

THE THRESHOLD BETWEEN HUMAN RATIONAL RESEARCH AND REVELATION IN THOMAS AQUINAS' *SUMMA CONTRA GENTILES*

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ABSTRACT: Thomas Aquinas represents the figure of the tireless researcher, undoubtedly with great care to the revealed data, but constantly listening to the philosophical contribution, which also becomes fundamental in his theological perspective. It is possible to perceive in him a “thinker on the threshold”, who thus becomes a classic author of theological thought. The *Summa Contra Gentiles* is a privileged place to grasp the relationship between rational thought and listening to Revelation. This is particularly evident in the second book, in which the two methods of research are specifically compared: this “threshold” can be emblematically captured in the discussion about the eternity of the world or its creation. In this context, the contribution of non-Christian philosophy acquires special importance: Thomas freely uses sources such as Averroes, Avicenna, Maimonides, Boethius as well as clearly Aristotle. Standing on the threshold, for Aquinas, becomes a fundamental modality that characterizes him as an indefatigable researcher up to the last years of his life.

Tommaso d'Aquino rappresenta la figura dell'instancabile ricercatore, senza dubbio con grande attenzione al dato rivelato, ma in costante ascolto del contributo filosofico, che diventa anch'esso fondamentale nella sua prospettiva teologica. È possibile percepire in lui un “pensatore sulla soglia”, che diventa quindi un autore classico del pensiero teologico. La *Summa contra gentiles* è un luogo privilegiato per cogliere la relazione tra il pensiero razionale e l'ascolto della Rivelazione. Ciò è particolarmente evidente nel secondo libro, in cui i due metodi di ricerca vengono confrontati in modo specifico: questa “soglia” può essere compresa emblematicamente nella discussione sull'eternità del mondo o la sua creazione. In questo contesto il contributo della filosofia non-cristiana acquista particolare importanza: Tommaso utilizza liberamente fonti quali Averroè, Avicenna, Maimonide, Boezio oltre ovviamente ad Aristotele. Restare sulla soglia per Tommaso d'Aquino diventa una modalità fondamentale che lo caratterizza come un ricercatore infaticabile fino agli ultimi anni della sua vita.

KEYWORDS: Threshold, Philosophy and Theology, Creation, Time, Eternity

PAROLE CHIAVE: Soglia, Filosofia e Teologia, Creazione, Tempo, Eternità

1. Introduction

The *Summa contra Gentiles* assumes a role of great importance in the theme of the “threshold” thanks to the approach that Aquinas claims to have in composing the work. At the beginning of the text it reads:

Multitudinis usus, quem in rebus nominandis sequendum philosophus censet, communiter obtinuit ut sapientes dicantur qui res directe ordinant et eas bene gubernant. Unde inter alia quae homines de sapiente concipiunt, a philosopho ponitur quod “sapientis est ordinare”. Omnium autem ordinatorum ad finem, gubernationis et ordinis regulam ex fine sumi necesse est [...]. Finis autem ultimus uniuscuiusque rei est qui intenditur a primo auctore vel motore ipsius. Primus autem auctor et motor universi est intellectus, ut infra ostendetur. Oportet igitur ultimum finem universi esse bonum intellectus. Hoc autem est veritas (Thomas de Aquino, 1918–1930, I, c.1).

In studying and analysing the progression of Aquinas thought, it can be seen that he often finds himself on the “threshold” between philosophy and theology, making an indisputable contribution to both disciplines. It is well known that he had a certain passion for the study of Aristotelian texts, but also how he freely and without prejudice used texts by Christian and non-Christian authors such as Avicenna, and Averroes. The intent of the research is to find the truth, without “Christianising” these authors, so as to avoid bending their thinking to his own ends (Thomas de Aquino (1886), I, Lc. 22, n. 228). In the field of Aristotelian commentaries this process is particularly evident: “In short, Thomas conducted a particularly scrupulous and meticulous work to learn everything that Aristotle had written, a work that testifies to an impressive scientific seriousness” (Porro 2012, p. 373 — my translation).

The “threshold argument” of the alternative between eternity or creation of the world emerges with particular determination in the text of the *Summa contra gentiles*. This work as a whole assumes a dynamic value between *etic* and *emic*, right from its title. The original title, most likely, was *Liber de veritate catholicae fidei contra errores infidelium*, as

attested by the *incipit* of the manuscripts (cf. Porro 2012, p. 153; Centi 2000, pp. 6–7). This would support the idea that the writing is not a polemic against the Averroists and does not have the intent to refute the theses of the Muslims of Spain⁽¹⁾, but its main purpose is to give foundation, through the use of reason, to the Catholic truth. The text shows a formally theological character (cf. Centi 2020, p. 8), with an important reflection on the philosophical level: in it we find central passages that use a purely philosophical method in addressing issues that have a theological implication. In the period of the elaboration of the *Summa contra gentiles*, in fact, Thomas shows a greater affinity to Aristotle, thus further deepening his philosophical studies to obtain greater theological knowledge (cf. Porro 2012, p. 188).

Est autem in his quae de Deo confitemur duplex veritatis modus. Quaedam namque vera sunt de Deo quae omnem facultatem humanae rationis excedunt, ut Deum esse trinum et unum. Quaedam vero sunt ad quae etiam ratio naturalis pertingere potest, sicut est Deum esse, Deum esse unum, et alia huiusmodi; quae etiam philosophi demonstrative de Deo probaverunt, ducti naturalis lumine rationis (Thomas de Aquino 1918–1930, I, c. 3).

Among the arguments that go beyond pure rational argumentation is that of the alternative between creation and the eternity of the world. In this case, in line with what is proposed in the *Summa theologiae*, the light of human reason turns out to be the guide which places man in the right direction towards the truth, though, for Thomas, Revelation is an even more certain guide to those truths that can be naturally attained by reason (*ibid.*, c.4). In medieval disputes, this theme assumes the value of the threshold between *emic* and *etic*: the Franciscan masters were convinced supporters of the possible rational demonstration of the creation of the world, while the masters of the arts, the so-called

(1) These two hints come from the attestation found in the *Cronaca del re d'Aragona Giacomo I* by Fra' Pietro Marsilio, which would indicate that the text was composed at the request of Raymond of Peñafort. Raymond could have at his disposal a manual that helped to oppose Muslims on a doctrinal level, but this hypothesis, especially in reference to the apologetic intent towards Muslims who would use Averroes as an anti-Christian reference, is somewhat unlikely (cf. Porro 2012, pp. 153–154; Centi 2000, pp. 7–8; Gauthier 1993, p. 165).

radical Aristotelians or Latin Averroists, underlined how it was more rational the affirmation of the eternity of the world in line with the Aristotelian dictum (cf. Porro 2012, p. 439). This discussion fits into the framework of the disputes between “theologians” and “masters of art” in which the *etic-emic* dialectic can be read. For the believer it was impossible to think something different from the creation of the world: this assumes the *emic* point of view in the Aquinas’ context. But he wants to take also an *etic* point of view too, with the argumentation of the eternity of the world: thanks to his insatiable thirst for knowledge, he takes a different approach to offer the contribution of a pure researcher or observer⁽²⁾.

It is interesting that the way of proceeding in researching by Aquinas can be read in this *emic-etic* dynamic. In this sense we find different levels of discussion in which Thomas put himself on the threshold between *emic* and *etic* point of views: the first can be found in the relationship between Theology and Philosophy; the second in the discussion about creation or eternity of the world; the third in the freely use of the non-Christians sources. These three topics emerge with evidence in the pages of the *Summa contra gentiles* that we are quickly analysing here.

2. The relationship between Theology and Philosophy

The relationship between philosophy and theology is transposed into history as that between reason and faith which had extensive discussion and a long tradition, especially in Christian and Catholic reflection⁽³⁾. In Aquinas’ thought this relationship is particularly harmonious: philosophy and theology, as disciplines, are not in conflict with each other, but pursue the achievement of the one Truth, while respecting their own epistemological statutes. Regarding the division of the different spheres of knowledge, the *Commentary on the de Trinitate of Boethius*

(2) To see the meaning of the *emic-etic* binomial in an anthropological context it is possible refer to Harris (1976) and Jorion (1983).

(3) In the context of the reflection on the Philosophy of Religion are particularly relevant the pages written by Aguti on the theme (Aguti 2013, pp. 156–172). On the theme is particularly relevant the text of Oleksowicz (2015, pp. 139–162).

(cf. Thomas de Aquino 1992, q.5, a.1, co.) is particularly relevant, in which speculative and respective sciences are related: physics, mathematics and primary philosophy or metaphysics. Each of them bears its own dignity, but above all philosophy allows us to approach the question of being which becomes central in the theological understanding of God. Clearly the *Sacra Doctrina*, which is based on Scripture, has faith as a distinctive element, which it allows an intelligence of divine realities according to human capacity. The theologian Thomas should have hit his research specially on the truth of revelation, but we can find an “etic” point of view in his modality to be a theologian itself. He investigates in Philosophy principally for two reasons: the taste of research itself; give greater strength to theological thought.

Using an etic point of view he finds a particular harmony between these two disciplines, that can be grasped first of all by considering the freedom with which Tommaso uses a plurality of sources in his research and in the exposition of his theses. The theme of time and the instant, central to the analysis here, truly constitutes an emblematic example of this harmony. In the exposition of the theme, Aquinas, in addition to having accepted the Aristotelian proposal on the discussion about time, a fact that was not to be taken for granted in his time, also makes use of the Arab commentator who also brought with him a considerable legacy of polemics or of prejudices⁽⁴⁾. A look at the general economy of the discussion carried out by Thomas shows how he freely relates to both sources and how he also makes the more specifically Neoplatonic contribution on the topic his own. This freedom thus offers a breadth to the discussion on time, which, although remaining particularly problematic, acquires a particular importance thanks to the specific contribution that Thomas offered to philosophical thought. The connection that he almost spontaneously makes between the various disciplinary fields, even if also present in other authors contemporary to him⁽⁵⁾, is grafted onto what is the specific character of the philosophy of the Angelic doctor. Thus, starting from scientific analysis of

(4) About the reception of Arab philosophers in the scholastic time of XIII century see Esposito and Porro (2009, pp. 273–291); D’Onofrio (2011, pp. 348–383). About the theme of time see Ghisalberti (1967); Trifogli (2000; 2001).

(5) Among his contemporaries the necessary reference is to the treatment of time offered by Albertus Magnus and Alexander of Hales.

the theme of time in relation to movement and number, thanks to the ontological position that the *nunc* acquires, we can grasp how observation and investigation into reality allows a typically Aristotelian process to reach from Physics to Metaphysics. Thanks to a special harmony between these two disciplines, Thomas position avoid an ideologization of one specific perspective. As Fernando Fiorentino states in a recent study on the relevance of St. Thomas, this methodology seems to be more urgent than ever for today's philosophical discussion:

Never before, after the failure felt and denounced by many of modern philosophy, which placed its principle in the *cogito* and which made the rational region its highest instrument, does one feel the need to return to the interrupted path of metaphysics; not, however, of that metaphysics told in its own way by modern philosophy, in the way in which it exists in the minds of those who criticize it, but of the original Aristotelian one, which started from the restlessness of the act of being, which every individuality existing here and now and which anyone who opens their eyes can directly experience (Fiorentino 2017, p. 13 – my translation).

In this sense, the theologian Thomas shows a radical epistemology, which is not satisfied with passively receiving revealed data only for a re-proposal. Throughout the course of his life, he engages with philosophical texts which have contributed not only to making “great” his theological contribution, but his philosophical work has offered ideas that are still fundamental today for the discussion around the reality that surrounds us. In this sense, the Aristotelian comments reside in this insatiable curiosity and continuous desire to search for the truth that animated him throughout his life.

Perhaps the knowledge of lightning and earthquakes was not immediately usable in his theological writings, but Thomas remained convinced [...] that a good theologian had to be, first and foremost, a man of science in general, and retained the duty not to never shy away from the comparison with the profane sciences, if not even to delve deeper into each of them in an analytical way (Porro 2012, p. 403 – my translation).

The importance of the theme taken into consideration here lies precisely in this specific perspective that emerges from Thomas' pages: the immediate context of natural analysis opens up to the perspective of the metaphysical relevance that time has for human existence, cutting across all the disciplines that reason can investigate, up to the gates of theological discussion through the theme of creation in its relationship to temporality. The method used by Thomas on this theme holds together the "physical" and the "metaphysical" but also the "philosopher" and the "theologian", without ever betraying the specific epistemological status that is used from time to time. The harmony between philosophy and theology of Aquinas' works therefore has a privileged place in the theme of time and the instant: "the history and the world acquire a great positivity; a familiarity is established between the eternal and time; man's commitment to the world takes on a clearly fruitful and positive character" (Salvati 2020, p. 72 – my translation).

Philosophical analysis remains in its intrinsic value as a search for truth to offer man, and not only the believer, a meaningful answer on his own existence, on the restlessness deriving from the act of being (cf. Fiorentino 2017, p. 13), but it also opens man to the possibility of welcoming an Other truth which on the one hand surpasses him, but on the other always pushes him to new research.

From this new style of approach to the "truths of faith", received by believers thanks to revelation and deepened over the centuries, especially in the great councils and in the reflection of the great Masters of Christian thought, arise: the courage of research, the audacity of intelligence, the rigor in identifying the answers to the questions, simple or complex, that man inevitably asks himself, after the encounter with reality and with God has aroused in him that amazement which is the beginning of philosophy and theology (Salvati 2020, p. 180 – my translation).

The case of the creation or eternity of the world represent a theme in which this harmony is necessary and evident. With the exclusive use of reason, this question is an indiscernible problem, because can be demonstrate both creation and eternity of reality. In these texts Thomas show how is possibly understand an idea of creation but an idea of eternity of

the world with the same philosophical radicality. The theological position, in dependence from the Biblical text, is naturally that of the creation *ex nihilo* of the world. The philosophical contribution can be supporting this theological data, not only with an elaboration of a specific language, but also giving a rational plausibility to the revealed data.

3. Creation or eternity of the world

The buttle ground on which the confrontation of the two opposing parties takes place is the doctrinal node of the *creatio ex nihilo*, carrying important implication on the doctrine on time and on the instant. Aquinas employs a substantial portion of Book II of the *Summa contra gentiles*⁽⁶⁾ in the exposition of these thesis, with a particular *focus* on chapters 31 to 38. The premise to the exposition on the problematic of creation is found in the decisive affirmation that this cannot be considered as a change or a motion (cf. Thomas de Aquino 1918–1930, II, c. 17), because these two processes imply a certain continuity with respect to any instant preceding the change. The concept of creation requires that there be no such continuity. Thomas, with great freedom, reports and analyses all the theories in favour of eternity on the one hand and in favour of the creation of the world on the other, showing particular philosophical acumen in this case as well.

The development of the analysis starts from the concept of necessity: to appreciate correctly what is necessary, it must be understood as what

(6) The text was presumably written in Italy between 1261 and 1264, although it is possible to hypothesize that the entire work was subject to small corrections even in subsequent years. The chronology of the *Summa contra Gentiles* is somewhat thorny. A first reason for the difficulty can be given by the silence regarding the year immediately following Thomas' participation in the general chapter of the Order of Preachers held in Valenciennes in June 1259 (cf. Porro 2012, p. 152). The date *ad quem* can probably be estimated between 1264 or at most 1265, while the publication within 1267, as Gauthier states (cf. Gauthier 1961, p. 59). The latest studies on the chronology of Thomas' works agree with the aforementioned Gauthier in placing the beginning of the elaboration in Paris, concluding the first 53 chapters of the first book by 1259, as attested by paleographic reasons regarding some manuscripts, and that he continued writing the work in the following years. The second book, in particular, cannot have been written before 1261, the year in which a translation by Moerbeke of Aristotle's works was published and is quoted there (cf. Weisheipl 1988, p. 50). For more details about the chronology see Gauthier (1993); Torrell (2019, pp. 171–176; 501–502).

has no potential for non-being (*ibid.*, c. 31)⁽⁷⁾. Necessity therefore expresses the impossibility of the apodictic demonstration of both the *creatio ex aeternitate* and the *creatio ex nihilo*. Only God is necessary in *absolutum*, while this category cannot be applied to creatures since their necessity must always be considered as dependent on the “*primum principium quod per se necesse est*” (Thomas de Aquino 1918–1930, II, c. 17).

The following chapters bring to light the validity of the motivations of those authors who assume true the idea of the eternity of the world starting from various respective principles: from God; from creatures; from the production of things. Here we find the *etic* way of proceeding in a typical *emic* context. The first argument moves from the assumption that a creation in time by God would imply a passive potentiality in God (*ibid.*, c. 32,1) or a change of the divine will (*ibid.*, c. 32,5), although it is not possible to prove these assumptions in an apodictic way. The second argument, derived from what is created, is centred on the continuity of time: if we conceive something which precedes time, we will inevitably fall into contradiction, because this “preceding” would come before the actual commencement of things (*ibid.*, c. 33). This argument clearly recalls a problem already present in Augustine, who resolves the question in a theological way, denying the effective reality of time externally with respect to the soul. For the third argument, deriving from the production of things, the *ex aeternitate* persistence of these things is required, because every production or causation is thinkable only because of the continuity of an already existing subject (*ibid.*, c. 34). The conclusion of this first section is particularly interesting from an argumentative point of view: “Haec igitur rationes sunt quibus aliqui tanquam demonstrationibus inhaerentes, dicunt necessarium res creatae semper fuisse” (*ibid.*, c. 34). Thomas limits himself here to describing the rational arguments of a theory directly contrasting with faith but does not use Revelation to contradict it, as this would create confusion between two different levels of reflection. Although the arguments turn out to be valid, he points out that they are not able to demonstrate their full validity with sufficient apodicticity.

The second section is a sort of *respondeo* to the previous chapters; Aquinas shows how the argumentation derived from God, from creatures and from the production of things, can be not only criticized, but reduced

(7) For further details on the topic of necessity see Serpe (2022, pp. 58–80).

to contradiction. This second part can be called the *emic* way, due to the approach that remark the typical position of a Theologian of the XIII century. In this section Thomas shows himself like a “native” thinker in Theology, but thanks to the previous argument he can give more systematicity to his proposal. The first argument shows how the possibility of *creatio ex nihilo* does not necessarily imply a passive potentiality in God or a change in his will, since divine action can be disposed from eternity to have its effects in time: “Deus autem simul in esse produxit et creaturam et tempus” (*ibid.*, c. 35,5). In this sense there is an even deeper question that Aquinas deliberately leaves unanswered precisely because it concerns a theological aspect: “Non est igitur ratio quare nunc et non prius in hoc consideranda: sed solum quare non semper” (Thomas de Aquino 1918–1930, II, c. 35,5). The second argument, referring to the metaphysical approach already expressed in early texts, underlines that necessity follows substance: being forever (as in the case of separate substances or of the heavens) does not imply having always been (*ibid.*, c. 36,1). Even the contradiction that emerges from the idea of the beginning of time can be overcome through the concept of an instant (*nunc*) which is the beginning of the future and not the end of the past, like a point from which a straight line originates (*ibid.*, c. 36,5). Finally, the argumentations that commences from the production of things do not apodictically demonstrate the eternity of the world, because they are binding only in the case of the production of things in the existing worldly reality, which always imply a passive potentiality that must be transformed into act. This had already been denied previously so as to avoid the “forbidden concept” of actual infinity (*ibid.*, c. 37), as Aristotle already claimed.

Chapter 38 is of great interest for the topic under consideration here: in it Thomas exposes the contradictions to which even the supporters of the rational demonstrability of the *creatio ex nihilo* lend their side. The arguments are basically three:

1. instantaneous action, proper to God, does not require a “temporal precedence” with respect to existence of creatures;
2. the problem of actual infinity does not arise, because it would not be simultaneously in act but in progression; and this would also be valid for the infinity of human souls;

3. the position regarding the impossibility of the existence in act of an infinite number of souls does not find sufficient confirmation in the philosophers of tradition; they do not even agree on the immortality of the rational soul.

Finally, Aquinas shows an attentive knowledge of ancient philosophy in his summary of the positions of the Naturalists.

4. The use of sources

An interesting aspect is Aquinas' research methodology that emerges from these pages. He analyses the question on a strictly rational level, putting aside the theological point of view depending on faith. This procedure is aimed at countering the theses that wanted to assert the rational demonstrability of the *creatio ex nihilo*, rather than at showing the inconsistency of the demonstration of the *creatio ex aeternitate*.

In his rational proceeding, he made his own and harmonized the lessons of Averroes, Avicenna, Maimonides, as well as clearly those of Aristotle and Boethius on the question of time (cf. Porro 2012, p. 448; Bukowski 1991, p. 114). This issue too is possible to be seen like a meeting between *etic* and *emic* point of view. In his time, it was typical to use Arab or Hebrew sources, like Greek Philosophers too, but Thomas had the great capacity to take them like authority only because of the profound use of logical and rational instrument.

We find some hints of this proceeding in these examples.

To begin with, Thomas accepts the premise of the unprovability of the creation of the world: "We must note that Thomas has, in the passage from the Sentences and Contra Gentiles just as in Summa 1.46.2, followed Maimonides' theme: one lays faith open to ridicule if one attempts to demonstrate truths of faith that cannot be demonstrated" (Bukowski 1991, p. 117).

Summarizing, the themes that emerge are: the relationship between necessity and contingency; the theme of time in relation to eternity and the instant; the mode of action proper to the First Cause.

Regarding the question of the relationship between necessity and contingency, there is a strong presence of Arab authors, especially their comments on Aristotelian texts. The description of the needs of realities implicitly recalls what Avicenna had expounded, namely: “that what is necessary can have a cause of its own necessity, and that “necessary” is therefore by no means synonymous with uncaused; that there is not a single necessary entity, but that several entities necessary *ab alio* can be brought back to one entity necessary *per se*” (Porro 2012, p. 409).

The definition of the necessary as that which has no potential towards non-being is more influenced by Averroes’ commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (*ibid.*, p. 416). This reference appears to be functional in avoiding a strongly deterministic position as emerges from the pages of Avicenna (*ibid.*).

As far as the second aspect is concerned, Thomas is known to accept the Aristotelian definition of time as a “measure of movement according to the before and after” (Aristoteles 1982, IV, 11) and linked to it, that of the instant (*nunc*) as a necessary and indivisible element that is found in the reality of time⁽⁸⁾. This argument turns out to be particularly important in relation to the theme of eternity or creation in time because the importance given by Thomas to the *nunc* becomes the distinction for which the demonstration of the *creatio ex aeternitate* cannot be cogent. He always implicitly recalls Boethius’ expression of eternity as “*interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*” (Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius 1847, V, 6, 6, p. 483) to which that of the instant is linked, meaning the eternity of God as a unique and indivisible *nunc*. The broadening of the Aristotelian perspective on the theme of the *nunc* is in turn the result of the study of the entire Peripatetic and Neoplatonic tradition. In this way it is possible to think of the *nunc* not only as a limit between past and future, but also as the beginning of a future without a past.

Finally, the mention of the very modality with which the First Cause can act, both in time remaining in eternity and in eternity itself, depends in turn on the Arab idea of causality. Reference is made to Avicenna’s position regarding the need for the Causal Agent to be extrinsic to its effects,

(8) Cf. Thomas de Aquino (1884), VI, Lc. 3, n. 793. “Necesse est in tempore esse aliquid indivisibile, quod dicitur ‘nunc’”.

which otherwise would be reduced to matter or form (cf. Porro 2012, p. 411; Avicenna Latinus 1980, VI, c. 1, p. 294, l. 69–73).

The relevance that these sources acquire in the present topic offers the possibility to reflect on the “border line” position that the topic acquires. Thomas, with great intellectual acumen, offers both possible rational solutions and for this reason Christian and non-Christian authors are used with the same degree of authority.

5. The role of the threshold for greater understanding both philosophical and theological

The well-known conclusion of the question is that it remains fundamentally of a theological nature, so it is not possible to demonstrate the *creatio ex nihilo* within the limits of natural reason (cf. Thomas de Aquino 1918–1930, II, c. 38). This way of proceeding can also be dangerous, since the arguments are not in themselves apodictic, they risk obtaining the opposite effect, convincing the “opponents” of the validity of their theories.

However, the limit of creation acquires a strongly positive meaning because the exercise of rationality in this theme demonstrates all its potential even if chance proves indiscernible. In this sense, human reason stands exactly on the threshold between philosophy and theology, providing a contribution to both disciplines. The effect of this contribution can be seen in the definition of God’s eternity. Aquinas, referring implicitly to the argument of the ontological perfection of God’s being, affirms that His eternity is to be considered totally simple, for that there can be no effective comparison between the eternity of God and time (*ibid.*, c. 35,5):

Non est igitur comparare inchoationem totius creaturae ad aliqua diversa signata in aliqua praeexistente mensura, ad quae initium creaturarum similiter vel dissimiliter se possit habere, ut oporteat rationem esse apud agentem quare in hoc signato illius durationis creaturam in esse produxerit, et non in alio praecedenti vel sequenti. Quae quidem ratio requireretur si aliqua duratio in partes divisibilis esset praeter totam creaturam productam: sicut accidit in particularibus agentibus, a quibus producit effectus in tempore, non autem ipsum tempus.

Deus autem simul in esse produxit et creaturam et tempus. Non est igitur ratio quare nunc et non prius in hoc considerata: sed solum quare non semper [...]. Et similiter in productione totius creaturae, extra quam non est tempus, et cum qua simul tempus producit, non est attendenda ratio quare nunc et non prius, ut per hoc ducamur ad concedendam temporis infinitatem: sed solum quare non semper, vel quare post non esse, vel cum aliquo principio (*ibid.*)

The ontological conception of the act underlies the present idea of time, as already reported in the *Super Sententiarum*: the act in the reality of created world always has a potential dimension within itself.

The theme of the principle is used here in an eminently metaphysical key (*ibid.*, c. 37,1), although it is rooted, both for the conception it supposes and for the examples given, in physical reality. Understood as a beginning, the instant is considered in its substantial value for the reality of time, following the rational procedure used in the Five Ways.

He speaks well of the impossibility of infinite regression and of the need to arrive at a First, without which the whole series of causal sequences that make up the life of the world would rest on a void [...]. The problem of radical origins, as some thinkers say, is a problem of the transcendent, not a problem of duration. It establishes the relation of the derivative with the Prime, of the finite being with the infinite Being, of the contingent with the Necessary, of the insufficient with the Sufficient, of the void with the Eternal and not only the perpetual. We must not confuse these things (Sertillanges 1945, pp. 41–42)⁽⁹⁾.

The metaphysical approach supports the ontological and substantial conception of the instant, which becomes the link between eternal and temporal reality, as it constitutes the point of application of the substance of things (*ibid.*, p. 91). Thomas had already reported the theme in the conception of the presence of God's Eternity in

(9) "Il parle bien de l'impossibilité d'une régression à l'infini et de la nécessité d'aboutir à un Premier sans lequel toute la série des enchainements de causalité qui composent la vie du monde reposerait sur le vide [...]. Le problème des origines radicales, comme disent certains penseurs, est un problème du transcendant, non un problème de durée. Il établit la relation du dérivé avec el Premier, de l'être fini avec l'Être infini, du contingent avec el Nécessaire, de l'insuffisant avec le Suffisant, du caduc avec l'Eternel et non pas seulement le perpétuel. Il ne faut pas embrouiller ces choses".

time, for which everything is in the present. He uses the analogy of the centre of the circle with respect to the circumference (cf. Thomas de Aquino 1918–1930, I, c. 66): the centre is at the same distance with respect to every point of the circumference; through this analogy he offers a possible explanation of God's presence at time through the ontological and non-temporal perspective (Bordoni 1965, p. 76).

The link that Thomas shows with the reality of eternity finally comes to constitute the essential ontological foundation of the instant and consequently of time, although he reiterates that eternity always exceeds the reality of time (cf. Thomas de Aquino 1918–1930, I, c. 102).

In the *contra gentiles*, through an even wider use of philosophical categories, we note the attempt to find the question of time with a more direct link to natural philosophy. Therefore, Aquinas does not neglect the fundamental relationship with the metaphysical category of act, which is measured by time and founded in the instant.

The instant becomes exactly that threshold from which it is possible to glimpse, even if not to demonstrate, the rational plausibility of the *creatio ex nihilo*. The threshold between emic and etic that it has tried to show in this contribution, can give some reflexes for anthropological considerations: an unconventional way of proceeding bears a different mode of conceiving the instant. In this way it can be grasped the existential link of the temporality with the eternity for human life.

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