DP* III.5, Kerr writes of Aquinas' interpretation of Plato that "Despite all this, historically speaking it is not the case that Plato ever arrived at a consideration of what Thomas understood *esse* to be, i.e. the act of existence correlative to the essence of a creature. So in this context Aquinas is reading Plato in a highly sympathetic light and is even willing to attribute his own metaphysical views on *esse* to Plato. This would tie in with Johnson's point about the authority of Augustine leading Aquinas to reevaluate his views on Plato such that Aquinas attributes to Plato views that Plato never held yet Thomas did hold and that to his mind justified a sympathetic reading. This reading is not out of sync with the gener-

Aristotle is also corroborated by the fact that this third group of philosophers, headed by Plato and Aristotle, is in agreement with the Catholic faith. If Plato and Aristotle, according to Aquinas' mind, posited a universal cause of all things but only in the sense of using pre-existing matter, then he could hardly say they agreed with the Catholic faith or even include them in the third group of philosophers at all, as opposed to the second. Thus, we can conclude that in this text Aquinas is attributing a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* to Plato and Aristotle.

Yet, an initial glance at *ST I.44.2* raises some questions. Here, in the context of asking whether primary matter is created, Aquinas gives us another three-fold division of the history of philosophy. First, ancient philosophers failed to realize that anything exists besides bodies, considered them to be uncreated and regarded all change as merely accidental and in accordance with condensation, rarefaction, union and separation. Others, however, understood the distinction between matter and form and arose to the consideration of substantial change, but nevertheless considered matter to be uncreated. These philosophers posited more universal causes such as the oblique circle, according to Aristotle, or the ideas, according to Plato. However, Aquinas informs us, each of these proceeding groups considered being only under some particular consideration. Finally, *aliqui* rose to consider being insofar

al tendency of Plato's thought but is certainly historically inaccurate." Kerr, *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*, 31–32. Commenting on Aquinas' interpretation of Aristotle, he continues, "So as with the Platonic argument so too with this one, the universality of *esse* and its possession non-essentially, i.e. through participation, are key notions for arriving at a sound metaphysics of creation. Again, as with Plato so too with Aristotle; we see Aquinas attributing to him a metaphysical doctrine that the historical Aristotle would not have recognized: the dependence of things on *esse* for their being... So, again, Aquinas is reading an ancient philosopher, Aristotle, in a highly sympathetic light in order that his thinking (Aristotle's) may yield a legitimate metaphysics of creation." Kerr, *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*, 35–36.

as it is being and assigned a cause to things. Such a cause is the cause of things not only insofar as they are such beings through accidental forms, nor these particular beings through substantial forms, but is the cause of all that pertains to being in any way. Thus, concludes Aquinas, it is necessary to hold that even primary matter is created by the universal cause of being.¹³

What is interesting here is that Plato and Aristotle now appear to be classified among the second group of philosophers who considered substantial change but regarded matter as uncreated. It is then the unnamed *aliqui* who arrive at the consideration of being qua being and assigned a cause to things qua being. Has Aquinas, therefore, changed his mind from the slightly earlier *DP* III.5?

¹³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.44.2: "Respondeo dicendum quod antiqui philosophi paulatim, et quasi pedetentim, intraverunt in cognitionem veritatis. A principio enim, quasi grossiores existentes, non existimabant esse entia nisi corpora sensibilia. Quorum qui ponebant in eis motum, non considerabant motum nisi secundum aliqua accidentia, ut puta secundum raritatem et densitatem, congregationem et segregationem. Et supponentes ipsam substantiam corporum increatam, assignabant aliquas causas huiusmodi accidentalium transmutationum, ut puta amicitiam, litem, intellectum, aut aliquid huiusmodi. Uterius vero procedentes, distinxerunt per intellectum inter formam substantialem et materiam, quam ponebant increatam; et perceperunt transmutationem fieri in corporibus secundum formas essentielles. Quarum transmutationum quasdam causas universales ponebant, ut obliquum circulum, secundum Aristotelem, vel ideas, secundum Platonem. Sed considerandum est quod materia per formam contrahitur ad determinatam speciem; sicut substantia alicuius speciei per accidens ei adveniens contrahitur ad determinatum modum essendi, ut homo contrahitur per album. Utrique igitur consideraverunt ens particulari quadam consideratione, vel in quantum est hoc ens, vel in quantum est tale ens. Et sic rebus causas agentes particulares assignaverunt. Et ulterius aliqui exerunt se ad considerandum ens in quantum est ens, et consideraverunt causam rerum, non solum secundum quod sunt haec vel talia, sed secundum quod sunt entia. Hoc igitur quod est causa rerum in quantum sunt entia, oportet esse causam rerum, non solum secundum quod sunt talia per formas accidentales, nec secundum quod sunt haec per formas substantiales, sed etiam secundum omne illud quod pertinet ad esse illorum quocumque modo. Et sic oportet ponere etiam materiam primam creatam ab universali causa entium."

The Status of the Question in the Secondary Literature

From this text, various scholars have concluded that Aquinas did not attribute a doctrine of creation to Aristotle and Plato. Étienne Gilson, for one, argues that Aquinas never credits Aristotle “with the notion of creation.”¹⁴ Furthermore, Gilson sees *ST* I.44.2 as explicitly denying that Plato and Aristotle arrived at a creative cause and interprets *DP* III.5 as positing a universal cause of being but not necessarily a creative cause.¹⁵ R. E. Houser seems to take a position similar to Gilson, arguing that the first two arguments of *DP* III.5 are based entirely on formal causation and so do not conclude to a cause which is an efficient cause of all being.¹⁶ To establish an efficient cause of universal being, Houser argues that Aquinas turns to Avicenna.¹⁷ Houser concludes:

The Platonic and Aristotelian arguments Aquinas presents in *De Potentia* are consistent with two quite different views of creation: God making use of matter as an eternal co-principle in causing every being, and God creating even matter *from nothing*. In short, the Platonic and Aristotelian arguments conclude to the existence of a creative God, but without proving in what sense he is creative. Aquinas seems to have realized that these arguments leave the issue of creation unresolved, and therefore added the Avicennian argument, which clarifies the even stronger sense in which God is a creator, that is, the efficient cause of

¹⁴ Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (London: Sheed & Ward, 1950), 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 439–44. See note 4.

¹⁶ Rollen Edward Houser, “Avicenna, ‘Aliqui,’ and Thomas Aquinas’s Doctrine of Creation,” *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales*, 80:1 (2013), 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

the very being (*esse*) of all creatures, apart from which a creature would be absolutely nothing.¹⁸

For Houser, the Platonic and Aristotelian arguments do not necessitate the conclusion that God is an efficient cause of being who produces even matter *ex nihilo*. Thus, Houser's interpretation highlights the importance of Avicenna and goes on to conclude that when Aquinas refers to the "aliqui" in *ST* I.44.2, he is implicitly referring to Avicenna.¹⁹

While this is perhaps an accurate interpretation of the historical Aristotle and Plato, such an interpretation of *DP* III.5 does not strike me as the most convincing interpretation, for reasons I have already indicated above. Furthermore, the characterization of God as the cause of *esse* for creatures in the Avicennian argument is also exactly what Aquinas attributes to Plato and Aristotle in *DP* III.5, i.e., a single cause of *esse* for all things. This even leads one to question whether the three arguments of *DP* III.5 are not essentially just three reformulations of the same argument. Nor does Aquinas give any indication that the first two arguments are based merely on formal participation and so stand in need of an Avicennian correction. Instead, Aquinas merely lists the three arguments as three ways of showing the consistency of the third group of philosophers with the Catholic faith (*Cui quidem sententiae etiam Catholica fides consentit*). The Catholic faith, of course, teaches that God created all things *ex nihilo*. Thus, when Aquinas writes in *DP* III.5, "Et hoc triplici ratione demonstrari potest," he means all three of these arguments to be ways of showing this consistency with the Catholic faith and so must conclude to a first cause of being which possesses being perfectly, essentially, and produces all things *ex nihilo*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37. Italics are mine.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

This reading of *DP* III.5 can also be supported by a close reading of *Summa Contra Gentiles* (*SCG*) II.6 and II.15, written around 1261.²⁰ In *SCG* II.6, Aquinas argues that God is the cause of being for things other than himself.²¹ Yet, Aquinas does not argue in this chapter that God is the cause of being for all things, although this may be implicit in some of his argumentation. But in *SCG* II.15, Aquinas explicitly sets about the task of showing that God is the cause of being for everything other than himself and that apart from him there is nothing.²² Thus, we are dealing in this chapter with creation *ex nihilo* since without God there would be nothing and we can conclude that Aquinas means all his arguments in this chapter to establish this fact. Of importance for our purpose here are the third, fourth and fifth arguments given in *SCG* II.15.

The third argument starts from the fact that what is common to many must be reduced to a common cause. Being, however, is common to all (*omnibus autem commune est esse*) and so above all causes there must be a cause to which it belongs to give being (*supra omnes causas sit aliqua causa cuius sit dare esse*). This argument parallels the argument Aquinas attributes to Plato in *DP* III.5 which began from the fact that *esse inveniatur omnibus rebus commune*.

The fourth argument of *SCG* II.15 seems to parallel the second argument of *DP* III.5 which Aquinas attributed to Aristotle. Both arguments explicitly employ the term “participation” and rely upon the fact that what has being by participation must be caused by that which has being essentially, and Aquinas even employs the example of fire being

²⁰ Wippel, “Aquinas on Creation and the Preambles of Faith,” 7.

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.6, in *Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 2. (Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute, 2020). The Latin text of this work is taken from the 1961 Marietti edition.

²² Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.15: “Oportet ulterius ostendere quod nihil praeter ipsum est nisi ab ipso.”

the cause of heat in all hot things in both arguments. God, therefore, is the cause of being to all other things (*Deus igitur est causa essendi omnibus aliis*).

The fifth argument of *SCG* II.15 begins from the consideration that what is possible to be or not to be has a cause, because considered in itself it is indifferent to both, and so there must be something else which determines it to one (*oportet esse aliquod aliud quod ipsum ad unum determinet*). Since we cannot proceed to infinity, we must arrive at a necessary being. If this necessary being has its necessity from another, we must ultimately arrive at a necessary being which has its necessity of itself (*sic est devenire ad aliquid quod est per se necesse esse*). Aquinas concludes from this that everything other than God must be reduced to God as a cause of its being (*oportet igitur omne aliud ab ipso reduci in ipsum sicut in causam essendi*). This argument is clearly Avicennian since it is situated in terms of Avicenna's trademark language of the possible and the necessary, concluding to a necessary being which has its necessity of itself.

It seems then that the third, fourth and fifth arguments of *SCG* II.15 parallel the argumentation and order that Aquinas ascribes to Plato, Aristotle and Avicenna in *DP* III.5 and so can be used, I suggest, as an interpretive key for the latter arguments. Given that these arguments appear in *SCG* II.15, it follows that Aquinas meant them to establish creation *ex nihilo*. If, to Aquinas, any of these arguments did not establish creation *ex nihilo* and left room for matter as an eternal coprincipal, they ought to appear in *SCG* II.6 and not *SCG* II.15. This is further confirmed from the fact that in the next chapter, *SCG* II.16, Aquinas begins by stating that from the forgoing, i.e., *SCG* II.15, it is clear that God produces all things in *esse* from nothing preexisting (*ex hoc autem apparet quod Deus res in esse produxit ex nullo praeexistente sicut ex materia*). Thus, implicit in *SCG* II.15, and therefore in all three arguments of *DP* III.5, is creation *ex nihilo* and this means that, according to the mind of Aquinas, Plato and Aristotle had such a doctrine.

Mark Johnson and Laurence Dewan come to a different conclusion than Houser and Gilson. In two articles already mentioned, Johnson examines several texts and concludes that Aquinas did in fact attribute a doctrine of creation to Aristotle and Plato, although Aquinas denies this of Plato earlier in his career but attributes it to him later. Johnson concludes:

St. Thomas was perfectly aware that his reading of Aristotle was new. Whereas *quidam* thought that Aristotle's God was a mover after the manner of an end only, for St. Thomas Aristotle's God is the maker of the heavenly bodies. Whereas *quidam* thought that Aristotle's God was a mover only, St. Thomas saw him as both the cause of motion and of *esse*, producing things in being. *Hoc autem creare dicimus, scilicet producere rem in esse secundum totam suam substantiam*. For the entirety of his career, St. Thomas claimed that Aristotle's God was the one upon whom the *esse omnium* depended, and on this matter he never changed his mind.²³

As to the tricky issue of *ST* I.44.2, while Johnson concedes that Aquinas does not state explicitly that Aristotle and Plato are in the third group, he retains "the suspicion that, for St. Thomas, Aristotle is a member of this third group."²⁴ As Johnson interprets the text, when Aquinas mentions Aristotle's oblique circle or Plato's ideas, he is listing examples "of the kind of more universal cause assigned by those in the second group of philosophers" without actually denying that Plato and Aristotle had a doctrine of creation.²⁵

Dewan, in agreement with Johnson, argues that to be a universal cause of all things, such as in *DP* III.5, is to be a creative cause since,

²³ Johnson, "Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?," 154.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

based on *STI.45.1*, it is impossible that any being is presupposed to the emanation of universal being from the first principle.²⁶ John Knasas agrees that Aquinas does in fact attribute a doctrine of creation to Aristotle, but is quick to observe that this is not the position of the historical Aristotle, but “Aristotle as mediated through Aquinas’ own metaphysics of being.”²⁷ Rudi te Velde acknowledges that Aquinas never uses the word “creation” while referring to Plato and Aristotle, but holds that “Thomas does think that creation is present, at least implicitly, in the texts of Aristotle and Plato. This is not of course creation in time, but creation understood as causal dependence or, in Platonic terms, participation.”²⁸

Gavin Kerr and Wippel take a slightly different approach and suggest that Aquinas changed his mind after *DP III.5*, denying a doctrine

²⁶ Lawrence Dewan, “Thomas Aquinas, Creation, and Two Historians,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 50 (1994): 368–369. In *STI.45.1*, Aquinas writes: “Unde, si consideretur emanatio totius entis universalis a primo principio, impossibile est quod aliquod ens praesupponatur huic emanationi.” To this, I would add that, for Aquinas, a universal cause of being is incompatible with working from pre-existent matter. In *SCG II.15*, Aquinas gives several arguments to show that God is the cause of being for all things, Aquinas then concludes by stating that from this the errors of the ancient physicists are set aside who held that certain bodies have no cause. In *SCG II.16*, Aquinas then writes: „Unaquaeque materia per formam superinductam contrahitur ad aliquam speciem. Operari ergo ex materia praeiacente superinducendo formam quocumque modo, est agentis ad aliquam determinatam speciem. Tale autem agens est agens particulare: causae enim causatis proportionales sunt. Agens igitur quod requirit ex necessitate materiam praeiacentem ex qua operetur, est agens particulare. Deus autem est agens sicut causa universalis essendi, ut supra ostensum est. Igitur ipse in sua actione materiam praeiacentem non requirit.” We see here that an agent that works by introducing a form to pre-existing matter is, for Aquinas, a particular agent. Aquinas then goes on to contrast such a particular agent with God who is the universal cause of being and as such does not require preexisting matter.

²⁷ John Knasas, “Aquinas’ Ascription of Creation to Aristotle,” *Angelicum* 73:1 (1996): 489.

²⁸ Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (Routledge: London 2006), 142. See the fourth endnote.

of creation to Plato and Aristotle in *ST I.44.2*. Wippel writes, “the simpler solution seems to be that in the text from the *Summa Theologiae*. Thomas has changed his mind about this point, notwithstanding the relatively short period of time between this text (1266–68) and *De Potentia* (1265–66)—and apparently changed it again.”²⁹ Kerr concurs:

I think the safest option is the following. If Aquinas did change his mind in the *Summa Theologiae*, he quickly changed it back again, and so overall his considered opinion appears to be that Plato and Aristotle arrived at the knowledge of a cause of the *esse* of things and so at the doctrine of creation.³⁰

Taking *ST I.44.2* in Context

ST I.44.2 does not look so problematic, however, if read in the context of the preceding article. In question 44, Aquinas begins his consideration of the procession of creatures from God and in the first article asks *utrum Deus sit causa efficiens omnium entium?* Furthermore, the first objection makes it clear that this is the same as the question of creation since it attempts to argue that *videtur quod non sit necessarium omne ens esse creatum a Deo*. Aquinas answers in the affirmative and states that whatever is in any way is from God (*quod necesse est dicere omne quod quocumque modo est, a Deo esse*). In the *respondeo* Aquinas writes:

For if something is found in another by participation, it is necessary that it be caused by that to which it belongs essentially, as iron is ignited by fire. However, it was shown above when treating of the divine simplicity that God is *ipsum esse per se subsistens*. And again, it was shown

²⁹ Wippel, “Aquinas on Creation and the Preambles of Faith,” 22–23.

³⁰ Kerr, *Aquinas and the Metaphysics of Creation*, 41–42.

that *esse subsistens* must be one, as if there were a subsisting whiteness it could only be one, since whiteness is multiplied according to the things that receive it. It remains therefore that all others are not their own being but participate in being, except for God. It is necessary therefore that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being so that they are more or less perfect are caused by the first being, which is most perfect.³¹

Here Aquinas gives an argument based on participation in *esse* to conclude that all things that participate in *esse* and so are not their own *esse* must be caused by the first and most perfect being which is God: *ipsum esse per se subsistens*. Aquinas is of course appealing to his distinctive metaphysics of *esse* in this argument, but what is particularly interesting about this is that Aquinas goes on to connect this metaphysics of *esse* with Plato and Aristotle and writes:

Whence Plato said that it is necessary to put a unity over every multitude. And Aristotle says in *Metaphysics* II that that which is maximally a being and true is the cause of all being and truth.³²

³¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.44.1: "Respondeo dicendum quod necesse est dicere omne quod quocumque modo est, a Deo esse. Si enim aliquid invenitur in aliquo per participationem, necesse est quod causetur in ipso ab eo cui essentialiter convenit; sicut ferrum fit ignitum ab igne. Ostensum est autem supra, cum de divina simplicitate ageretur, quod Deus est ipsum esse per se subsistens. Et iterum ostensum est quod esse subsistens non potest esse nisi unum, sicut si albedo esset subsistens, non posset esse nisi una, cum albedines multiplicentur secundum recipientia. Relinquitur ergo quod omnia alia a Deo non sint suum esse, sed participant esse. Necesse est igitur omnia quae diversificantur secundum diversam participationem essendi, ut sint perfectius vel minus perfecte, causari ab uno primo ente, quod perfectissime est."

³² *Ibid.*: "Unde et Plato dixit quod necesse est ante omnem multitudinem ponere unitatem. Et Aristoteles dicit, in II *Metaphys.*, quod id quod est maxime ens et maxime verum, est causa omnis entis et omnis veri, sicut id quod maxime calidum est, est causa omnis caliditatis."

Thus, Aquinas sees a deep compatibility between his metaphysics of *esse*, which leads to the conclusion that God is the efficient cause of all being, and the principles found in Plato and Aristotle. With this in mind, we can see that *ST* I.44.1 is strongly reminiscent of the arguments of Plato and Aristotle in *DP* III.5 since here Aquinas cites the very principles upon which those arguments are based and again explicitly names Plato and Aristotle.³³

What then are we to make of *ST* I.44.2? This text is a further explication of what is implicit in the conclusion of *ST* I.44.1, making clear that primary matter is also caused by God. In fact, *ST* I.44.2 concludes in much the same way as *ST* I.44.1 began—making the point that whatever is in any way is from God.³⁴ It is therefore implicit in *ST* I.44.1 that even primary matter is from God. Thus, it seems quite unlikely

³³ The argument Aquinas presents in the text of *ST* I.44.1 is especially close to the argument that Aquinas attributes to Aristotle in *DP* III.5. Both arguments initially employ the basic principle that what has something by participation must be caused by that to which the participated perfection belongs essentially. Both arguments employ the example of fire being the cause of heat in all things which have heat by participation. Both arguments then state that there is a perfect being. *DP* III.5 states that there is a being that is most perfect since there is an immovable and absolutely perfect mover. Thus, all other beings must derive their being from it. *ST* I.44.1 employs the earlier conclusion that in God essence and existence are identical and that God is self-subsisting being and concludes that God must be the cause of being for all things that have being by participation. Interestingly, in the *DP* III.5, Aquinas is combining the principle taken from *Metaphysics* II that what is maximally a being is the cause of being for all other things, and which is also employed in *ST* I.44.1, with Aristotle's conclusion that there must be a Prime Mover that is Pure Act. Since this Prime Mover is Pure Act and so is maximally a being, Aquinas seems to be reasoning that it must then be the cause of being for all other things.

³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.44.2: "Hoc igitur quod est causa rerum in quantum sunt entia, oportet esse causam rerum, non solum secundum quod sunt talia per formas accidentales, nec secundum quod sunt haec per formas substantiales, sed etiam secundum omne illud quod pertinet ad esse illorum quocumque modo. Et sic oportet ponere etiam materiam primam creatam ab universali causa entium."

that if Aquinas will connect Plato and Aristotle to his understanding of creation in *DP* III.5 and *ST* I.44.1 that he would then immediately thereafter deny this in the next article.

Wippel argues, however, that *ST* I.44.1 does not explicitly attribute a doctrine of creation to Plato or Aristotle and so is able to conclude that Aquinas denies such a doctrine to them in the next article.³⁵ While Aquinas does not explicitly say in this text that Aristotle and Plato had doctrines of creation, he certainly thinks that their basic metaphysical principles are consistent with his own. Thus, for Aquinas to employ these principles derived from Plato and Aristotle, nearly as conclusions of his own argument, and then deny that they even rose to a properly metaphysical consideration of things in the next article, is *inconveniens*. Further, it is especially unlikely, and I would even say impossible, that Aquinas could say of Aristotle in *ST* I.44.1 that what is maximally a being is the *causa omnis entis* and then turn around and state that Aristotle failed to consider being qua being in *ST* I.44.2. Instead, I suggest, Aquinas is moving quickly in *ST* I.44.2 (it is a short article, the *respondeo* is less than half the size of that of *DP* III.5) and used the word “aliqui” because he is moving quickly. He simply does not want to take the time to spell out who exactly the *aliqui* are, perhaps because he has dealt with this in *DP* III.5, but also because he just informed the reader in the previous article of how Aristotle and Plato are compatible with his understanding of God as the efficient cause of all being such that whatever is in any way is from God.

Why then do Aristotle and Plato get referred to as among the second group of philosophers who failed to arrive at a consideration of being qua being? In fact, they do not. With Johnson, I take Aquinas' reference to the oblique circle and the ideas (*ut obliquum circumulum, secundum Aristotelem, vel ideas, secundum Platonem*) as examples of

³⁵ Wippel, “Aquinas on Creation and the Preambles of Faith,” 19–20.

the kind of causes the second group of philosophers posited either as reported by Plato and Aristotle or as examples of a more universal cause of substantial change present in their thought that nevertheless does not fully exhaust their account of universal causality. Thus, in this one line, Aquinas is by no means giving us an exhaustive account of his interpretation of Plato and Aristotle.³⁶ With this interpretation then, we can present Aquinas as consistently attributing to Aristotle a doc-

³⁶Johnson, “Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?” 146: “Could Aristotle be among these philosophers who arrived at a knowledge of being as being? Even if Gilson did incorrectly read the utriusque, one cannot ignore the fact that St. Thomas uses Aristotle’s elliptic circle as an example of a more universal cause of substantial being (hoc ens). Furthermore, he does not name Aristotle explicitly here as he did in the corresponding portion of the *De Potentia*. All the same, I myself do not think that Aristotle is out of the running here. My reason for this is that Aristotle’s elliptic circle is cited here by St. Thomas as an example of the kind of more universal cause assigned by those in the second group of philosophers, namely those who spoke of the essential transmutations of bodies brought about by substantial forms.” Johnson’s conclusion could be supported by a brief consideration of Aquinas’ *Commentary on the Divine Names*. In the prologue, Aquinas notes that Dionysius uses the mode of speaking of the Platonists. Aquinas then notes that the Platonists wanted to reduce all composite material things to simple, separate principles. Thus, they posited a separate per se human being, or human being itself, from which sensible human beings were derived. Here we could add that according to the Platonists, as interpreted by Aquinas, such a per se human being would not be a universal cause of being but a cause of this or that being. Aquinas, however, rejects this postulation of separate species as inconsistent with the Catholic Faith. Yet, the Platonists, says Aquinas, also posited a separate Good, Unity, and Being from which all other things which are said to be good or being are derived. And to this account of separate forms, which Aquinas interprets as being synonymous with God, Aquinas tells us that the opinion of the Platonists “is most true and in accord with the Christian Faith (*verissima est eorum opinio et fidei Christianae consona*).” Thus, the positing of separate species of material objects does not exhaust the universal causality of the Platonists. Thomas Aquinas, *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus*, proemium, ed. Fr. Ceslari Pera O.P., (Marietti: Taurini 1950). Interestingly, Aquinas ascribes this same account to Plato in *ST* I.6.4. Furthermore, as Rudi te Velde notes, “The ‘oblique circle’ is a reference to the ecliptic cycle of the sun—its yearly path among the stars—which, in Aristotle’s view, is responsible for the natural cycle of generation and corruption on earth.” Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The ‘Divine Science’ of the*

trine of creation throughout the entirety of his career and consistently attributing one to Plato from the 1260s on.³⁷ Finally, while I do not believe that we should read ST I.44.2 as excluding Plato and Aristotle from the *aliqui*, Houser's insight that Avicenna is included in the *aliqui* is a good one since, as we shall see, Avicenna is indispensable for Aquinas' philosophical account of creation.

The Importance of Avicenna

Because Plato and Aristotle do not have doctrines of creation *ex nihilo*, they cannot really be sources, or at least the main sources, for Aquinas' thought on this matter. Instead, I suggest, Aquinas reads his

Summa Theologiae, 135. Yet, it seems, the oblique circle does not exhaust the universal causality that Aquinas will attribute to Aristotle.

³⁷ If we remember that creation is the emanation of all being from the universal first cause, which is God, we can see Aquinas again attributes a doctrine of creation to Plato and Aristotle in *On Separate Substances* IX: Sed ultra hunc modum fiendi necesse est, secundum sententiam Platonis et Aristotelis, ponere alium altiore. Cum enim necesse sit primum principium simplicissimum esse, necesse est quod non hoc modo esse ponatur quasi esse participans, sed quasi ipsum esse existens. Quia vero esse subsistens non potest esse nisi unum, sicut supra habitum est, necesse est omnia alia quae sub ipso sunt, sic esse quasi esse participantia. Oportet igitur ncreat quamdam resolutionem in omnibus huiusmodi fieri, secundum quod unumquodque eorum intellectu resolvitur in id quod est, et in suum esse. Oportet igitur supra modum fiendi quo aliquid fit, forma materiae adveniente, praecintelligere aliam rerum originem, secundum quod esse attribuitur toti universitati rerum a primo ente, quod est suum esse. Aquinas then concludes chapter: Non ergo aestimandum est quod Plato et Aristoteles, propter hoc quod posuerunt substantias immateriales seu etiam caelestia corpora semper fuisse, eis subtraxerunt causam essendi. Non enim in hoc a sententia Catholicae fidei deviarunt, quod huiusmodi posuerunt ncreate, sed quia posuerunt ea semper fuisse, cuius contrarium fides Catholica tenet." Thomas Aquinas, *On Separate Substance* IX, in *Opuscula I in Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 55 (Aquinas Institute: Green Bay WI 2020). The Latin text of this work is taken from The Leonine Edition, Vol. 40D (1968).

doctrine of creation, which he takes from Avicenna, into Plato and Aristotle. To see this, we must first examine the importance of Avicenna for Aquinas' doctrine of creation.

In *Scriptum Super Sententiis* II d.1.q.1 a.1–5, Aquinas presents one of his earliest and most substantial treatments of creation and, as Luis Xavier Lopez-Farjeat has observed, in these articles Aquinas, while arriving at a novel understanding of creation, relied on Avicenna.³⁸ In the first article, Aquinas asks *utrum sit tantum unum primum principium?* He gives three arguments to the affirmative but only the second directly concerns us here. There we find:

In another way, this appears from the nature of things. For in all things is found the nature of being, in some it is more noble and in others less so. Nevertheless, the natures of the things themselves are not the being itself that they have. Otherwise being would pertain to the understanding of every quiddity, which is false since the quiddity of any given thing is able to be understood without understanding whether the thing is. Therefore it is necessary that they have being from something else and arrive at something whose nature is its own being, otherwise we would proceed into infinity. And that which gives being to all things can only be one since the nature of being is one notion in all things according to analogy, for the unity in what is caused requires unity in the per se cause, and this is the way of Avicenna.³⁹

We see here that for Aquinas it is in fact Avicenna who is the source of his famous doctrine of the distinction between essence and exist-

³⁸ Luis Xavier Lopez-Farjeat, "Avicenna's Influence on Aquinas' Early Doctrine of Creation in 'In II Sent.' D.1, Q.1, A.2," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 79:2 (2012), 307–337.

³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* II d.1.1.1, ed. P. Mandonnet and M. Moos (Paris, 1929–1947): "Aliter apparet ex ipsa rerum natura. Invenitur enim

tence and his argumentation for God's existence based on this distinction. Concerning the importance of Avicenna for Aquinas' doctrine of the real distinction, Houser writes:

It was Avicenna, not Aristotle, who had seen that being (*esse*) is an ontological principle distinct from quiddity (*res*) in a way which makes *esse* the most universal of traits and the cause of *esse* the most universal of all causes.⁴⁰

This argument begins with the fact that things possess being to varying degrees, are not identical to the being they possess, and so do not have being in virtue of their own quiddities. It follows from this that such things must have being from something else and we must ultimately arrive at something whose very nature it is to be and such a reality can only be one. Speaking of God, the Necessary Existent, in *The Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.3, Avicenna writes:

everything other than Him, if considered in itself, [is found to be] possible in its existence and hence caused, and it is seen that, [in the chain of things] being caused, [the caused existents] necessarily terminate with Him. Therefore, everything, with the exception of the One who in His essence is one and the existent who in His essence is an existent, acquires existence from another, becoming through it an existent, being

in omnibus rebus natura entitatis, in quibusdam magis nobilis, et in quibusdam minus; ita tamen quod ipsarum rerum naturae non sunt hoc ipsum esse quod habent: alias esse esset de intellectu cujuslibet quidditatis, quod falsum est, cum quidditas cujuslibet rei possit intelligi esse non intelligendo de ea an sit. Ergo oportet quod ab aliquo esse habeant, et oportet devenire ad aliquid cujus natura sit ipsum suum esse; alias in infinitum procederetur; et hoc est quod dat esse omnibus, nec potest esse nisi unum, cum natura entitatis sit unius rationis in omnibus secundum analogiam; unitas enim causati requirit unitatem in causa per se; et haec est via Avicennae."

⁴⁰ Houser, "Avicenna, 'Aliqui, and Thomas Aquinas's Doctrine of Creation,'" 48.

in itself a nonexistent. This is the meaning of a thing's being created—that is, attaining existence from another. It has absolute nonexistence which it deserves in terms of itself; it is deserving of non-existence not only in terms of its form without its matter, or in terms of its matter without its form, but in its entirety. Hence, if its entirety is not connected with the necessitation of the being that brings about its existence, and it is reckoned as being dissociated from it, then in its entirety its nonexistence becomes necessary. Hence, its coming into being at the hands of what brings about its existence is in its entirety.⁴¹

Everything other than the Necessary Existent is, considered in itself, a possible being or nonexistent since it does not have existence in virtue of its own nature. As such, everything other than the Necessary Existent, who in its essence is an existent and exists by its very nature, must be caused by the Necessary Existent since in itself it has absolute nonexistence, not only with regard to its matter or form, but in its entirety.

⁴¹ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, trans. and ed. Michael E. Marmura (Brigham Young University Press: Provo UT 2005), 272. For the sake of clarity of translation, I cite Marmura's translation from the Arabic. However, note the Latin text of Avicenna which was available to Aquinas: "Unde quicquid aliud est ab illo, cum consideratur per se, est possibile in suo esse, et ideo est causatum et paene innotuit quod in causalitate sine dubio pervenitur ad ipsum. Unde quicquid est, excepto uno quod est sibi ipsi unum et ente quod est sibi ipsi ens, est acquirens esse ab alio a se, per quod est sibi esse, non per se. *Et haec est intentio de hoc quod res est creata, scilicet quod est recipiens esse ab alio a se et habet privationem quae certificatur ei in sua essentia absolute, non quod certificetur ei privatio propter suam formam absque sua materia, vel propter suam materiam absque sua forma, sed per suam totalitatem.* Igitur si sua totalitas non fuerit simul cum debito essendi datorem esse, tunc, si posuerit ipsum remotum ab ea, debebit esse privatio eius cum sua totalitate; quod est oppositum ad ipsam esse a datore essendi ipsam cum sua totalitate." Avicenna Latinus, *Liber De Philosophia Prima Sive Scientia Divina V–X, VIII.4* Édition critique de la traduction latine médiévale, par S. van Riet (E. J. Brill: Leiden 1980), 396. Italics are mine.

Thus, while Aquinas' argumentation for God's existence based on the distinction between essence and existence has its philosophical origination in the thought of Avicenna, Aquinas also follows Avicenna when he explicates the nature of creation. In the second article, Aquinas asks *utrum aliquid possit exire ab eo per creationem?*⁴² In the *respondeo*, Aquinas tells us that creation is not only held on faith but can be demonstrated by reason since everything that is imperfect in some genus arises from that in which the nature of the genus is realized primarily and perfectly, as heat in things that are hot comes forth from fire. In a similar way, for all those things that participate in being, it is necessary that all that is in them comes from the first and perfect being (*oportet quod omnis res, secundum totum id quod in ea est, a primo et perfecto ente oriatur*). Aquinas concludes that this is creation, i.e., the production of a thing in being according to its whole substance: "Hoc autem creare dicimus, scilicet producere rem in esse secundum totam suam substantiam."

Aquinas then explains that creation involves two things. First, creation presupposes nothing in the thing that is said to be created and so is unlike generation and accidental change which presuppose some subject. Thus, creation is from nothing. Secondly, in the created thing, non-being is prior to being not by a priority of time but a priority of nature such that if the created thing were left to itself it would revert to non-being. If these two senses of "from nothing" suffice for the notion of creation, Aquinas concludes that creation can be demonstrated. However, if a third sense of "from nothing" is added so that what is created has non-being before it with respect to duration and time, such that it comes after nothing in time, then creation cannot be demonstrated, but must be held on faith.

This second article also bears the essential notes of Avicenna's doctrine of creation. As we have seen, according to Avicenna, for the

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, II d.1.1.2.

Necessary Existent to create is to produce its effect in being according to its entirety, without which the effect would be nothing. Aquinas follows Avicenna here by holding that to create is to produce a thing in being according to its whole substance. Aquinas also draws on Avicenna's *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.3 for his position that creation *ex nihilo* does not indicate a temporal priority of creator to creatures but an essential priority. As Avicenna writes of the priority of nonexistence to the posteriority of existence in creatures:

the posteriority here is essential posteriority. For, the state of affairs that a thing possesses from itself precedes that which it has from another. If it has existence and necessity from another, then from itself it has nonexistence and possibility. Its nonexistence was prior to its existence, and its existence is posterior to nonexistence, [involving] a priority and posteriority in essence. Hence, in the case of everything other than the First, the One, its existence comes about after not having been —[a non-being] that it itself deserves.⁴³

Thus we see that Aquinas' account of creation draws on Avicenna in four essential ways: 1) the fact that creatures do not possess existence in virtue of their natures leads to a cause of existence which exists in virtue of its own nature and such a reality can only be one, 2) creation is to produce a thing in being according to its entirety or whole substance, 3) creation is from nothing in the sense that it pre-

⁴³ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 272–273. Again, note the Latin text available to Aquinas: “Igitur post quod est hic est post quod est per essentiam, quia id quod est rei ex se ipsa prius est eo quod est ei ex alio a se; postquam autem est ei ex alio esse et debitum essendi, tunc habet ex se privationem et possibilitatem, et fuit eius privatio ante esse eius «et esse eius» post privationem eius prioritate et posterioritate per essentiam. Igitur omnis res, excepto primo, est postquam non fuit ens, quantum in se est.” Avicenna Latinus, *Liber De Philosophia Prima Sive Scientia Divina* V–X, VIII. 4, 397.

supposes nothing in the created thing (Avicenna is clear that in terms of itself the creature deserves nonexistence with respect to both its matter and form), 4) in the created thing nonbeing is prior to being not necessarily by a temporal priority but by an essential priority. Aquinas then confirms his agreement with Avicenna in the response to the second objection to the contrary in the fifth article:

Avicenna responds in his *Metaphysics*, for he says that all things have been created by God and that creation is from nothing or that it has its being after nothing. But this can be understood in two ways. Either as designating the order of duration, and thus according to him it is false. Or as designating the order of nature, and in this way it is true. For according to its nature, what belongs to each thing from itself is prior to what belongs to it from another. But everything besides God has being from another. And therefore it is necessary that according to its nature it has non-being, except that it has being from God. Gregory also says that all things would fall into nothingness except that his omnipotent hands uphold them. And thus the non-being that it has from itself naturally is prior to the being which it has from another, even if not by duration. And in this way the philosophers conceded that they were made and created by God.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* II d.1.1.5 ad 2c: "Ad secundum respondet Avicenna in sua metaphysica: dicit enim omnes res a Deo creatas esse, et quod creatio est ex nihilo, vel ejus quod habet esse post nihil. Sed hoc potest intelligi dupliciter: vel quod designetur ordo durationis, et sic secundum eum falsum est; aut quod designetur ordo naturae, et sic verum est. Unicuique enim est prius secundum naturam illud quod est ei ex se, quam id quod est ei ab alio. Quaelibet autem res praeter Deum habet esse ab alio. Ergo oportet quod secundum naturam suam esset non ens, nisi a Deo esse haberet; sicut etiam dicit Gregorius quod omnia in nihilum deciderent, nisi ea manus omnipotentis contineret: et ita non esse quod ex se habet naturaliter, est prius quam esse quod ab alio habet, etsi non duratione; et per hunc modum conceduntur a philosophis res a Deo creatae et factae."

Here we see Aquinas is clearly in agreement with Avicenna regarding the way in which creation is from nothing, which he earlier adopted as his own understanding of *ex nihilo*. The key difference, however, is that for Aquinas, the temporal beginning of the universe is true but can only be held on faith, while Avicenna holds that the universe is in fact eternally ontologically dependent on the Necessary Being (Aquinas will also object to the Avicennian view that God creates the world necessarily, but this issue would take us too far afield).

Before moving on to a final consideration of Plato and Aristotle, it is worth mentioning Aquinas' employment of Avicenna's distinction between the natural agent cause that acts through motion and the divine agent cause which is a cause of being. In *Scriptum super Sententiis* II d. I. q.1. a.2 ad 1, Aquinas writes:

According to Avicenna, there are two kinds of agent: a certain natural one, which acts through motion, and a divine one, which gives being, as was said. And similarly, we must take what has been acted upon or what has been made in two ways. One through the motion of a natural agent. And in every such coming to be, not only active potency but also passive potency must precede in time, because motion is the act of what exists in potency. The other is made insofar as it receives being from the divine agent without motion.⁴⁵

In this text, Aquinas even uses the very same terminology of the Latin Avicenna's *Metaphysics of the Healing* VIII.3, since Aquinas

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* II d.1.1.2 ad 1. "Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod secundum Avicennam, duplex est agens: quoddam naturale quod est agens per motum, et quoddam divinum quod est dans esse, ut dictum est. Et similiter oportet accipere duplex actum vel factum: quoddam per motum agentis naturalis; et omne tale fieri oportet quod praecedat tempore potentia non tantum activa, sed etiam passiva: quia motus est actus existentis in potentia. Quoddam vero est factum, in quantum recipit esse ab agente divino sine motu."

speaks of the creature as *recipit esse* from the divine agent, while the Latin Avicenna referred to the creature as *recipiens esse*. Furthermore, this distinction between the divine and natural agent cause is drawn from Avicenna's *Metaphysics of the Healing* VI.1. Avicenna writes:

the metaphysical philosophers do not mean by "agent" only the principle of motion, as the naturalists mean, but the principle and giver of existence, as in the case of God with respect to the world. As for the natural efficient cause, it does not bestow any existence other than motion in one of the forms of motion. Thus, in the natural sciences, that which bestows existence is a principle of motion.⁴⁶

With this Avicennian background in mind, and especially the understanding that the eternity of the universe does not preclude its being created *ex nihilo*, we can then see that Aquinas reads this distinction between the natural agent cause, which acts through motion, and the divine agent cause, which is its own *esse*, into Plato and Aristotle. In *De Substantis Separatis* (DSS) IX, a much later work dating to 1271,⁴⁷ Aquinas tells us that those who first began to philosophize considered all change to be merely alteration and considered matter to be the uncreated substance of things. Others came along who were able to see that certain corporeal substances had a cause of their being and reduced corporeal substances to corporeal principles, such as the combination and separation of certain bodies. Later still, philosophers resolved sensible sub-

⁴⁶ Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, 195. In the Latin we find: "divini philosophi non intelligunt per agentem principium motionis tantum, sicut intelligunt naturales, sed principium essendi et datorem eius, sicut creator mundi; causa vero agens naturalis non acquirit esse rei nisi motionem aliquam ex modis motionum; igitur acquirit esse naturalibus est principium motus." Avicenna Latinus, *Liber De Philosophia Prima Sive Scientia Divina* V–X, VI.1, 292.

⁴⁷ Wippel, "Aquinas on Creation and the Preambles of Faith," 25.

stances into their essential parts of matter and form and grasped that matter is subject to diverse forms. In short, this group had arrived at knowledge of substantial change. Finally, Aquinas tells us, according to the teaching of Plato and Aristotle, it is necessary to posit a still higher way of coming into being (*sed ultra hunc modum fiendi necesse est, secundum sententiam Platonis et Aristotelis, ponere alium altiozem*) and that above the mode of coming to be by which form comes to matter, is presupposed another origin of things according to which *esse* is granted to the total universe of things from the first being which is its own being (*oportet igitur supra modum fiendi quo aliquid fit, forma materiae adveniente, praeintelligere aliam rerum originem, secundum quod esse attribuitur toti universitati rerum a primo ente, quod est suum esse*).⁴⁸

From the preceding examination, we can gauge the importance of Avicenna for some of Aquinas' most important doctrines pertaining to his metaphysics of *esse* and understanding of creation. Houser is correct to point out that Avicenna is the core influence behind Aquinas' metaphysics of *esse* and doctrine of creation. Nevertheless, I suggest that the principles Aquinas appeals to in *ST* I.44.1—that according to Plato it is necessary to put before every multitude a unity and according to Aristotle that what is maximally a being is the cause of all being as the maximum in heat is the cause of all heat—become occasions for him to interpret Aristotle and Plato in light of his own Avicennian metaphysics of *esse*. Aquinas, thus, attributes a deep compatibility to Plato and Aristotle on this issue, often referring to them both in the same text, such as in *DP* III.5, *ST* I44.1 and *DSS* IX—a unique interpretation of Plato and Aristotle that was certainly not adopted by all in Aquinas' own time.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, while Aquinas draws heavily on

⁴⁸ Note that Aquinas again employs the verb *attribuere* just as he had previously done three times in *DP* III.5.

⁴⁹ Another text where Aquinas seems to do this, but this time connecting Aristotle to the "Platonists," is his commentary on the third proposition of the *Liber De Causis*.

Avicenna, from his histories of philosophy we can conclude that he regards Plato and Aristotle as the founders of the philosophical tradition that arrives at the consideration of being qua being and posits a universal cause of being. And, I suggest, Aquinas saw himself very much as the inheritor of this classical tradition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, for the entirety of his career, Aquinas attributed a doctrine of creation to Aristotle and, from the 1260s on, attributes one to Plato as well. Nor does *ST I.44.2* present a challenge to this fact. Since, however, Plato and Aristotle do not actually possess doctrines of creation *ex nihilo*, Aquinas reads his own metaphysics of *esse* and creation into Plato and Aristotle through the Platonic principle that above every multitude there must be a unity and the Aristotelian principle that what is maximally *ens* is the *causa omnis entis*. Yet, to fully appreciate Aquinas' doctrine of creation, we have had to examine the influence of key Avicennian elements on Aquinas, especially in the *Scriptum super Sententiis*, namely that creation is ontological dependence in *esse*, without which the creature would be nothing, and as such does not neces-

There we find: "The Platonists maintained that being itself is the cause of existing for all things, while life itself is the cause of living for everything [that lives], and intelligence itself is the cause of understanding for everything [that understands]. So Proclus says in Proposition 18 of his book: 'Everything that dispenses being to others is itself originally that which it gives to the recipients of the dispensation.' Aristotle agrees with this opinion when he says in Book 2 of the *Metaphysics* that what is first and a being to the greatest degree is the cause of subsequent beings. So, according to what was previously said, we should understand that the soul's very essence was created by the first cause, which is its very own being." Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Causes*, trans. Vincent A. Guagliardo, Charles R. Hess, and Richard C. Taylor (Catholic University of America Press: Washington D.C. 1996), 24.

sarily entail a temporal beginning of the universe. With such an understanding of creation, attributing such a position to Aristotle becomes much less problematic, if albeit not completely satisfactory from the standpoint of the Christian faith. While a more complete analysis of Aquinas' understanding of creation (which this paper did not claim to attempt) would necessarily require an examination of the many important ways in which Aquinas' account differs from that of Avicenna, as well as the other sources Aquinas draws on, especially the *Liber de Causis* and Pseudo-Dionysius, we can see that Avicenna is an indispensable source for Aquinas' unique understanding of creation.



Aquinas' Attribution of Creation *Ex Nihilo* to Plato and Aristotle:
The Importance of Avicenna

SUMMARY

There is some debate among interpreters of Aquinas as to whether he attributed a doctrine of creation to Plato and Aristotle. Mark Johnson has noted many texts where Aquinas does appear to attribute to Plato and Aristotle an understanding of creation. Yet, an initial glance at *Summa Theologiae* I.44.2 would suggest he did not. This paper first examines what various interpreters of Aquinas have had to say on the matter. Secondly, it argues that *Summa Theologiae* I.44.2, taken in context with the preceding article and *De Potentia* III.5, need not be read as denying such a doctrine to Plato and Aristotle. Thirdly, this paper concludes that because Plato and Aristotle do not actually possess doctrines of creation, they cannot be the chief sources for Aquinas' own thought on this matter. Instead, to attribute creation to Plato and Aristotle, Aquinas interprets them through Avicenna. Thus, Avicenna is the chief source for Aquinas' understanding of creation.

Keywords: Aquinas, Creation, Aristotle, Plato, Avicenna

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