

**Aquinas and Bonaventure:
The World's Beginning in Time**

Mark Hellinger
PHIL 211: Medieval Philosophy
March 27, 2015

One of the questions that the Medieval Philosophers pondered was the question of whether or not the world had a beginning in time. Both St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure disagree with Aristotle, Avicenna, and others, concluding that the world did indeed have a beginning. They disagree, however, on the ability to use reason to conclude that the world is not eternal. As St. Bonaventure says, one can prove that the world is not eternal; it is an article of faith, but one that can be reasoned to as well.

St. Bonaventure posits the position that the world is not eternal and one can prove that this is the case. “It has to be said that to maintain that the world is eternal or eternally produced by claiming that all things have been produced out of nothing is entirely against truth and reason...”¹ To claim that the world is eternal, one would have to presuppose that matter is also eternal. An analogy he provides for this position (taken from St. Augustine) is that of a foot making an imprint on dust. It can be said that both the foot and the dust are eternal, but the footprint formed by the foot is still a creation of the foot. St. Bonaventure argues that matter cannot be eternal by pointing out, “For by means of an infinite power, which does not need the support of matter, it is just as easy that something be produced out of nothing as from something else. Otherwise the power of the first principle would not be infinite, but it would need the foundation of matter.”² Thus it is clear that the matter with which the world was made cannot be eternal, or God’s power

1 Bonaventure, *Commentary on The Sentences*, bk. II, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2, in St. Thomas, Siger of Brabant, & St. Bonaventure, *On the Eternity of the World*, ed. & trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J., Lottie Kendzierski, & Paul Byrne (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1965), 110.

2 Bonaventure, *Commentary on The Sentences*, bk. II, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1, trans. Daniel Shields (class handout, Spring 2015), 5.

would not be infinite. Further, matter can be made from nothing and this is expressed in the difference between creating and making. “In regards the objection that action takes place on something, it is said that *to create* is not to act, but *to make*, and this refers [to the difference] between acting and making. For acting requires something *on which* one acts, not something *which* one acts, whereas the converse is true for making.”³ God can make the world’s matter and form. He does not have to add a form to already existing matter to “create” the world. Realizing that matter is not eternal and has to have been created is key to reaching the conclusion that the world is not eternal. For if the matter that makes the world is not eternal, neither is the world that the matter makes.

A new problem then arises; if God created the world he would have changed in his eternal being to move from not creating the world to creating the world. St.

Bonaventure answers this:

Accordingly, the divine will, which operates by way of wisdom, has produced the world not from eternity but in time, since, as He has produced so has He disposed and so has He willed. For He has willed from eternity to produce then when He has produced, just as I will now to hear Mass tomorrow.⁴

There is, then, no reason God did not create the world in time; this however, is not proof that He did. To really answer the question St. Bonaventure must explain time. “To the objection concerning time, as to when has it begun, it must be said that it began in its own beginning. But, the source of time is the instant or “now”; and so it began in an

³ Bonaventure, q. 1, 5. (Italics and brackets by translator)

⁴ Bonaventure, q. 2, 113.

instant.”⁵ Time is hard to understand in its relation to God, who is outside of Time. If time had its own beginning and the only time that is known or experienced is the “now,” then God created time with the “motion of change.” Through the change, God creating the world, time was created with it and therefore the world was created in time.⁶

In contrast to St. Bonaventure, St. Thomas Aquinas argues that, though by faith it is known the world had a beginning in time, reason alone cannot prove it with certainty. “That the world did not always exist we hold by faith alone: it cannot be proved demonstratively...”⁷ Both philosophers agree that the world is not eternal. St. Thomas simply does not believe that one can prove any of this demonstratively, but must rely on faith to reach this truth.

Aquinas argues his point by showing that both sides lack a conclusive argument, therefore no definitive conclusion can be reached by reason. He begins by showing that the world does not necessarily exist eternally. God’s will causes all things and He has a perfect free will, therefore He does not have to will anything save Himself. If God willed, the world *could* be eternal, but if God willed, the world *could* also be finite. Therefore, Aquinas states, “It is not therefore necessary for the world to be always; hence neither can it be proven demonstratively.”⁸

⁵ Bonaventure, q. 2, 112.

⁶

Ibid., 112-113.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 46, a. 1-2, in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Hyman, James J. Walsh, and Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010), 491.

⁸ Ibid., 489.

Aquinas responds to the argument posited by Avicenna and others that if the world had a beginning in time God would have had to had changed. He responds by distinguishing between the particular agent and the universal agent. The particular agent introduces a form into preexisting matter. If God was the particular agent, then the world would have to be eternal like Him or he would have changed in time. God, however, is not the particular agent; God is the universal agent. Therefore Aquinas can say, “But the universal agent, who produces both the thing and time, is not correctly described as acting now, and not before...He must be considered as giving time to His effect as much as and when He willed...”⁹ Therefore, God could be said to have created the world in time, but He still cannot be said to have had to.

In article two of question 46 Aquinas directly takes on the question of whether the belief that the world had a beginning is an article of faith. Here he responds to some of Bonaventure’s arguments. One argument that the world had a beginning in time is that humans have been developing in the arts and sciences over time. If the world were eternal, then humans would already be at the peak of technology and the arts because there would have been an infinite amount of time before the present moment for things to advance.¹⁰ This is answered by the idea that the world could be in an infinite loop of “discovery and decay.”¹¹

9
Ibid., 490.

10 Ibid., 491.

11 Ibid., 492.

The argument concerning infinity is split, the first part the argument concerns the infinity of time. The argument is posed stating it would be impossible for time to arrive at the current moment because if the world was infinite, time would have to traverse an infinite amount of itself, which does not make sense because it is apparent that the present moment is happening. Second is the infinite amount of generation. This is the question of whether there could be an infinite amount of people created. If it is the case that the world is eternal an infinite number of souls would exist. This is impossible to Aquinas as he proved in another question.¹² God could have created humans later in time, but even then, the world could have a beginning in time and God still created humans later in time.

Bonaventure seems to have a better argument than Aquinas. If it is understood that God created the world *ex nihilo* then it makes sense that the world would be created in time. If God is He who is before all things, He must have been before there *was* anything. Therefore God *is* before the world *was*. It seems contradictory to say that the world, which functions in time, is infinite. As Bonaventure points out, this creates a problem in the ordering of time, which we experience to be ordered. “If there is no first, there is no order.”¹³ Time is ordered, and it therefore follows that there would be a first moment in time. Everything that happens has an effect on what happens next in time, if

12 Ibid., 493.

13 Bonaventure, q. 2, 108.

time were infinite then time could not be ordered and what happens in each moment could not effect the next because nothing infinite can be ordered.¹⁴

If God exists outside of time, then the very creation of time implies a beginning of it. The world had to have its creation from God, time is not proper to God, He does not live in it, and the creator must be before He can begin creation. Time was not before it was. The beginning of time seems proper because God created the world, which exists in time, and because God is not in time.

Further, the answer that the world could be in an infinite cycle of growth and decay is not satisfying. If civilizations achieve a great technological advancement and then just disappear, it seems unlikely that all evidence of this cycle would be completely lost. Moreover, because there would be an infinite amount of these cycles before the present, it is even more unlikely that no one in the whole of history would have found a trace of these past civilizations. This is especially evident by the current advancements in technology being able to see the geology of the Earth's crust, as well as archeology being able to constantly add to the understanding of the history of the world. Though it could be possible that this argument is true, it seems highly improbable considering that according to the argument, an infinite number of cycles have already occurred.

All of this considered, Aquinas's answer is simply not satisfying. It does not adequately answer some of the points that Bonaventure makes. Bonaventure, therefore, has the more reasonable argument and shows that it is possible to use reason alone to come to the knowledge that the world had a beginning in time.

14 Ibid.

Bibliography

- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 46, a. 1-2, in *Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, edited by Arthur Hyman, James J. Walsh, and Thomas Williams, 487-493. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010.
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 46, a. 3, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, edited by Anton C. Pegis, vol. 1, 455-457. New York: Random House, 1945.
- Bonaventure, *Commentary on The Sentences*, bk. II, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 1, translated by Daniel Shields. Class handout, Spring 2015.
- Bonaventure. *Commentary on The Sentences*, bk. II, d. 1, p. 1, a. 1, q. 2, in St. Thomas, Siger of Brabant, & St. Bonaventure, *On the Eternity of the World*, edited and translated by Cyril Vollert, S.J., Lottie Kendzierski, & Paul Byrne, 106-114. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1965.