

2

God and Creation *ex nihilo*

The first verse of Genesis tells of the time when God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a formless void, darkness covered the face of the deep and the spirit of God swept over the waters. At first glance, it seems that God created out of a chaotic material realm that already existed. A broadly similar view can be found in the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy. Plato's mythical cosmogony, *Timaeus*, describes the creation of the cosmos from chaotic material by the god-like craftsman known as the demiurge.¹ That material resists the attempts of the demiurge to fashion it according to rational, mathematical principles. Aristotle's view was rather different: the universe has always existed and is therefore of everlasting time.²

Given this scriptural and philosophical background, it is remarkable that a very different consensus gradually emerges among Jewish and Christian theologians from at least the first century AD, followed in due course by Islamic scholars.³ These three traditions claim that if we are to speak of God's creative act, we must not speak of God fabricating the cosmos out of some kind of pre-existent material. Rather, we must speak of God creating *ex nihilo*, 'out of nothing'. What does this mean? As we will see in this chapter, in many ways it is easier to see what creation *ex nihilo* does *not* mean. Creation out of nothing does not mean that 'nothing' is some special stuff that God uses in his act of creation. Nor is 'nothing' a vacuum because a vacuum still requires space and has significance.⁴ Put simply, creation *ex nihilo* means that God does not create the universe out of something else. God does not take chaotic matter and fashion it into an orderly and rational universe; there are no prior materials out of which God fashions

the universe. There is not even a pre-existent space within which God creates. Instead, we are to think of God creating everything, including matter, space and time. Aside from that absolute act of creation, there is nothing.

Creation *ex nihilo* is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, it clearly contradicts the classical philosophical maxim first articulated by Parmenides (fl. late sixth century BC): *ex nihilo, nihil fit*. Out of nothing, nothing comes. Because nothing could come from nothing, the ancient Greeks thought that something had always existed, whether a chaotic material realm which was brought into order (Plato) or an orderly cosmos which has no beginning (Aristotle). By contrast, creation *ex nihilo* suggests that the cosmos has some kind of absolute beginning or origin. Secondly, creation *ex nihilo* differs from an important view of the origins of the cosmos that we find in the tradition known as Neoplatonism (literally, the ‘new Platonism’), a broad variation on Platonic philosophy whose first exponent is usually thought to be Plotinus (AD 204/5–270). In his *Enneads*, Plotinus writes of an ‘overflow’ of creation from the divine first principle, which he calls ‘the One’.⁵ This overflow later came to be labelled ‘emanation’. The emanationist view suggests that creation flows or emanates from God (or, for the pagan Neoplatonists, ‘the One’), much as light emanates from a candle or a stream flows from its spring. Early Christian theologians were uneasy about emanation as a way of understanding creation because it suggests that creation is not a free and voluntary act; it implies that creation just happens, eternally and necessarily, by virtue of the divine nature – much as the stream necessarily flows from the spring. Following scripture, Christianity’s first theologians wanted to maintain that creation is God’s totally free and voluntary act, not something which pours forth by necessity or compulsion from the divine. While some later theologians, notably Aquinas, describe creation as an emanation from God, they always qualify such emanation as freely willed and not necessary or constrained in any way.

In the background to creation *ex nihilo*, we can therefore see three alternative views of creation. First, we have the Aristotelian view that the universe is of everlasting time and sits alongside God, mirroring his eternity. Secondly, we have the constructivist view, apparently seen in Plato’s *Timaeus*, in which a demiurge makes the cosmos from pre-existent material. Having no ultimate beginning or origin, this pre-existent material chaos always sits alongside

God. Thirdly, we have the emanationist view in which creation emerges from God by necessity, like the stream from the spring, albeit without a temporal beginning. For the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, all three views share a common problem: they make it difficult to distinguish between God and creation. In the case of the Aristotelian and constructivist views, there is always something that sits alongside God, challenging his eternal nature. In other words, there is a material nature (whether orderly or chaotic) which is always present and which does not seem to have an *ultimate* origin in God's creative act. This material nature seems to be like God insofar as it is not bound by time. In the case of the Neoplatonic emanationist view, there is also a danger of seeing creation as the 'stretching out' of divine being in such a way that creation and God become continuous, much as the stream is continuous with the spring. This could lead to a view known as pantheism – the idea that God and the universe are coterminous.

If there is one crucial issue that dominates the theology of creation in the ancient and medieval worlds, it is this: how do we distinguish between God and creation? This is important because, if we fail to identify with precision the absolute *difference* between God and creation, there is always a danger that we will conceive God as *part* of creation, or creation as part of God. And once God is understood as in any way like a creature we lapse into idolatry because we confuse God the creator for something created.⁶ Moreover, for God truly to be the absolute source of creation he cannot be understood as *like* a creature in any univocal sense because then God himself would need some kind of explanation. That is, we could legitimately ask the question: 'Who created God?'⁷ So before all else, God must be understood as totally self-subsistent, having no attribute that implies a need of something further. Indeed, theologians of the ancient and medieval periods were also adamant that God does not need to create and gains nothing by creating. Rather, creation is a purely free, completely unique, totally gratuitous and wholly unnecessary act. The three views of creation mentioned above – the Aristotelian, constructivist and emanationist views – all present a similar problem with respect to this divine freedom: the apparently necessary existence of something other than God. In the case of the Aristotelian view, there has always been an orderly universe. In the case of the constructivist view, there has always been a material realm which God draws from chaos to order. In the case of the

emanationist view, creation necessarily flows from the divine. In all three cases, it seems as if there is something other than God of which God is not the *ultimate* source.

In this chapter, we will examine the meaning of creation *ex nihilo*, the way in which it establishes the distinction between God and creation and its relation to scientific cosmologies such as the Big Bang. It will be seen that creation *ex nihilo* is not, in fact, first and foremost a theory about how God created the cosmos. Creation *ex nihilo* emerges first from what the monotheistic traditions profess about God. On the basis of that profession, certain claims are made concerning creation. To begin with, we will examine the biblical and historical background to creation *ex nihilo*.

The origins of creation *ex nihilo*⁸

Although the consensus among early church theologians concerning the centrality of creation *ex nihilo* is remarkable,⁹ there is allegedly no obvious verbatim instance of this teaching in scripture. At first glance, the crucial early verses of Genesis imply that there is a temporal beginning to creation and that God creates by manipulating formless matter. The New Revised Standard Version renders the first two verses of Genesis as follows: ‘In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.’ The implication is that *when* God creates, at that moment there is *already* a formless void, a ‘deep’, and a wind sweeping over the waters. This seems to imply pre-existent matter from which God creates. Such modern translations refer to the Hebrew text of the Bible produced by Jewish grammarians and Torah scholars known as Masoretes between the seventh and tenth centuries AD.¹⁰ The oldest manuscript we possess comes from around the ninth century AD. For very good reasons, Biblical scholars refer primarily to the Masoretic text. However, there are different interpretations and translations of these verses, some of which more clearly suggest creation *ex nihilo*.¹¹ As well as a number of modern translations of the Hebrew text,¹² the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint or LXX, produced around the third century BC,

offers a slightly different sense of ‘beginning’: ‘In the beginning (*en archē*) God created the heavens and the earth.’¹³ The ‘when’ of some translations of the Hebrew Masoretic text is not included in the Septuagint version. To understand the significance of this difference, we should note two senses of ‘beginning’. First, we might think of a temporal beginning in statements such as ‘at the beginning of the journey’ or ‘when I began to eat’. This sense of beginning refers to a moment in time in which there is a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. Some modern translations of the first verse of Genesis imply this temporal sense of beginning; God creates at one moment within the flow of time, at this moment rather than that moment. It seems that creation is located in time. Another sense of beginning refers to something’s rationale or foundation. For example, we might say ‘the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord’ (Ps. 111.10) or ‘justice is the beginning of peace’. This is a different kind of beginning that is not temporal but metaphysical: ‘beginning’ refers to the root, principle or purpose of something. If this is the kind of beginning which the Septuagint translators had in mind, not to mention some traditional scholarly renderings of the Hebrew, it is more consistent with the beginning proposed by creation *ex nihilo*: an absolute origin of all things *including* time, rather than a beginning *within* time.

The first verse of St. John’s gospel, in repeating the phrasing of Gen. 1.1, appears to offer a gloss on Genesis and creation’s origins which refers clearly to the fundamental origin or ‘beginning’ of all things in God’s eternal Word: ‘In the beginning (*en archē*) was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.’¹⁴ Indeed, the New Testament consistently refers to creation in terms of a fundamental origin of *all* things: ‘For from him and through him and to him are all things’ (Rom. 11:36); ‘yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist’ (1 Cor. 8:6); ‘and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things’ (Eph. 3.9); ‘for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him’ (Col. 1.16); ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you

created all things, and by your will they existed and were created' (Rev. 4.11).

If it seems difficult to decide the precise meaning of the opening verses of Genesis, we must allow for different priorities among the Priestly authors of the Hebrew text and the Hellenized Judaism which produced its Septuagint translation. For the Priestly writers, the precise metaphysical basis of creation and its causal origin are not the central concern; what matters is that the world that God creates is good, beautiful and providentially ordered. Though not the focus of the Priestly writers' attention, a world devoid of this divine imprint would, in a sense, be 'nothing'. The teaching that God is the creative source or 'beginning' of all things also seems to lie behind the wisdom literature of the second century BC.¹⁵ Another oft-cited text comes from the second book of Maccabees, a deuterocanonical work written in Greek in the late second or early first century BC. It concerns the warrior Judas Maccabeus and the Jewish revolt against King Antiochus IV and his empire beginning around 169 BC. This was a period of oppression for the Jews that included the desecration of the Temple; it produced many martyrs and deep hostility towards Hellenistic culture. The experience of oppression and martyrdom gave rise to debates concerning the resurrection of the dead. This theme is reflected in the seventh chapter of the second book of Maccabees in which seven brothers and their mother are arrested by the king and compelled to eat food contrary to Jewish law. Six of the brothers are martyred in gruesome fashion. Their mother encourages her sons, evoking the themes of creation, life and resurrection:

I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws. (2 Macc. 7.22-23)

Following the brutal death of six of the brothers and with only one remaining, King Antiochus urges the woman to persuade her child to turn from the law and the ways of his ancestors. But the woman says to her son:

My son, have pity on me. I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have taken care of you. I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being. Do not fear this butcher, but prove worthy of your brothers. Accept death, so that in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers. (2 Macc. 7.27-29)

Turning to the New Testament, an important text similarly invokes the themes of creation and life. When writing to the Christians of Rome around AD 55, St. Paul considers the life that was brought from Abraham and the faith which is the promise and gift of God.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations') – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. (Rom. 4.16-17)

Insofar as the Jewish and Christian scriptures reflect on creation and cosmic origins, they are particularly concerned with God's power, providence, presence and fidelity to his creation as well as creation as an absolute beginning of all things (Gen. 1 and 2; Prov. 8.22-30; Ps. 104; 121.1-2; 148.4-5; Job 38.4-39.30; Isa. 45.7-14; Jn. 1; Col. 1.15-17). These passages hardly constitute a clear and consistent statement concerning the metaphysics of creation; that is not their purpose. They do, however, reflect particular convictions concerning God's supreme authority and freedom, even in the face of an apparently ultimate and unavoidable power – the oblivion or 'nothingness' of death. Whether the woman depicted in 2 Maccabees witnessing the brutal martyrdom of her sons had creation *ex nihilo* in mind hardly seems relevant or decidable. What is important is that the tradition preserves her plea to her son in terms which reflect the conviction that God's freedom and power are such that all creatures have a fundamental source in God's creative act. In contrast to the teaching of the Greek philosophers, *this* Greek text, the second book of Maccabees, is clear that God did not

create out of things already in existence.¹⁶ Nothing rivals the creator and death is not the ultimate horizon; God even calls things to life from nothing. These are the seeds of what was to become the more thoroughly worked-out metaphysical teaching that God creates out of nothing.

As well as these scriptural origins, scholars also find traces of creation *ex nihilo* in the works of the Hellenistic Jewish thinker Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BC–c. AD 50)¹⁷ and its clear expression in Christian thought occurring at least as early as the second century, in texts such as *The Shepherd of Hermas*.¹⁸ We find a concise statement in a work by Tatian, an Assyrian convert to Christianity who wrote his anti-Hellenistic ‘Oration to the Greeks’ around AD 160. He stated, ‘For matter is not, like God, without beginning, nor, as having no beginning, is of equal power with God; it is begotten, and not produced by any other being, but brought into existence by the Framer of all things alone.’¹⁹ Theophilus, bishop of Antioch from around AD 169, wrote to a pagan named Autolycus, ‘And all things God has made out of things that were not into things that are, in order that through His works His greatness may be known and understood.’²⁰ By the mid-second century, then, expressions of creation *ex nihilo* were clear and explicit, even if not formulated in precise metaphysical language.

So it seems that the idea of creation *ex nihilo* was distilled over a long period as Jewish and Christian thinkers developed a distinctive scriptural monotheism that had clear consequences for how one should speak theologically of God’s creative act. The standard scholarly narrative of the emergence of creation *ex nihilo* implies that, while this doctrine ‘corresponds factually with the Old Testament proclamation about creation’,²¹ it is not demanded by the scriptural text and only emerges clearly in second-century Christianity, as a response to the challenges of ancient Greek cosmology – particularly Platonism and Stoicism – and Gnosticism.²² However, in surveying this doctrine’s scriptural basis and its early history, we have seen that creation *ex nihilo* is more than a product of Christian theological apologetics in the second century, even if it achieved a new clarity in this period. The biblical conviction that God’s creative act establishes a fundamental beginning of all things including time and matter leads Janet Soskice to aptly describe creation *ex nihilo* as ‘a biblically compelled piece of metaphysical theology’.²³ Creation *ex nihilo* is therefore much more than a philosophical invention. In an

important sense, it has its fundamental basis in scripture, elucidated in the delicate interweaving of theology and philosophy.

The scriptural foundation of creation *ex nihilo* extends beyond those texts that deal explicitly with God's creative act. As we will see, what emerges in the development and clarification of this doctrine is a teaching that does not simply begin and end with creation per se, but also draws conclusions concerning creation from a more fundamental doctrine of God. The wider, scripturally derived doctrine of God gives rise to the need to speak of God creating *ex nihilo*, as distinct from understanding the created order as timeless, as constructed from always existing material, or as emanating from the divine. Given scripture's profession of God as sovereignly free (Ps. 103.19), one (Exod. 3.14; Deut. 6.4), eternal (Deut. 33.27; Ps. 90.2; Isa. 40.28; Rev. 22.13) and omnipotent (Rom. 1.20), creation *ex nihilo* becomes a way of expressing a distinct monotheism, as well as a particular doctrine of creation.

So how are we to understand the teaching that God creates out of nothing? To explore the meaning of creation *ex nihilo* further, we turn now to examine this teaching within the context of the doctrine of God as this is represented in the work of some of the greatest Christian thinkers of the ancient and medieval periods, particularly Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) and Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274).

Creation *ex nihilo*: Divine simplicity

As we have seen, an overriding concern of Christian theology is the need to establish the distinction between God and creation. Relevant to this are certain attributes of created existence: creatures are finite, temporal and contingent. To refer to creation as *contingent* is to point out that it might not exist. In other words, there is nothing about a creature that is sufficient to ensure its existence. Furthermore, by its very nature a creature, because it does not explain its own existence, points to something whose existence requires no further explanation, that is to say, it is uncreated.

One way in which traditional theology establishes this difference between the created and the uncreated is with the notion of divine simplicity. Augustine draws a clear connection between divine simplicity and creation:

There is, then, a Good which alone is simple, and therefore alone immutable, and this is God. By this Good all other goods have been created; but they are not simple, and therefore are not immutable.²⁴

To understand the concept of simplicity, it is easiest to begin with creatures because this is the realm with which we are familiar. A creature is composed of parts that are assembled to form a whole; it has a structure that is often very complex. For example, there are parts of the human body or parts of a plant. In addition to their material parts, creatures are also composed of qualities or attributes. In the case of human beings, we might point to power and knowledge. However, my particular power and knowledge are not essential to my nature but are *additions to*, or *qualifications of*, my human existence; I *possess* them. In other words, I can acquire my power and knowledge through growing and learning or I can lose my power and knowledge through illness, forgetfulness or ageing, but I would still exist. So a creature may acquire certain attributes and lose those attributes and this implies that creatures change. This also suggests that a creature has a structure that includes existence – for example, existence plus knowledge plus power. To put it another way, a creature is *composed of* existence plus certain attributes that may change over time. Recalling that we can even speak of existence is something a creature *receives* and *possesses* – because the source of its existence lies elsewhere and not within itself – there is nothing about a creature that suggests that it must exist. Ultimately, a creature also comes into existence and out of existence. Therefore, according to Augustine, creaturely reality is identified by a fundamentally composite structure, which we can express in terms of the distinction between what something *is* and what something *has*. I *have* the ability to speak French, but I *am not* that ability. I could forget how to speak French and I would still be me (although of course I would have changed). To put that matter another way, creatures have an existence to which is added accidental qualities to make it this or that *kind of thing*.

In referring to God as simple, Augustine wishes to claim that there is no distinction between what God *is* and what God *has*. So God's attributes (what God *has*) and God's existence (what God *is*) are one and the same. God does not possess anything because possession implies the possibility of loss and contingency and this

is characteristic of the creaturely realm. With reference to God the Trinity, Augustine writes:

It is for this reason, then, that the nature of the Trinity is called simple, because it has not anything that it can lose, and because it is not something different from what it has, in the way that a vessel is different from its liquid or a body from its colour or the air from its light or heat, or the mind from its wisdom. For none of these things is what it has: the vessel is not liquid; the body is not colour; the air is not light or heat; the mind is not wisdom.²⁵

God simply *is* his wisdom, power, knowledge and so on. These are not merely attributes that God might or might not have. God *is* these attributes and is therefore not subject to change. One implication of this is that God has no structure; divine simplicity is the metaphysical expression of God's perfect unity and oneness.

Writing more than eight centuries later, the Italian Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas clarified the concept of divine simplicity by pointing out that creatures are subject to a most fundamental composition: essence and existence. In other words, it is not of a creature's essence – it is not essential to it – that it exist. Existence is not essential or definitive of a horse, a tree or a person; these things might or might not exist. In that sense they are contingent. This means that, within the order of creation, things receive and possess their existence as an addition to their essence, to what they are. This is not the case with God and this is how we distinguish God from creation: it is of God's essence that God exists. So in God, essence (*what* God is) is perfectly continuous with God's existence (*that* God is).²⁶

Aquinas's view of divine simplicity can also be explained using two categories he inherits from Aristotle: 'substance' and 'accident'.²⁷ A creature's 'substance' is its essential nature, what makes it what it is, for example a 'cow' or 'man'.²⁸ By contrast, an 'accident' is a quality or attribute that something possesses that is not definitive of what that thing is; it is possessed 'accidentally'.²⁹ For example, my substantial nature is human male but my brown hair is accidental. I could dye my hair red and I would still be the same human person. Qualities such as height, weight, colour or physical fitness are not definitive of who or what I am; I may gain or lose such qualities but my substantial nature would remain the same. The categories

of substance and accident allow Aquinas to distinguish between an accidental change and a substantial change. An accidental change occurs to a tree when its accidents are altered – the colour of its leaves during autumn, for example. When the woodsman fells the tree to turn it into timber for the construction of a house, this would constitute a substantial change – an alteration in what something is, in this case a change from tree to timber to house.³⁰ According to Aquinas, God is immutable and eternal substance, lacking all accidents. This is not to say that God is *a* substance, a ‘this’ rather than a ‘that’, because God is not a type of thing.³¹ Rather, ‘the substance of God is therefore his existence.’³² This is another way of saying that in God there is no composition of substance plus existence; existence *is* the very substance of God.

So the concept of divine simplicity allows Augustine and Aquinas to distinguish between God and creation. On the one hand, creatures possess their attributes and can therefore be distinguished from those attributes. They can gain or lose them. In fact, even existence itself is something that does not belong *properly* (i.e., intrinsically or by nature) to a creature; it is received, possessed and may be lost. As such, creaturely existence is composed or structured. By contrast, God does not receive or possess existence. It is of God’s essence to exist; essence and existence are one and the same in God. God therefore exists by necessity and is totally *uncaused*. Aquinas expresses this by referring to God as *ipsum esse per se subsistens*, ‘self-subsistent being itself’.³³

By establishing God as simple in this way, Aquinas shows us that God is the source of *all* created being because God is ‘being itself’. There is nothing that exists that does not owe its existence wholly and immediately to God. As such, God is ‘the principle and cause of being to other things’.³⁴ Because God is the source of *everything* that is *not* God, this suggests that we must not speak of God creating the universe from some always-present material stuff that does not owe its existence to God. We might say that, according to creation *ex nihilo*, the universe does not have a material cause; there is not some stuff out of which God fabricates the cosmos. God is the source not only of particular things, but also of existence *per se*. The consequence of viewing God as the ultimate source and principle of existence itself – or the *archē* of all things, to use the Greek of the Septuagint – is that we must speak of God creating ‘out of nothing’, because there is no thing whose existence is not caused by God.

The claim that there is no material cause to creation (there is no matter upon which God works to form the universe) marks an important distinction between our acts of making and God's act of creation. When we make something, say a pot or a car, we work with existing material to reform it into something else. One thing – a lump of clay or some metal and rubber – becomes something else – a pot or a car. The material with which we work resists us to some degree; we have to mould it by force into something else. The material restricts us in the sense that we can make some things with our particular material, but not others. For example, I could make a pot out of clay but I could not make a car or a hammer out of clay. Unlike our acts of making, God is not restricted in his creation by the characteristics of some pre-existent material stuff. There is no limit to God's creativity because it is the origin of existence itself, including matter. There is no material stuff to resist God. So creation *ex nihilo*, in denying that there is a material cause to creation, preserves the divine freedom in the act of creating. Our acts of creativity participate in, or presuppose, God's creation of all things out of nothing.

This concept of participation – sharing in God's primordial creativity – points to another important way in which Aquinas distinguishes between God and creation that we will encounter again in later chapters. Whereas God exists essentially (*ens per essentiam*), creation exists by participation (*ens per participationem*).³⁵ He puts it this way in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

Every thing, furthermore, exists because it has being. A thing whose essence is not its being, consequently, is not *through its essence*, but *by participation* in something, namely, being itself. But that which is through participation in something cannot be the first being, because prior to it is the being in which it participates in order to be. But God is the first being, with nothing prior to Him. The essence of God, therefore, is His own being.³⁶

In this dense passage, Aquinas wishes to claim something quite straightforward: creation does not exist of its own power or by its own right. It is not self-standing. In other words, existence is not *proper* to creation. Instead, creation's being is 'borrowed' from God via participation in God. Creation exists because it participates in that which exists in and of itself, namely God. There are two

important corollaries of this view. First, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter, when we speak of God's act of creation, we are not to think of there being some entity called 'God' to which we add another entity alongside God that we call 'creation'. For Aquinas, it is not a matter of there being 'God' and then suddenly at the moment of creation 'God plus the universe'. There is only one focus of existence, namely God. Everything else exists by sharing in God's existence just as terrestrial things are warm or visible not in their own right, but because they participate in the light of the sun. Secondly, strictly speaking creation *in itself* is nothing because it is in continual receipt of its being from God. It is held in existence at every moment by God's gracious donation of being. This brings us to a vital aspect of creation *ex nihilo*: as well as creating without any pre-existent material stuff, God sustains creation in existence 'out of nothing' *at every moment*. Creation hovers over nothingness at every instant, held in existence only by God's sustaining power. This moment now, as you are reading this book, is just as much *ex nihilo* as the very first instant of creation.

Creation *ex nihilo*: The relation between God and creation

For Aquinas creation is wholly contingent because it exists only by participation in God's eternal simplicity. This has yet another important consequence: there is a radical and irreducible asymmetry between God and creation. It is not that God is a bit like a very powerful and very creative person. The difference between God and creation is not a difference in degree or even a difference in kind. It is a sheer and utterly unique difference because God exists in himself, whereas creation exists always and only by participation in God, by virtue of God's creative gratuity. This leads Aquinas to describe the relation between God and creation in a way that has often been a source of misunderstanding and controversy: while God creates, knows, governs and loves creation, the relation between God and creatures is real in creatures but not in God.³⁷ This does not mean that God is unrelated to creation or that God is indifferent to creation. Although the discussion of relations in ancient and medieval philosophy is very complex and the concept is technical,

what Aquinas has in mind with regard to God and creation can be stated succinctly. Let us start with the first of Aquinas's three kinds of relation: real relations.

Two subjects can be related to each other in such a way that they are mutually constitutive and have something in common. This might be a shared characteristic; for example, Alice can be taller than Clare because they have height in common. Also, an action between two terms might cause them to be related. For example, a company can hire a worker and, by this action, the two terms – the company and the worker – become related and mutually constitutive, as employer and employee. Similarly, a couple can be related via a mediating action such as a hug or a kiss. Aquinas calls such relations 'real' because they bring about a change in *both* terms. In such real relations one term always implies the other. Where there is a wife there is a husband and vice versa; where there is an employer there is an employee and vice versa. Such relations are symmetrical in that the terms constitute each other in a particular way, for example as husband and wife or employer and employee.

Aquinas also identifies a variety of relations which are 'logical' or 'relations according to reason'.³⁸ Such relations occur only in the mind and do not change either term. For example, we might relate Black Beauty to the equine species. Another example would be the relation between two future beings such as the relation between my grandchildren and me. At the time of writing (and, I hope, for some time to come) this is a relation only according to reason and not a real relation.³⁹ Such logical relations are a kind of association or classification in the mind.

As well as real relations and relations according to reason, Aquinas also describes a third kind of relation, one which involves both real and logical elements. These are 'mixed relations'. A good example of a mixed relation would be my relation to the city of Prague when I visit as a tourist. I come to know about Prague and, as such, my relation to Prague is real in me because it changes me. Prague's relation to me, however, is merely logical because my knowledge of the city does not change Prague. The relation between a knower (in this case, me as a tourist) and something known (in this case, Prague) is one of Aquinas's examples of a mixed relation.

In describing the relation between God and creation as 'logical' in God and 'real' in creation, Aquinas is describing a mixed relation.⁴⁰ As such, he wishes to make some important claims about the

asymmetrical relation between God and creation. First, creation is a reality wholly in the creature but not in God. In other words, God's act of creation immediately constitutes a creature's very existence, but creation does not constitute, establish or define God in any way. God would be God and creator whether or not creation existed. The act of creation does not realize any potential in God. This means that, even though God wills creation, God does not need to create in order to fulfil himself. At first glance this appears coldly logical as a way of describing God's relation to creation. It is important, however, to recognize that it helps us to understand creation as an act of free and selfless love. Imagine I have creative potential as an artist or musician. In practising my skills I realize something in myself; there is a benefit to me as well as to those who (against all the odds) appreciate my painting or musicianship. I *need* to practise my skills in order to fulfil myself. There is a degree of obligation: to realize myself as an artist or musician I must paint or play the piano. In God's act of creation, he gains nothing; he is therefore in no way compelled or obliged to create. There is, as it were, no ulterior motive. God creates as a pure selfless act of donation. There is only one beneficiary of God's creative act: creation itself. For this reason it is a pure and free gift, a theme to which we will return in the final chapter.

In describing God's relation to creation as real in creatures, Aquinas also wants to point out that the relation between creatures is not like the relation between creatures and God. For a start, while it is the case that all our creaturely relations together help to comprise our identity, none of those relations, of themselves, entirely constitute what a creature is. For example, I am related to many people and institutions, but none of those relations is *wholly* constitutive of what I am. I might be related to a particular company as its employee and I could leave that company's employment, but I would still be the same person, albeit a changed person. We might say that such relations, although very important and precious, are accidental to who and what I am. But there is one relation that is wholly constitutive of a creature and, as it were, 'non-negotiable': a creature's relation to God. Every relation between creatures assumes a most fundamental prior relation which constitutes a creature's very being, that between the creature and God.

Finally, in describing the relation between God and creation as logical in God but real in creatures, Aquinas is able to describe the

unmediated intimacy between God and creation. In any real relation between creatures there is always something held in common between creatures (e.g., a shared humanity) or a mediating act (e.g., the act of marriage). In the relation between God and creation, there is nothing held in common between the terms and neither is there a mediating act *besides* the very act of creation *ex nihilo*. God and creation do not share 'existence' or 'being' in common because God is existence itself, in which creation participates. As a result, God's relation to creation is more intimate and immediate than relations between creatures – precisely because of the sheer difference between God and creation. God can be infinitely close to creation because there is no mediating principle or act between the terms besides the very act of creation itself. Yet at the same time God remains wholly transcendent because of the sheer difference between God and creation. To reiterate, the asymmetrical relation between God and creation is not a difference of degree or a difference of kind; it is a sheer difference in which God's transcendence is at once God's immanence.

In describing the asymmetry of the relation between God and creation, we saw that God does not benefit from creation. There is no 'ulterior motive' in the sense that God does not realize himself in creating because God is eternally and fully realized. As Aquinas would say, God is 'pure act' because there is no potential in God to be other than he is. God is not required to create in order to achieve a goal or realize a potential. So why does God create? If there is no need or benefit, if God is eternally replete and fully actual, why bother? If creation is *ex nihilo*, there is nothing to benefit from creation – no potential to be realized in some pre-existent material nature, no partially made stuff waiting to be fashioned into something more orderly and beautiful. If there is no reason to create, does this mean that creation is an act of pure caprice, a sort of random decision by God to establish a created order? Because creation is from nothing, there is nothing for God to control, overcome or realize, so it looks as if creation has no basis or foundation except the inscrutable (we might even say 'random') will of God. The difference between God and creation that is established *ex nihilo* seems to be impenetrable to reason.

Following a number of patristic theologians including Augustine, this is not the way that Aquinas understands God's act of creation. The act of creation *ex nihilo* is the act of God the Trinity and it is

crucial to remember that what Aquinas writes about the difference between God and creation has its origins in his analysis of the difference between the divine persons who are named in scripture as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mat. 3.13-17; 28.16-20).⁴¹ God is love (1 Jn. 4.16), love is a relation and the three divine persons are in a triadic eternal relation that is pure love. The processions of the persons of the Trinity establish the eternal relations of the Godhead. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son. The Father eternally communicates the fullness of divinity to the Son, and the Father and Son communicate the fullness of divinity to the Spirit. The eternal relations of the Trinity are real relations in the sense that the persons are wholly mutually determinative: the Father is only Father in relation to the Son and the Spirit; the Son is only Son in relation to the Father and the Spirit; the Spirit is only Spirit in relation to the Father and the Son.⁴² So the difference between God and creation is not a random and inscrutable difference; it is a participation in, or trace of, the eternal differences and relations of the Godhead.⁴³ For Aquinas, the emanation of creation from God, which is freely willed and in no sense necessary, is an image of, or a participation in, the eternal emanation of the persons of the Trinity.⁴⁴ So God's act of creation is not simply a result of the divine will, impenetrable to reason. It is an expression of the very nature of God himself as eternally self-giving. As the Father communicates himself in the procession of the Son, and the Father and Son communicate their love in the procession of the Holy Spirit, so God's love is communicated in the freely willed communication of created being in creation *ex nihilo*. Aquinas writes, 'Hence also God the Father made the creature through His Word, which is His Son; and through His Love, which is the Holy Ghost. And so the processions of the Persons are the type of the productions of creatures inasmuch as they include the essential attributes, knowledge and will.'⁴⁵

So creation *ex nihilo* is not simply an act of the divine will. It is also an expression of God's eternal nature as self-donating love. The real relation of creation to God is a participation in the real relations of the persons of the Trinity. In pointing to this connection between God's act of creation and God's eternal and revealed nature, Aquinas is reflecting a crucial principle which can be traced to Aristotelian and Neoplatonic theology and philosophy: effects resemble their causes.⁴⁶ In order to understand what this means,

consider an artist who produces landscape paintings. The effect – the painting – will resemble the cause – the artist. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the painting will *look* like the artist, although there are some cause–effect relations in which the effect does look like the cause (biological reproduction, for example). In the case of the artist and her paintings, it means that the painting will reflect something of the artist’s training, skill, style and visual interpretation of the world. Any given effect will, at least in this sense, resemble or represent its cause. The same is the case with creation understood as an effect of its cause, God. Creation *ex nihilo* resembles God’s freedom, power and eternal relations of love.

Creation *ex nihilo*: Motion and time

God’s act of creation *ex nihilo* is the origin and basis of all events within the created order. As such, it must be distinguished from natural processes. If it were a natural process, it would also require some kind of explanation. So creation is not just another event; it is the *archē* or principle of all things. In order to distinguish creation itself from events *within* the created order, Aquinas insists that creation is not a motion.⁴⁷ By ‘motion’ he means any kind of change – including change of place (locomotion), change of quality (e.g., learning) or change of quantity (e.g., growing). Motion involves succession – one thing becoming another. It is a process by which something that already exists realizes its potential. By denying that creation is a motion, Aquinas wishes to claim that creation is not a process. That is, it is not one thing becoming another. Such processes belong only *within* the natural order. To reiterate: because the act of creation is the very principle of the natural processes which occur within the natural order, it cannot itself be a process – otherwise the act of creation itself would require further explanation in terms of something else. So creation *ex nihilo* is the absolute beginning and origin – if you like, the ontological ‘point zero’ – which is the basis of creation’s motion.

In turn, motion is clearly linked to time, although the nature of time has been disputed in ancient, medieval and modern physics. For thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas – who followed the precedent set by Plato and Aristotle – time is the measure of motion. By means of time, we can measure different motions relative to each other – the

fraction of a second for the beat of a bird's wing, the twenty minutes it takes us to walk a mile, the three years it takes us to learn a new language. In the seventeenth century the question of absolute time and space arose in the classical mechanics of Isaac Newton (1643–1727): Would time pass in the absence of motion? In the twentieth century, a new physics particularly associated with Albert Einstein (1879–1955) introduced the notion of relative time. Creation *ex nihilo* presents us with a very important and tricky question with respect to time: if creation is the origin or beginning of everything, does it mean that time itself had a beginning? This is how creation *ex nihilo* is often interpreted, as meaning that there was a 'time zero', akin to the Big Bang, that is the absolute temporal beginning of everything. Contrary to Aristotle's teaching, there was a moment of creation. The universe has not always existed. Time is not everlasting.

A philosophical problem arises, however, because 'beginning' is itself a temporal concept. If creation *ex nihilo* means not only that God sustains creation in existence *ex nihilo* at every instant, but also that there was a first instant, can we ask what happened prior to that first instant? We cannot, because there is nothing before creation or before time itself. The notion of there being a first instant of time seems philosophically confused because any instant of time, even the first instant, is framed or defined by a 'before' and 'after'. But if there were a 'before' to the first instant of time, it would not be the first instant; it would follow something else.⁴⁸

The question of the nature of the universe's beginning is, of course, one of the most fundamental and enduring in theology and philosophy. Many Greek philosophers, observing the unchanging and cyclical nature of the heavens, believed matter to be eternal. The circle has no beginning or end, yet is finite. This seemed to rule out an absolute temporal beginning to the cosmos. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers challenged Aristotle's view on the grounds that we observe perishability in parts of the cosmos, so the whole must be perishable too. On this view, time would have an end, if not a beginning. Later Neoplatonic philosophers, including Plotinus, argued against the Christian view that the universe had a beginning on the grounds that a temporal origin (non-being temporally succeeded by being) would imply that God had changed in deciding to create – and change cannot be predicated of the divine. Following Anselm in his *Monologion*,⁴⁹ most thinkers of the thirteenth century argued that creation *ex nihilo* does not simply

deny a material cause of the universe, but must also refer creation's temporal origin. According to Bonaventure (c. 1217–1274) and Aquinas's teacher Albert the Great (d.1280), the universe began to exist after not existing and the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is incompatible with the view that the universe is eternal.

Aquinas took a more subtle approach. He argued that there is nothing inherently contradictory in the view that the universe is eternal, although we should be cautious about the use of the word 'eternal'. When applied to God, 'eternal' does not mean that God simply goes on and on and on. It means that God is beyond time. God's existence is not a matter of succession (one thing after another) but is 'one'. So God's 'time' is singular and simple. We are not supposed to be able to imagine what such existence might be like. It is unimaginable because our existence is temporally divisible; we live in the moment between before and after. So this concept of 'eternity' when applied to God is negative in the sense that it tells us what God's existence is *not*: it is not divisible according to time. By contrast, when applied to the universe 'eternal' denotes that time has no beginning or end. It is in this sense that Aristotle believed that the universe is eternal. Aquinas thinks Aristotle's view is probable (what he calls 'relatively demonstrable') but not subject to strict philosophical proof because God does not will creation's existence necessarily. Creation might not be, so it is not necessarily of everlasting time.⁵⁰

Aquinas's view is that we know by faith that there is creation, but creation can also be demonstrated by reason. He distinguishes creation from making something because whereas making something implies pre-existent material, creation means 'to produce a thing into being according to its entire substance'.⁵¹ In addition to this, creation *ex nihilo* has a twofold meaning. First, it means that the creator is the source of the entire being of the creature, including its material nature, in such a way that 'the causality of the creator extends to everything that is in the thing'.⁵² Secondly, non-being is prior to being not in a temporal sense but by a 'priority of nature'. What Aquinas means is that when a creature normally receives something – say a lump of clay receiving the form of a pot – something comes before what is received. In other words, there is a recipient. In the case of creation *ex nihilo*, it is not the case that something is already there, which then receives being. There is nothing prior to the creature's receipt of its very existence. Left to

itself, creation would not lack something; it would simply cease to exist. Aquinas sums this up in a passage in his treatise *The Power of God* (*De Potentia Dei*):

We should say that God does not by one action bring things into existing and by another preserve them in existing, since the very existing of permanent things is divisible only incidentally, as it is subject to movement, and it is as such instantaneous. And so God's action intrinsically causing a thing to exist does not differ insofar as it causes the beginning and the continuation of existing.⁵³

So Aquinas does not interpret creation *ex nihilo* to mean that God starts creation off from nothing and then, by a secondary act, sustains creation in being. The beginning and continuation of creation's existence are one and the same creative act of God. Yet revealed faith requires that we add a further interpretation of creation *ex nihilo*, namely 'that the creature should have non-being prior to being [even] in duration, so that it is said to be "out of nothing" because it is temporally after nothing'.⁵⁴ The notion that creation *ex nihilo* concerns a temporal beginning to the universe is an article of revealed faith which cannot be demonstrated and is therefore not granted by the philosophers.

In the end, Aquinas agrees that creation *ex nihilo* means that creation had a temporal beginning or a 'time zero', but as a matter of faith rather than philosophical demonstration. This does not mean that faith contradicts reason, but that faith adds an extra dimension of understanding that enhances the rational exploration of creation by philosophy. What does faith add?

Things are said to be created in the beginning of time, not as if the beginning of time were a measure of creation, but because together with time heaven and earth were created.⁵⁵

Aquinas is stating that creation *ex nihilo* means there is no 'before' and 'after' to God's creation. Nevertheless, God is the absolute source of everything that is not God, including time. In faith, we must therefore talk of time itself having a beginning. At that beginning, the absolute origin of everything that is not God, we have reached the edge of our words.

Creation *ex nihilo*: Contemporary science

At the turn of the twentieth century, the most popular cosmology among physicists was known as the ‘steady-state’ theory. On this view, the universe is in more or less the same state at any moment. As it expands, matter is created. The French priest and physicist, Georges Lemaître (1894–1966), proposed a different approach to the expanding universe that he called ‘the hypothesis of the primeval atom’. Lemaître suggested that the universe began with an explosion from what later became known as a singularity, the ‘primeval atom’. In 1949, the Cambridge cosmologist Fred Hoyle (1915–2001), who preferred the steady-state theory, coined the phrase ‘Big Bang’ to describe Lemaître’s view. The ‘Big Bang’, now a very familiar term, suggests that the universe expanded and cooled from a primordial hot and dense condition around fourteen billion years ago.

The idea of a ‘Big Bang’ immediately drew comparisons with creation *ex nihilo*. Did this finally provide scientific evidence for the theological view that creation came from nothing? More recently, scientists have been keen to explain how the universe could come from nothing without the need to involve God.

A moment’s thought reveals that Big Bang cosmology and creation *ex nihilo* are not one and the same view of the origins of the cosmos. The reasons why they cannot coincide are both scientific and theological. The first reason concerns the nature of scientific enquiry. Science deals with processes *within* the natural order – one thing becoming another. Whenever cosmologists attempt to define creation from nothing in scientific terms, it always turns out to be something coming from something else.⁵⁶ Recall that ‘nothing’ in creation *ex nihilo* is not a vacuum of any description, not even a quantum vacuum. ‘Nothing’ means just that: ‘nothing’. If science were to say anything about this ‘nothing’ and what comes from it, it would stop being science and would become metaphysics. This is precisely Aquinas’s point when he says that creation is not any kind of motion. In other words, creation is not one thing becoming another. While contemporary cosmology might not contradict creation *ex nihilo*, they are not coterminous.

The second reason why Big Bang cosmology cannot be one with creation *ex nihilo* is because the latter is more about the nature of God and creation’s relation to God than it is a description or

explanation of ‘how or when God got the universe running’. As we have seen, creation *ex nihilo* is about the absolute ontological priority of God and the asymmetrical relation between God and creation. It preserves the distinction between God and creation and establishes what we *do not* mean by ‘creation’ – a process of manufacture or a necessary overflow of divine being. Moreover, creation *ex nihilo* is concerned not only with a temporal beginning of creation, but also with creation’s utterly contingent nature at every moment. Creation exists ‘suspended’ over nothingness, sharing in God’s eternal existence. There is, therefore, no competition between contemporary cosmology and the theology and metaphysics of creation *ex nihilo*. Their origins and implications are quite different.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Creation *ex nihilo* is a distinctive mark of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim understanding of God’s creative act. It emerges from certain convictions concerning what we must say of God if we are to preserve the distinction between God and creation. God is the absolute source of all that is not God, including matter, space and time. Creation *ex nihilo* is also what the theologian John Webster calls ‘a distributed doctrine’: it appears throughout Christian theology’s treatment of its central topics.

Our understanding of creation is amplified and deepened by this frequent recurrence, for its full scope and meaning become apparent in relation to what is said about other divine works of nature, such as preservation and governance, and, most of all, in relation to what is said in the works of grace which culminate in the missions of the Son of God and the Holy Spirit.⁵⁸

One of the key implications of creation *ex nihilo* is that creatures, in themselves, are nothing. The relation between God and creation is radically asymmetrical. Creation only exists by participation in God’s sustaining power, an idea we will explore further in the next chapter. For some critics of creation *ex nihilo*, this renders the creature wholly debased, having no intrinsic worth. To reduce the creature to nothing *but* its relation to God seems to evacuate the creature of any true significance.⁵⁹

Such a criticism represents a deep misunderstanding of creation *ex nihilo*. It is certainly the case that creation from nothing points to the radically *gifted* nature of created being, an idea to which we will return in the final chapter. Creation is, however, a pure act of gratuitous love precisely because God gains nothing by creating. In fact, one of the perplexing questions for Christian theology is why, given God's eternal perfection and repletion, he would create. As we have seen, it cannot be due to any lack or need because God realizes nothing in creating. The act of creation, therefore, can only be described as a primal instance of *utter* gratuity with no 'ulterior motive'. It is the pure donation of existence by love that includes the donation of integrity and value: '*Because of* (not *in spite of*) the non-reciprocal character of the relation of creator and creature, the creature has integrity.'⁶⁰ Creation is not an act of coercion, compulsion or even persuasion. It is the purely peaceful, totally free and unnecessary donation of existence from nothing. Creation's participation in God, the source of its being and fount of its integrity, is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2

- 1 Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. R.G. Bury (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 2 Aristotle, *Physics (Books V-VIII)*, trans. P.H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), VIII.1, pp. 277–9.
- 3 On the interwoven doctrines of creation in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, see David B. Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).
- 4 See Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) for a fascinating account of the political significance of the vacuum in Boyle's air-pump investigations of the seventeenth century.
- 5 Plotinus, *Enneads V*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), V.2.1, pp. 59–61.
- 6 We may think that there must be some connection or similarity between God and creation. The relation between God and creation will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter and in Chapter 3.
- 7 When we describe God as like a creature in a univocal way (literally 'with one voice'), we are suggesting that we can speak of God and his creative act *in the same way* (with the same voice) as we can speak of creaturely creativity so that we might think of God's creativity as a very grand or supremely powerful version of human creativity. The thrust of this chapter is that God's act of creation *ex nihilo* is utterly unique and not univocal with our creativity, although our creativity is related by analogy to God's creativity. All our acts of 'creativity' assume God's primordial and unique act of creation *ex nihilo*. The analogical relation of our creativity with God's act of creation will be discussed in the next chapter.
- 8 A fine exposition of creation *ex nihilo* is available in Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), especially ch.4. See also the articles in a special edition of the journal *Modern Theology*: Janet Soskice (ed.), *Modern Theology*: Special issue: 'Creation "Ex Nihilo" and Modern Theology', 29(2), 2013, pp. 1–192. For critiques of creation *ex nihilo* arising from feminist concerns and process theology, see Thomas Jay Oord, ed., *Theologies of Creation*:

Creatio Ex Nihilo and its New Rivals (London: Routledge, 2015) and Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

- 9 Notable exceptions are Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–c. AD 165) and Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150–c. AD 215).
- 10 The text is therefore usually known as the Masoretic text. It is the authoritative Hebrew text of the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) for Rabbinic Judaism.
- 11 For a thorough survey of the different interpretations of Genesis 1, arguing for creation *ex nihilo*'s scriptural basis, see Paul Coplan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic 2004), pp. 36–60. See also Gordon J. Wenham, *World Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1987), pp. 11–14. Wenham argues that verse 1 of Genesis constitutes a main clause describing the first act of creation (*the beginning in an absolute rather than temporal sense*) while vv. 2 and 3 describe God's subsequent creative act. Wenham translates the Hebrew of Genesis 1.1 very similarly to the Septuagint, as: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.'
- 12 For example, the New International Version and the New American Bible.
- 13 Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν.
- 14 A much more detailed account of this interpretation of Gen. 1.1 is available in R.R. Reno's excellent theological commentary, *Genesis* (London: SCM Press, 2010). For a helpful discussion of this understanding of 'beginning' in Ambrose of Milan's Hexameron sermons of AD 387, see N. Joseph Torchia, O.P., *Creatio ex Nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaean Polemic and Beyond* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 20.
- 15 The wisdom literature is generally thought to include Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the deuterocanonical books Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) and Wisdom. For God as the creator and source of all things, see Prov. 8.22–30 and Job 38.4–39.30.
- 16 Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A.S. Worrall (London: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 21.
- 17 See Janet M. Soskice, 'Creatio ex nihilo: its Jewish and Christian foundations', in David Burrell et al. (eds), *Creation and the God of Abraham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 24–39, especially pp. 33–5.

- 18 See *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Book 1, ch. 1: 'God, who dwells in the heavens, and made out of nothing the things that exist.' The text is available in Bart D. Ehrman (trans.), *The Apostolic Fathers vol. 2* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003).
- 19 Tatian, 'Address of Tatian to the Greeks' in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 2, trans. J. E. Ryland, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), ch. 5, p. 67. See also ch. 12.
- 20 Theophilus of Antioch, 'To Autolycus', I.4 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 2, trans. J.E. Ryland et al., p. 90.
- 21 May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, xi.
- 22 Ernan McMullin, 'Creation *ex nihilo*: early history', in Burrell et al. (eds), *Creation and the God of Abraham*, pp. 17–18. See also May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo*, pp. 24–5. For May, Judaism does not establish a clear doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* until the Middle Ages in the context of a dispute with Arabic Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism.
- 23 Janet M. Soskice, 'Creatio *ex nihilo*: its Jewish and Christian foundations', p. 25 (emphasis original). Note that Soskice's phrase is a deliberate rejoinder to Gerhard May's claim that creation *ex nihilo* is not compelled by the biblical text.
- 24 Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), XI.10, p. 462.
- 25 Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, XI.10, p. 462.
- 26 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.4.3. For those unfamiliar with Aquinas's theology, an obvious question may come to mind: On what basis does he make these claims about God? How does he know all this? As a theologian, Aquinas has a clear method: the exposition of sacred scripture in concert with the 'holy teaching' (*sacra doctrina*) of the church. When considering the doctrines of God and creation, Aquinas sees himself as expositing what is taught in scripture through the church by using the tools of philosophical learning in order to bring clarity and detail. What Aquinas wants to say here is that theologians are concerned with distinguishing between speech about God and speech about creatures. If we speak of God in terms appropriate to creatures without reflection or qualification, we are speaking only of a mythological figure. To avoid such idolatrous speech, he uses three guiding principles (*triplex via* or 'threefold way'), drawn largely from the sixth-century Christian Neoplatonist Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (c. AD 500). First, in speaking about God we are necessarily speaking about the creator or 'first cause' of all things, who must therefore be distinguished from his

effects. We therefore speak of God by ‘the way of causality’ (*via causalitatis*). Secondly, we must remove from our speech about God all categories and modes of reason that belong properly to the created realm, such as time or change. This is known as ‘the way of remotion’ (*via remotionis*) because we must *remove* creaturely categories from our speech about God. This is essentially the method of negative theology whereby we are better to say what God is *not* rather than what God *is*. So: God is not temporal or subject to change because these are categories which belong to creation. Thirdly, Aquinas uses ‘the way of eminence’ (*via eminentiae*) or what we might call the logic of perfection: if we are to speak of God at all, we must ascribe to God the greatest perfection, or ‘eminence’. In this context, this means ascribing to God the greatest unity and aseity. Throughout, Aquinas’s basic principle is this: we must be very careful what we say of almighty God and it is the theologian’s job to ensure that we are speaking of God rather than a creature of myth. On Aquinas’s threefold method, see *Summa Theologiae* 1a.12.12; *Summa Contra* I.14; Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The ‘Divine Science’ of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 76 and Fran O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), pp. 31–41.

- 27 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.3.6.
- 28 It is important not to confuse the philosophical category of substance with the modern English term ‘substance’. When speaking of substance today, we are usually referring to some kind of material stuff (‘this white substance is sugar’). When ancient and medieval philosophers and theologians use the term substance, they are *not* pointing to something’s material nature. They are pointing to what something is, essentially, in itself. For Aquinas, as well as material substances such as human beings there are non-material substances such as angels. According to Aristotle in book 12 of his *Metaphysics*, there are five kinds of substance, the highest being God who is an eternal and immutable substance.
- 29 Note the potentially confusing terminology. An accidental change is *not* a change that happens by accident. It is a change to the incidental qualities – the so-called ‘accidents’ – of something.
- 30 Note that a substantial change may not involve any material change. The material nature of a tree is wood and the material nature of a desk is wood but they have different ‘forms’ which means that, according to Aristotle and Aquinas, their substantial natures – what they *are* – are different.
- 31 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.3.5. ad 1; 1a.3.6. ad 2.

- 32 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.3.4. *sed contra*.
- 33 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.4.2. *responsio*.
- 34 Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles Book Two: Creation*, trans. James F. Anderson (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), II.6.1.
- 35 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.3.4.*responsio*; *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.4.3.ad 3. The rediscovery of the importance of the metaphysics of participation in Aquinas's theology is one of the most important recent developments in Thomist scholarship. See Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas and God*, pp. 139–46; Jan Aertsen, *Nature and Creature: Thomas Aquinas's Way of Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 123–7; John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Press of America, 2000), ch.4.
- 36 Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.22.9 (my translation and emphases).
- 37 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.13.7. *responsio*: 'Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea, inasmuch as creatures are referred to Him.' See also *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.45.3.ad 1. For a critique of Aquinas's view, see William Lane Craig, 'Timelessness, Creation, and God's Real Relation to the World', *Laval théologique et philosophique* 56 (1), 2000, pp. 93–112. For a defence of Aquinas's view in response to Craig, see Matthew R. McWhorter, 'Aquinas on God's Relation to the World', *New Blackfriars* 94 (1049), January 2013, pp. 3–19.
- 38 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.28.1 and *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, question 7, article 11, available in Thomas Aquinas, *The Power of God*, trans. Richard J. Regan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 225.
- 39 Aquinas, *The Power of God*, question 7, article 11 (p. 225): 'The intellect sometimes considers two things as beings, only one or neither of which is such, as when the intellect considers two future things, or one present and the other future, and understands one with a relation to the other, asserting that one is prior to the other. And so these relations are only conceptual, as resulting from the way of understanding.'
- 40 Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 1a.45.3.ad 1; *The Power of God*, question 3 article 3, pp. 41–3.

- 41 The intricacies of the Trinitarian doctrine of God lie beyond the immediate scope of this book. One question will occur to some readers, however: Having established the importance of the simplicity of God, does the doctrine of the Trinity introduce plurality or complexity into God? To answer this question, it is important to be clear at the outset that the doctrine of the Trinity does not mean that there are three individuals or people in the Godhead. Neither does it mean that there is complexity. Rather, God does not *have* relations; God is pure relationality of love in such a way that the threefold persons of the Trinity are also a perfect and eternal unity. It may be helpful to note that the doctrines of divine simplicity and the Trinity, rather than being mutually exclusive, are mutually interpretative because each tells us what the other does *not* mean. On the one hand, the doctrine of the Trinity, in pointing to the relation of love in God, makes it clear that, whatever we mean by divine simplicity, we do *not* mean that God is a kind of monad, a ‘thing’ or something like a lone individual. God is love and love is a relationship; God is the perfect and eternal relationship of love in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Similarly, the doctrine of divine simplicity makes it clear that whatever we mean by the Trinity we do *not* mean that God has a structure such that God is composed of three persons. We *have* relations whereas God *is* pure relation. Neither does the Trinity mean that God *possesses* love because God *is* love. This kind of eternal relation in God is not inimical to simple unity, but constitutive of that unity. Finally, we should note that, while Aquinas speaks of ‘difference’ in God (the difference of the persons), he is clear that in God there is no diversity, division or inequality (which would certainly compromise simplicity). See *The Power of God*, question 9, article 8, p. 266.
- 42 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.28.1.*responsio*: ‘But when something proceeds from a principle of the same nature, then both the one proceeding and the source of procession, agree in the same order; and then they have real relations to each other. Therefore as the divine processions are in the identity of the same nature, as above explained (1a.27, articles 2 and 4), these relations, according to the divine processions, are necessarily real relations.’
- 43 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.45.7.
- 44 Aquinas titles his question on God’s creative act as *de modo emanationis rerum a primo principio* – ‘on the emanation of things from the first principle’ (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a.45.1). While a *necessary* emanation or a stretching of divine being such as one finds in Neoplatonism is precluded in Christian theology, creation is described by Aquinas as a freely willed emanation from God.

- 45 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.45.6.responsio. See also Aquinas, *The Power of God*, question 10, article 2, counter-objection 2, p. 285: 'The processions of creatures are imitations of the processions of the divine Persons.' The work of Gilles Emery provides the finest recent exposition of Aquinas's teaching on the Trinity and creation. For a succinct review of this research, see Gilles Emery, 'Trinity and Creation', in Rik van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (eds), *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Press, 2005), pp. 58–75. Emery cites in particular a number of texts from Aquinas's commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard (*Scriptum super libros sententiarum magistri Petri Lombardi Episcopi Parisiensis*), for example book 1, distinction 14, question 1, article 1: 'The eternal procession of the persons are the cause and reason of the production of creatures' (p. 59).
- 46 Aristotle, *Metaphysics (Books I-IX)*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), VII.7, pp. 338–9; *Physics (Books I-IV)*, trans. P.H. Wicksteed and F.M. Cornford (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996), II.7, p. 165; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.45.7.responsio: 'Every effect in some degree represents its cause, but diversely. For some effects represent only the causality of the cause, but not its form; as smoke represents fire. Such a representation is called a "trace": for a trace shows that someone has passed by but not who it is.'
- 47 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.45.2. ad 2; *Summa Contra Gentiles* II.19; *The Power of God*, question 3, article 2, pp. 39–41.
- 48 See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.46.1. ad 7.
- 49 Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 'Monologion', ch.8, pp. 20–2.
- 50 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.46.1.responsio.
- 51 Aquinas, *Scriptum super Libros Sententiarum Petri Lombardi* (Writings of the 'Sentences' of Peter Lombard), book 2, distinction 1, question 1, article 2, responsio. The translated text is available in Steven E. Baldner and William E. Carroll (eds and trans.), *Aquinas on Creation: Writings on the 'Sentences' of Peter Lombard 2.1.1* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997).
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Aquinas, *The Power of God*, question 5, article 1, p. 134.
- 54 Baldner and Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation: Writings on the 'Sentences' of Peter Lombard 2.1.1*, book 2, distinction 1, question 1, article 2, responsio, p. 75.

- 55 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.46.3.ad 1.
- 56 A good example of an abject failure to understand the *nihil* in creation *ex nihilo* is Lawrence M. Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather than Nothing?* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2012).
- 57 For a fine, succinct account of creation *ex nihilo* in relation to contemporary quantum cosmology, see William R. Stoeger, 'The Big Bang, quantum cosmology and *creatio ex nihilo*', in Burrell et al. (eds), *Creation and the God of Abraham*, pp. 152–75.
- 58 John Webster, '“Love is also a Lover of Life”: *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness', *Modern Theology* 29 (2), 2013, pp. 156–71 (quotation appearing on p. 156).
- 59 See Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. For a defence of Augustine's doctrine of creation against criticisms from process and feminist theology, see Rowan Williams, '“Good for Nothing”? Augustine on Creation' in Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), ch.4.
- 60 Webster, 'Love is Also a Lover of Life', p. 168.

Chapter 3

- 1 See pp. 46–7.
- 2 Although 'teleology' is now a common term in philosophy and theology, *teleologia* is not conclusively attested until 1728 when, in his *Philosophia Rationalis, Sive Logica*, the German philosopher Christian Wolff refers to a branch of natural philosophy that deals with the ends of things.
- 3 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.13.1.
- 4 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.4.3; 1a.13.2; 1a.45.7.
- 5 Aquinas, *Truth (De Veritate)* vol. 3, trans. Robert W. Schmidt (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 22.2 ad 1, p. 42.
- 6 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.13.1 *responsio*. For an explanation of the terms 'excellence' and 'remotion', see Chapter 2 footnote 26, p. 166.
- 7 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a.13.5.*responsio*.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.

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Bloomsbury T&T Clark
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Imprint previously known as T&T Clark

50 Bedford Square
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1385 Broadway
New York
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First published 2017

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-0-5676-5609-4

PB: 978-0-5676-5608-7

ePDF: 978-0-5676-5610-0

ePub: 978-0-5676-5611-7

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Cover image © Yuri Afanasiev/Alamy Stock Photo

Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services, Chennai, India