Creation and the Classical Tradition: St Thomas' Synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian Thought in *Creatio ex Nihilo*

Timothy Ross Davies
Bible and Theology, UWTSD
December 2024

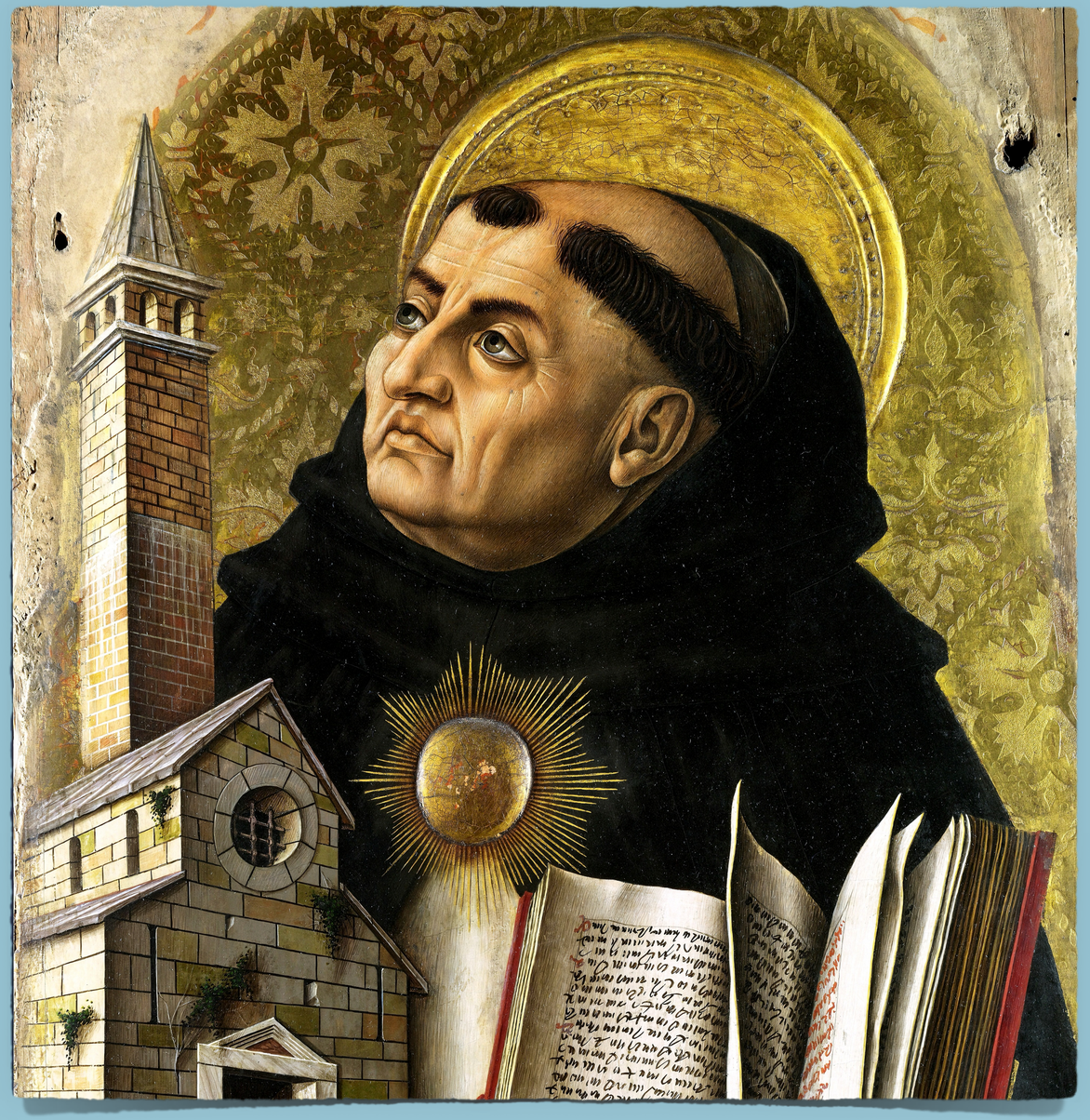


Fig. 1

Creatio ex Nihilo:

“Creation Out of Nothing”

‘*Nothing exists that does not owe its existence to God the Creator*. **The world began when it was made out of nothing by the Word of God**; all existing beings, all nature, all human history are rooted in this primordial event: for it is the genesis through which the world was established and time began.’[1]

The Catechism of the Catholic Church



Fig. 2

Saint Thomas:

The “Common Doctor”

‘[H]e raised that philosophy above itself by submitting it to the illumination of a higher light, which invested its truth with a radiance more divine than human. **Between Aristotle as viewed in himself and Aristotle viewed in the writings of St. Thomas is the difference which exists between a city seen by the flare of a torchlight procession and the same city bathed in the light of the morning sun.**’[2]

Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy*



Fig. 3

Philosophical Foundations:

A Broad History

‘**The ancient philosophers gradually**, and as it were step by step, **advanced to the knowledge of truth.**’[3]

Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*



Fig. 4

Plato

Unity Precedes Multiplicity

‘Seeing then that being is found to be common to all things, which are by themselves distinct from one another, it follows of necessity that they must come into being not by themselves, but by the action of some cause. **Seemingly this is Plato's argument, since he required every multitude to be preceded by unity** not only as regards number but also in reality.’[4]

Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia*

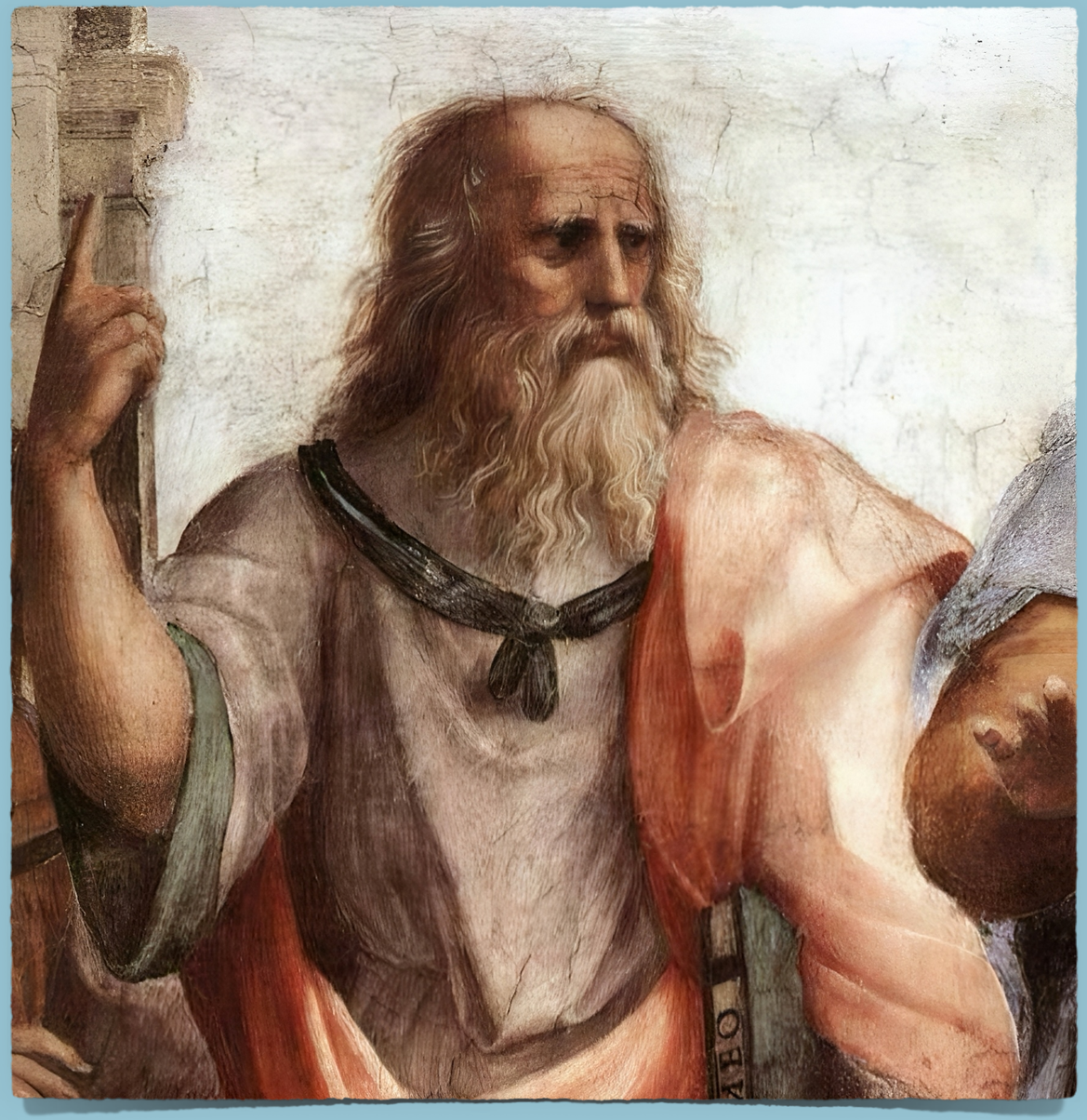


Fig. 5

Aristotle

The Principle of Being

‘**Now anything which is the basis of a univocal predication about other things has that attribute in the highest degree. Thus fire is hottest and is actually the cause of heat in other things.** Therefore that is also true in the highest degree which is the cause of all subsequent things being true. For this reason the principles of things that always exist must be true in the highest degree…’[5]

Aristotle in *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*

‘Thus fire, which is the extreme of heat, is the cause of heat in all things hot. **Now there is one being most perfect and most true: which follows from the fact that there is a mover altogether immovable and absolutely perfect**, as philosophers have proved. Consequently all other less perfect beings must needs derive being therefrom. This is the argument of the Philosopher (*Metaph*. ii, I).’[6]

Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia*

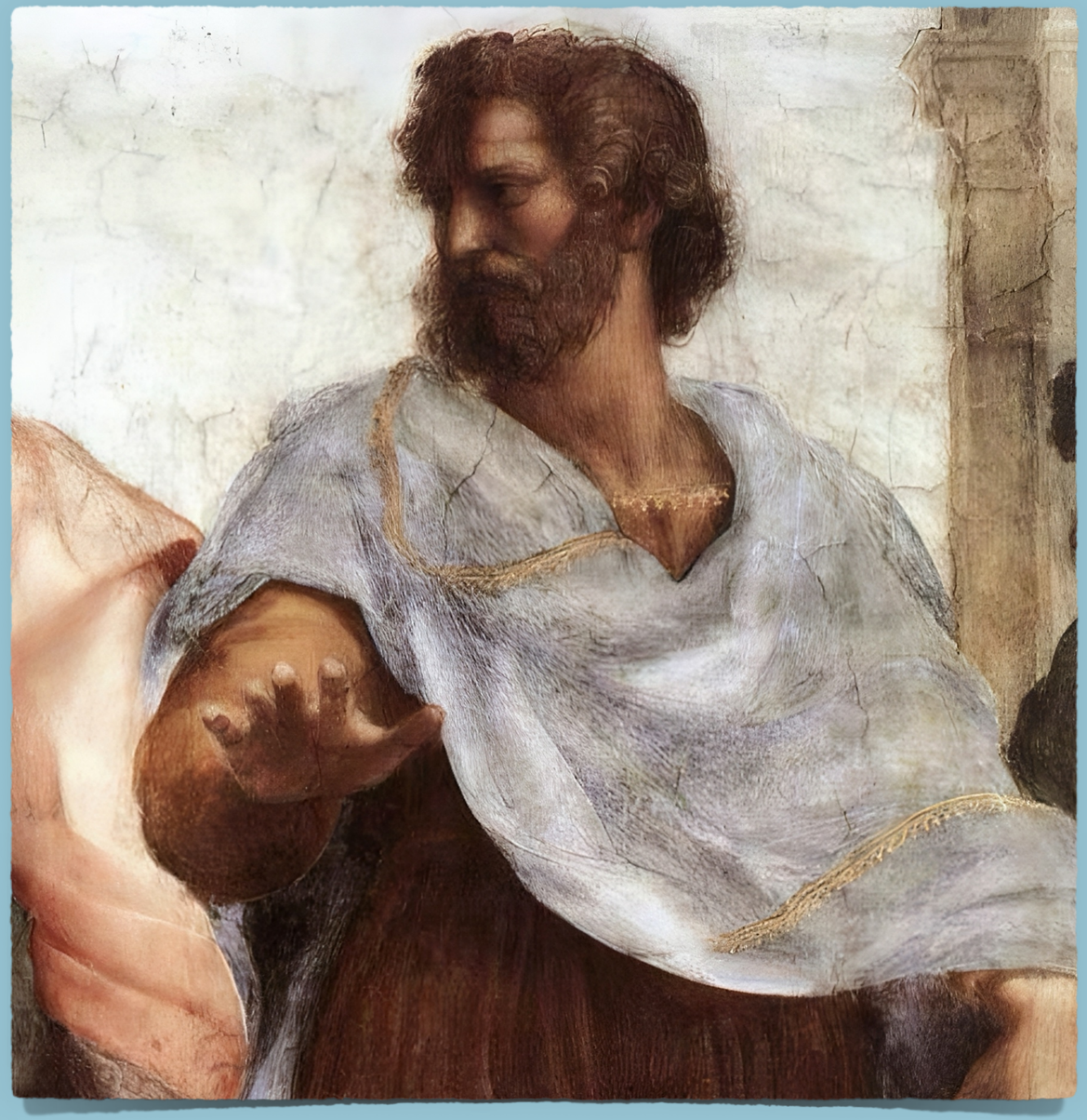


Fig. 6

Essence, Existence, and God

From Physical to Metaphysical

‘…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 realised 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**…’[7]

Seth Kreeger, *Aquinas’ Attribution of Creation Ex Nihilo to Plato and Aristotle*



Fig. 7

Essence, Existence, and God

From Physical to Metaphysical

‘Nevertheless, while Aquinas draws heavily on Avicenna, from his histories of philosophy we can conclude that he regards Plato and Aristotle as the founders of the philosophical tradition that…posits a universal cause of being. And, I suggest, **Aquinas saw himself very much as the inheritor of this classical tradition.**’[8]

Seth Kreeger, *Aquinas’ Attribution of Creation Ex Nihilo to Plato and Aristotle*



Fig. 8

Creation and the Classical Tradition: St Thomas' Synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian Thought in *Creatio ex Nihilo*

Timothy Ross Davies
Bible and Theology, UWTSD
December 2024



Fig. 9

References:

[1] Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part I, Section II, Chapter 1, Article 1, Paragraph 338 https://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism_lt/p1s2c1p5_lt.htm [accessed Thursday 12th December 2024].

[2] Jacques Maritain, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1937), p. 99.

[3] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* I, trans. by the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1922) q. 44, art. 2, co. 1, p. 216.

[4] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God* (*Quæstiones disputatæ de potentia Dei*), trans. by the English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1932), q. 3, art. 5, co. 5, p. 109.

[5] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle: Volume 1,* trans. By John P. Owen (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Co., 1961), p. 120.

[6] Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, q. 3, art. 5, co. 5, pp. 109–110.

[7] Seth Kreeger, 'Aquinas' Attribution of Creation Ex Nihilo to Plato and Aristotle: The Importance of Avicenna', *Studia Gilsoniana*, 11.3 (2022), 377–410, (p. 401) <DOI: 10.26385/SG.110314>.

[8] Ibid., pp. 406–407.

Bibliography:

Aristotle, Physics (Books V-VIII), trans. P.H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), VIII.1

Catechism of the Catholic Church https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/43151/Catechism%20on%20Man.htm [accessed 14th December 2024]

Craig, William L., and Copan, Paul, *Creation Out Of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, And Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004)

Kreeger, Seth, 'Aquinas' Attribution of Creation Ex Nihilo to Plato and Aristotle: The Importance of Avicenna', Studia Gilsoniana, 11.3 (2022), 377–410 <DOI: 10.26385/SG.110314>

Lombardo, Stanley, 'Hesiod', in *Anthology of Classical Myth: Primary Sources in Translation*, 2nd edn., ed. and trans. by Trzaskoma et al. (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2016). pp. 129–167

Maritain, Jacques, An Introduction to Philosophy (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1937)

Murray, Paul D., and Wilkinson, David, 'The Significance of the Theology of Creation within Christian Tradition: Systematic Considerations', in *God, Humanity and the Cosmos: A Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. by Southgate et al (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2011), pp. 44–67

Oliver, Simon, 'God and Creation *ex nihilo*', in *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017)

Pinch, Geraldine, *Handbook of Egyptian Mythology* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2002)

Rochberg, Francesca, *A Companion to the Ancient Near East* (ed. by Daniel C. Snell, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020)

Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God* (*Quæstiones disputatæ de potentia Dei*), trans. by the English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1932)

Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Two: Creation, trans. by James F. Anderson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), Book II, Chapter 6, Article 1

Saint Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1922)

The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments, Douay-Rheims Version: the Old Testament first published by the English College at Douay, A.D. 1609, and the New Testament first published by the English College at Rheims, A.D. 1582 (London: Baronius Press, 2008)

Figures:

Fig. 1: Carlo Crivelli, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* [Tempera on poplar] (ca. 1476), The National Gallery, London **https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/carlo-crivelli-saint-thomas-aquinas** [accessed Monday 9th December 2024]

Fig. 2: Pieter de Grebber, *God Inviting Christ to Sit on the Throne at His Right Hand* [Oil on canvas] (1645) **http://www.wga.hu/art/g/grebber/inviting.jpg** [accessed Monday 9th December 2024]

Fig. 3: Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Apotheosis of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, [Oil on canvas] (ca. 1631) **https://www.wikiart.org/en/francisco-de-zurbaran/apotheosis-of-st-thomas-aquinas-1631** [accessed Saturday 14th December 2024]

Fig. 4: Sandro Botticelli, *Depiction of Saint Thomas Aquinas* [Fresco] (ca. 1482) **https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_Aquinas_by_Sandro_Botticelli.jpg** [accessed Saturday 14th December 2024]

Fig. 5: Raphael, *The School of Athens* [Fresco] (ca. 1509–1511) **https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/stanze-di-raffaello/stanza-della-segnatura/scuola-di-atene.html** [accessed Saturday 14th December 2024]

Fig. 6: Ibid.

Fig. 7: *Ibn Sina* (*Avicenna*), Bibliothèque interuniversitaire de santé, Paris [unknown medium] (c. 1271) **https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avicenna#/media/File:Avicenne_-_Avicenna_-_Ibn_Sina_(980-1037)_CIPB2067.jpg** [accessed Monday 16th December 2024]

Fig. 8: Frederick E. Hart, *Ex Nihilo* [Indiana limestone] (1974-1982) **https://robinrile.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/HARTICLE8-1.jpg** [accessed Tuesday 17th December 2024].

Fig. 9: Antoine Nicolas, *Fountain of Wisdom* [unknown medium] (ca. 1648) **https://www.friendsofnotredamedeparis.org/cathedral/artifacts/mays/saint-thomas-aquinas-fountain-of-wisdom/** [accessed Tuesday 17th December 2024]