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Improvising the Paradigms: Aquinas, Creation and the Eternal Ideas as Anti-Platonic Ontology

*Rien n'est, du moins rien n'est absolument
(dans le domaine linguistique)
De Saussure*

*Dans la langue il n'y a que des différences
De Saussure*

*Deus . . . scit enuntiabilia non
per modum enuntiabilium
Aquinas*

The Platonic philosophy of eternal ideas was for centuries gladly appropriated by Christian thinkers. Famous warnings about gift-bearing Greeks should perhaps have been heeded, however, since this particular Trojan horse smuggled into the being of the monotheistic creator a pernicious multitude, akin to a viral infection. The logic of Platonic position time and again has invited theologians to locate the archetypes of created things as distinct existences “within” God’s own understanding, but in a way utterly detached from the creative will of God. Hence the problem: if the creature’s free determination by God from nothing is precisely the mark of its creation *ex nihilo*, yet its proper creaturely identity is already a predefined feature of God’s own being, then either it cannot really be created in the full sense of that word, or else in some sense it always already has been! The considerations that follow will address this conundrum by suggesting that Thomas Aquinas’s rethinking of the creative role of the divine ideas moves in a decidedly more voluntarist direction, extricating them from Platonist ontological assumptions. The examination in that light of some different accounts of creation over the centuries will suggest that there is a way, inspired by Aquinas, of relating divine ideas and divine will that can isolate the different “Platonic” diseases afflicting these accounts, that perhaps even should have prevented them. The following section (I) will attempt in very brief compass to suggest the voluntarist dynamic implicit in Aquinas’s discussion of divine ideas. The remaining sections will progressively explore what seem to be the unavoidable and unfortunate consequences of ignoring this dynamic: an impossible disruption of the creative act into “stages” (II), an impossible bifurcation of intellect and will in the simple creating agent (III), and an impossible incorporation of the created world into the divine life itself as a necessary ingredient

(IV). After suggesting three contemporary theological echoes of this last deviation (V), a concluding section (VI) will schematize the results.

I. Aquinas's Voluntarism of Creation

It may as well be admitted: Aquinas's writings are frustratingly obscure on the detailed relationship between the divine ideas and the divine creative will.¹ We can, however, make an initial approach to the riddle of how God's will connects with God's knowing of creation by posing this question: granted that God perfectly knows not only what is not God (i.e. actual creatures) but also all that is not God and that could exist but will not (i.e. possible but never realized things, non-actuals), is that knowledge, materially speaking or in terms of its content, the same in kind? Otherwise put: granted that God's ideas of (non-divine) things are always secondary terms contained within God's perfect knowledge of his own essence (i.e. as ways in which that essence can be deficiently imitated or participated), is there nonetheless anything to suggest that ideas of non-actuals (shorthand here for "mere" possibilities, i.e. what could exist but never has or will) have a cognitive status distinguished in principle from the cognitive status of ideas of creatures (meaning here actual creatures)? It is crucial to see that the distinction in cognitive status at issue here is in material terms, i.e. it is specifically directed to the non-divine content as cognized. Of course God will know that ideas of creatures, unlike ideas of non-actuals, are ideas of what God actually wills to exist. All would agree to that. But the key issue is this: can the difference of known content between ideas of creatures and ideas of non-actuals be restricted to divine awareness of the decision to create or not (a kind of extraneous detail, as it were), or does the noetic differential extend beyond the divine option itself to condition as well what is known about the very creature or non-actual respectively. Crudely: does an idea of a creature "look (to God's knowledge) like" an idea of a non-actual? If God's decision to make a creature translates into a greater determinacy of known content in that creature's idea, then clearly for Aquinas God's creative act involves something more, well, "creative," more voluntarist, than is assumed by those interpreters who think Aquinas basically extends the Platonic lineage of the ideas. I will point out two kinds of evidence implying that Aquinas on further consideration did indeed settle upon a more voluntaristic reading of ideas: first, a progressively stabilized and careful distinction between ideas as intelligibilities (*rationes*) and ideas as exemplars; second, the pivotal role assigned to providence in the divine envisagement of non-divine possibility.

¹ Vivian Boland O.P., *Ideas in God according to Saint Thomas Aquinas: Sources and Synthesis* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996) provides a thorough survey of Aquinas's doctrine of ideas and references much of the secondary literature. Aquinas's mature position on divine knowledge, divine ideas and divine will is essentially laid out in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* [henceforth *SCG*], Book I, chapters 47-54, and *Summa Theologica* [henceforth *ST*], Part I, questions 14 and 15. As will become clear from the following discussion, the earlier discussion of ideas in Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* (*Disputed Questions on Truth*, henceforth *QDV*) represents what I regard as a transitional and more problematic treatment specifically where the question of the divine will to create is concerned. The reading of Aquinas offered in the following paragraphs is not a straightforward summary but is very much a synthetic interpretation. It is not uncontentious, but I have argued for it in detail elsewhere, indicating as well some of the other recent interpreters who have weighed in on either side of the question. Paul DeHart, "What Is Not, Was Not, and Will Never Be: Creaturely Possibility, Divine Ideas and the Creator's Will in Thomas Aquinas," *Nova et Vetera* [English edition] 13 (2015), pp. 1009-1058.

Cutting a long story short, in regard to the first point it seems Aquinas made an important decision soon after the *Disputed Questions on Truth*. In that work he had recognized a distinction between ideas in a more proper and limited sense, which are God's practical knowledge of things properly producible in themselves, and ideas in a broader and vaguer sense, which denote any intelligible aspect (actual or possible) of the non-divine realm that can fall within God's speculative cognition.² The idea properly speaking is of what stands and independently exists as such, i.e. the substance; but are there such ideas of never-to-be-created substances? I would argue that Aquinas abandoned an earlier position that defined the proper idea from what was producible as such (regardless of the divine intent to produce), and which thus identically encompassed both created and non-actual substances. By the time of the *Disputed Questions on the Power of God* his position is that ideas in the proper sense are practical not because they are geared to the producible, but because they incorporate a willed determination to execute their creation (*per voluntatem ad opus ordinatam*); so non-actuals do not have ideas in the full sense.³ In his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius's *Divine Names* he flatly rejects his own earlier reading of that author, where the "practicality" of ideas properly speaking meant only "potential" practicality; now, proper ideas are of what God actually intends to create.⁴ In the *Summa Theologiae* he terminologically fixes the now stabilized distinction; God's ideas properly speaking are exemplars, and are of actual creatures, while his knowledge of non-actuals demands only ideas in the vaguer sense of intelligibilities (*rationes*).⁵ A late disputed question confirms the mature position: an idea means a form according to which an agent actually intends to make something.⁶

The question as to where non-actuals "belong" within God's knowledge evidently struck Aquinas as of sufficient importance to warrant careful thought and a definite resolution. Such resolve would hardly seem justified if the divine fiat had no other relevance to God's cognition of some participant in his being than a shift of title, as if creation means an intelligibility simply "becomes" an exemplar by being "selected," so that, unchanged in itself, it is shifted into a subset of actualized intelligibilities called exemplars, as an accountant moves a number to a new column. But intelligibilities are not only of non-actuals, and this already suggests that the difference between intelligibility and exemplar might be of greater cognitional import. For it is noteworthy that Aquinas implicitly assigns God's knowledge even of non-actual *substances* to the same cognitional category as his knowledge of matter in itself, or of genus, or of property, which are realities that in themselves are abstractions, and can only truly exist as elements within some more metaphysically fundamental whole.⁷ Is there, then, some sense in which the merely possible substance even as substance is known by God as inherently lacking in some degree of concreteness or determinacy, as devoid of some constitutive context? A further indication pointing in this direction is the important discussion in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* where Aquinas elaborates on the traditional distinction between God's "simple knowledge" (i.e. of all possible to him, including non-actuals) and God's "knowledge of vision" (i.e. of what he actually creates). Aquinas defines the difference by the fact that in the latter God knows the acts of

² Aquinas, *QDV*, q. 3, aa. 3, 5, & 7.

³ Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia dei*, q. 1, a. 5, answer to 11th objection.

⁴ Aquinas, *In De divinis nominibus*, chapter 5, lectio 3. The rejected earlier interpretation is found at *QDV*, q. 3, a. 3, answer to 3rd objection.

⁵ Aquinas, *ST*, Part I, q. 15, a. 2.

⁶ Aquinas, *Quodlibet* IV, q. 4, a. 1, answer to 1st objection.

⁷ Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 15, a. 3, answers to 3rd and 4th objections.

existence proper to the creatures, while in the former things are known only “in” God’s power and not “in themselves.”⁸

What does it amount to, then, this distinction made by Aquinas between a divine idea as the intelligibility of a non-actual and a divine idea as the exemplar of a creature? The way God knows anything is always the same, by knowing his own essence; such knowledge is always necessary; and in accordance with Aquinas’s most basic metaphysical assumptions, what is known, i.e. what makes knowledge true, is ultimately the act of existence (*esse*) of the known. Now, in the act of knowing his own perfect act of existence God also knows every intelligible participation thereof, i.e. every imperfect act of existence. This field of intelligibility is infinitely, if arbitrarily, divisible; hypothetically, any non-divine actuality that might have been given can be said to have its “own” intelligibility (*ratio*) in God.⁹ This is God’s “simple knowledge.” But, uniquely, in knowing actual creatures, God is no longer knowing simply his own act of existence, but also their own, just as the contingent effect of his free will. But what “more” is thereby known? After all, as Kant long ago saw, God perfectly envisions the creature, including its existence, so it seems that God could know nothing different of the creature than he could know of a non-actual: “mere” existence adds nothing.¹⁰ But this conclusion will not harmonize with the evidence adduced above. God’s actual willing of a creature must “put something into” it that cognitively differentiates it, something that amounts to a meaningful distinction between its “own” act of existence and its virtual presence “in” God’s power. The answer is already suggested in the just cited discussion from *Summa Contra Gentiles* ch. 66, where Aquinas stipulates that, in contrast to his knowledge of non-actuals, in his “knowledge of vision” God sees creatures in their proper causes. That knowing their proper acts of existence also involves knowing their causal interactions with other creatures sounds like the constitutive context we were seeking. This is the point of our second kind of evidence, namely, Aquinas’s doctrine of providence.

As is clear from *Disputed Questions on Truth*, q. 5, a. 1 (and replies), there is only a “world,” that is, a combination of many different kinds of creatures into a causally interconnected whole, due to the providential ordering of God. But this work of disposing means ordering specific things to their ends, and the world as a whole to its end; the only end outside the world is God’s own goodness, God’s own ultimate end (i.e. himself), and only the actual act of creation is the willing of such a disposition.¹¹ In other words, there is no merely speculative aspect to providence as with the “intelligibilities” among ideas; there is no such “idea” of a world because a world as a system of ends is not merely entertained by God: all subordinated ends fall into position only in view of the end of participating God’s being, i.e. of being created.¹² Thus the total range of causal interconnections that enters into the concrete actuality of any individual creature is already part of the envisioning of the total end of creation. We might venture further.

⁸ Aquinas, *SCG*, Bk. I, ch. 66.

⁹ Note that the virtual status of distinction among the intelligibilities of mere possibles, i.e. their indeterminacy in terms of a lack of a fixed or discrete content, does not amount to the claim that God’s knowledge is in any way indeterminate. Since it is precisely the mark of the non-actual that it has no proper act of existence (unlike the creature), then its only act of existence is that of the divine being and power as such. And God’s perfect grasp of his own perfection is no more indeterminate than the divine act of being itself.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* [1763], in *Theoretical Philosophy 1755-1770*, ed. David Walford, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 117-8.

¹¹ Cf. Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 22, a. 1.

¹² Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 19, a. 3: *alia autem a se Deus vult, inquantum ordinantur ad suam bonitatem ut in finem.*

Some passages strongly suggest that the ensemble of different things and kinds to be found in creation are themselves artifacts of the particular providential world-order intended by God.¹³ Aquinas's language here does not suggest that God simply stocks a world with a selection (off the shelf) of "potential" creatures already given in some determinate way. Rather, the divine wisdom "thinks out" the order of the universe which itself partially consists in the distinguishing of the things that populate it. Hence God does not just actualize preexisting distinctions, but rather distinguishes in making. Not just multitude but differentiation are "*ex intentione*": they are intended together, as subordinated to the intention to create itself. I am suggesting that it is just this enormous range of information that derives from God's actual will to create, that concretely renders actual creatures only within the concrete context of an intended cosmos, and therefore that constitutes the surplus of cognitive content signaled by the "proper being" and "proper causes" distinguishing God's ideas of creatures from his ideas of non-actuals.

So, combining the evidence of the intelligibility/exemplar distinction and the role of providence, the results are: first, that there is indeed a material contrast among ideas between intelligibilities (*rationes*) and exemplars; second, that in the latter God's essence is known as participated in a more concretely determined mode; and third, that this gain in definition springs from the actual creature's exhibition within the intended totality or world, for only this bestows upon substances the living fullness of actuality (accident, relation, condition, reciprocal order). This reading harmonizes with Aquinas's metaphysical system, where the privilege of reality is granted not to "essences," the differentiated formal identities, but rather to the act of existence (*esse*). So intelligibilities and exemplars are not simply two classes of Avicennian essences, merely externally denominated as unactualized or actualized as the case may be. Only exemplars envision creatures in their fullness, while the virtual multiple of intelligibilities signals only the general truth that every "aspect" of the non-divine abstractable from the concrete order of things in relation, must equally be rooted in God's knowledge of his own complete perfection. In fact, the establishment of a technical distinction between intelligibilities and exemplars indicates that Aquinas's mature position on ideas is a hybrid: as intelligibilities the ideas protect God's full knowledge of created detail and possibility against Arab necessitarianism; the privileging of exemplars over intelligibilities in turn reflects the ontological priority of the actual over the possible, and maintains the centrality of free willing in the creative act. Only the concrete will to create this world resolves the infinite divine potency into multiple definite forms, mediated by the wisdom that envisions a cosmos.

Here we can sum up the way in which Aquinas's "voluntarist" theorization of the ideas is attuned to his doctrine of creation from nothing, the consequence of which is the denial of their customary Platonic status. Creation is not the selection of a pre-assembled world from an infinite series of worlds, nor is it even the assembly of a world from a chosen menu of pre-given "possibles." There is no continuous logical or deductive path leading directly from intelligibilities to exemplars, as if God merely adopted some of the latter as already substantially defined, and then added judicious touches of relationship and incidental detail. The move is not from already definite intelligibilities to added determination. In fact, to imagine the relationship more adequately one would do better to begin from the concreteness of exemplars and move backwards from them, not to a larger set of equally definite "exemplars-in-waiting," but rather into the background field of God's perfectly understood potency. The divine comprehension of that field as the virtual ground of all viable modes of participation is captured by the notion of the "intelligibilities," a kind of *Restbegriff* necessitated by the special status of exemplars.

¹³ Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 44, a. 3 and q. 47, a. 1.

As theorized by Aquinas, in neither of their aspects can the divine ideas play the role demanded for them by Platonism, i.e. as the ultimate formal constituents of being itself, its necessary articulation. Intelligibilities are too vaguely evanescent, too “perspectival,” too virtual to serve the turn, while exemplars are only necessary as elicited or “called forth” on the divine hypothesis of a concretely intended world. The remaining sections of this essay will turn to various (mainly later) deviations from Aquinas’s position on the ideas. In each case, the result will be some erosion of the integrity and radicality of God’s creative act; the diagnosis of these consequences will enable us by the end of the essay to see how Aquinas resolves the subtle pattern of relations connecting God’s knowledge, God’s will, and the created cosmos, untangling the conceptual snarl introduced by residual Platonic assumptions.

II. Dissolving the Unity of the Creative Act

If the above reading of Aquinas is accurate, then the lineaments of a radically non-Platonic and voluntarist doctrine of ideas can at least be glimpsed in his writings. It is hard to claim more than this. After settling his mind on exemplars and providence, Aquinas chose not to develop the scheme further. Perhaps this was because the sphere of counterfactual possibility in itself failed to hold his interest, no doubt due to his metaphysical commitment to the primacy of the actual. Then, too, he could hardly have foreseen the sensational metaphysical exploitation of this realm lying just around the corner with Scotus, and its later investiture by Suarez. Yet these developments can be seen as a kind of flowering of decisions surrounding the divine ideas made by Aquinas’s great colleague in Paris, the Franciscan Bonaventure. Indeed, in the later medieval period wherever the reality of divine ideas continued to be maintained, something akin to Bonaventure’s notion of them, rather than Aquinas’s, appears to be the received wisdom. Besides, that Aquinas’s brief comments on divine ideas concealed a radical departure was usually missed; on the one hand, his metaphysical vision was mostly contested and/or misunderstood, and, on the other hand, the role he envisioned for the divine will in the constitution of the ideas was obscure in its specifics. In the long run, the alternative line on the divine ideas had the advantage of clearer exposition and a readier connection with older traditions. As we will show in this section, however, its embrace of the “Platonism” that Aquinas’s ideas avoid leads directly to problems for the doctrine of creation.

The venerability of this alternative line hit close to home for Aquinas, for his own teacher Albert the Great stood under its influence. I cite two interpreters of Albert to capture the nature of the opposition between the dominant trend in idea theory and Aquinas’s minority position. The divine ideas in Albert, reflecting the influence of Avicenna, are “an introduction of the Platonic Forms into the divine intellect as an order of essences, really distinct from the divine essence and really distinct in their essential being.”¹⁴ In contrast to Aquinas, because Albert “did not give the same fundamentality to *esse*, the divine rationes, whilst making up a unity in God, are not expressed as they are in Thomas as being ‘non secundum aliquam diversitatem’.”¹⁵ Albert’s Platonist assumption remained the default position of most later scholastic discussions of the ideas: the archetypes of created things and of non-actuals must somehow preexist in God’s

¹⁴ Anton C. Pegis, “The Dilemma of Being and Unity: A Platonic Incident in Christian Thought,” in *Essays in Thomism*, ed. Robert Edward Brennan (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942), 175.

¹⁵ Edward Booth, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology in Islamic and Christian Thinkers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 232.

self-understanding with equal determinacy, comparable to that of creatures themselves. However, the more detailed and generative formulation of this position probably lay not with Aquinas's mentor but, as already mentioned, with the latter's counterpart in the Franciscan chair at Paris.

Just as with Aquinas, one of the prime motivations for Bonaventure in taking up the tradition of divine ideas was to resist the reduction of creation to a kind of necessary and "blind" emanation of the world. In face of this kind of scheme, associated with the powerful Arabic interpreters of Aristotle, Bonaventure like Aquinas resorted to an exact knowledge of creatures in the divine intelligence. And, again like Aquinas, Bonaventure understood the ideas as the different relations of participation or imitability rooted in God's knowledge of his own essence. But there is a fateful shift in emphasis. To Bonaventure's way of thinking, the best way to insure God's exhaustive knowledge of ideas is to construe that perfection of intellection as the presence in God's mind of exact similitudes of all things that are not God.¹⁶ Bonaventure grounded truth not, like Aquinas, in the identity of knower and known, i.e. Peripatetically; truth rather consists, Platonically, in the mental observation of objective likenesses ("*Eo similitude, quo veritas.*").¹⁷ The totality of these similitudes constitute the simultaneous articulation of God's comprehension of his own infinite power. Thus the truth about God is "expressed" in God's mind in the form of this multitude; because the divine power is infinite, the multitude of similitudes is likewise infinite. And, finally, because the eternal Son or Word is the direct expression of God's self-knowledge, then the ideas, too, are eternally expressed in the eternal utterance of the Word.

What seems a displacement of detail is actually of great moment. In Bonaventure's approach to the divine ideas, their connection with the willed act of creation itself has been almost completely set aside. The systematic distinction between intelligibilities and exemplars that Aquinas thought it necessary to work out is absent in Bonaventure. And no wonder: there is no constitutive difference for him between ideas of creatures and of non-actuals. All that is not God, actually created or not, has the same cognitive status in him; they are the product of a single mechanism, the "expression" of divine truth: ideas are the infinity of "possibles." More than that, this expression is an essential aspect of God's eternal self-expression in the Son. Hence, component within the necessary Triune identity lie the countless forms of non-divinity in their discreteness: God's own life includes their inevitable articulation. The role of the electing will of God in the constitution of creaturely identities has been rendered invisible. This aspect of the difference between Aquinas and Bonaventure is encapsulated in their rival readings of a passage from Anselm.

In discussing God's eternal knowledge of creatures, Anselm (*Monologium* ch. 32) had said: "There can be no word of what was not, is not, and will never be." On its face, such a dictum seems to imperil God's knowledge of what he could but does not create. The way Aquinas interprets this utterance in the *Disputed Questions on Truth*, even though he had yet to

¹⁶ "Because [God] expresses [sc. the *rationes aeternas* or *exemplares*] inasmuch as he is the supreme light and pure act, therefore he expresses most brilliantly, most articulately [*expressissime*], most perfectly, and through this equally and by intention a similitude in no way diminished; and hence it is that he knows all things most perfectly, most distinctly, and most integrally." Bonaventura, *Quaestiones disputatae de scientia Christi*, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. V, ed. the Fathers of the College of St. Bonaventure (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1901), 9.

¹⁷ Jean-Marie Bissen, *L'Exemplarisme Divin selon Saint Bonaventure* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1929), 29-31. For the quoted phrase see 30 fn. 4. Bernard Lonergan repeatedly opposed Aquinas's model of knowledge by identity to the Platonic model of knowledge by "confrontation" favored by medieval Augustinians. Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 85, 192-3, 196, 197, 202, 225-6.

firm up his position, already shows his characteristic sensitivity to the connection of idea, will, and actual creation. Instinctively, he sees something true in Anselm's statement. To the eternal Word is appropriated the content of the divine knowledge and wisdom; but though the Word expresses the Father's total knowledge, it only "speaks" actual creatures, i.e. the Word is only "of" creatures, not of "possibles."¹⁸ This in turn affects the way he reads the traditional claim (based on John 1:4) that all creatures were eternally "life" in the Word.¹⁹ Does this include non-actuals? Only insofar as all possibility is understood, and hence is identical with the Word's own life (which itself is an act of understanding). But only what God will actually produce is alive in the Word with, in a manner of speaking, its own life; its idea (which Aquinas will later call an exemplar), unlike a mere "possible," is productive of the created thing, the principle of its movement, its life.

It is completely characteristic of Bonaventure that he must simply reject this kind of reasoning, and with it Anselm's claim. There is no basis in his scheme of ideas for even this relative privileging of the actual over the non-actual. He refutes the reasoning of those who link life in the Word to its actual "utterance," its production of creatures. The divine ideas are primarily to "express" the fullness of the Father's knowledge, hence Augustine's authority must trump Anselm's. Augustine called the Son the Father's "art, full of all the living intelligibilities," and since the Father's knowledge is infinite, the Word as "art" must contain infinite intelligibilities, and that means all the possibles.²⁰ In effect, the systematic demands of Bonaventure's construal of the constitution of ideas in God means that he cannot countenance the kinds of distinctions demanded by Aquinas's quite different construal: between intelligibility and exemplar, and between the Son as "art" of the Father (i.e. reflecting all his knowledge) and the Son as "word" of the Father (i.e. particularly connected with the actual "speaking" of creatures, their creation).²¹

We may sum up the comparison as follows. Both Aquinas and Bonaventure faced the same problem: to defend creation from nothing and providence against the schemes of necessary and mediated emanation propounded by Avicenna and Averroes. Both saw that "ideas," God's intimate foreknowledge of his own creative act, were the key. But Bonaventure, immediately associating ideas with Plato, made Aristotle's rejection of them the *proton pseudos* from which Arab necessitarianism flowed. He saw only the Arab alliance with Aristotle, and pitted it against the alliance of Plato and Augustine.²² By insisting that the ideas of all possible creatures are eternally expressed in the Son as the necessary fullness of the Father's truth, Bonaventure disregards the divine will, in effect baptizing the Platonic notion of a "logos" in God as the requisite eternal receptacle of the necessarily defined array of archetypes. The irony, from the perspective of this essay, is that the "expression" of ideas understood in this way is arguably simply an internalized form of necessary emanation. Aquinas drew different lessons from the threat of Arabic philosophy, namely the need for a deeper exploration of Aristotle and also the

¹⁸ Aquinas, *QDV*, q. 4, a. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, a. 8.

²⁰ Bissen, *L'Exemplarisme*, 76-7.

²¹ Aquinas's line of interpretation is discussed in Boland, *Ideas in God*, 243-5. The discussion reveals the distinction presupposed by Aquinas's reading of Anselm: the Son as "art" must be distinguished from the Son as "word" because "speaking" implies disposition, i.e. actual creation. A comparison of Boland's analysis of Aquinas on 244 with the quote from Bonaventure's *Commentary on the Sentences* to be found in Bissen, *L'Exemplarisme*, 76 fn. 7, will make it evident that the interpretation of Anselm adopted by "some" and rejected by Bonaventure is identical with the line of reasoning adopted by Aquinas, though Bonaventure need not have had Aquinas in mind.

²² Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 404.

need for a more profound probing of the meaning of creation as the shaping of a complex of imperfect acts of existence into the reflective shadow of the perfect act. Non-actuals can thus remain “dissolved” as it were in the single divine potency, reserving full exemplar status only to those ideas mediated by the divine will to execute. Where Bonaventure chose more Plato, Aquinas chose more will.

The continuing intuitive allure of the Platonic scheme is such that a number of learned and authoritative scholars have, it would appear, even interpreted ideas in Aquinas himself along quintessentially Bonaventurian lines.²³ They found grounds for this in one of the most characteristic of his teachings, that of the distinction in all creatures between two principles that are identical in God: “essence” and “act of existence” (*esse*). Now, does not Aquinas famously assert a “real” distinction between essence and act of existence? Does he not speak accordingly of their union in creatures as a kind of “composition”? Finally, does he not image this composition as a kind of “reception” and “limiting” of the act of existence by the essence? All this naturally suggests that essence somehow possesses an independence, in fact a kind of prior reality over against the act of existence such that it can serve as its limiting receptacle. This in turn implies that the essence and the act of existence require quasi-distinct “moments” within the constitution of the unified creature. There follows all too readily from this an account of creation whereby God simply bestows the act of existence understood as sheer undifferentiated “actuality” upon already differentiated essences of creatures. What more natural (i.e. Platonic) than to assume these essences to be a selection from the infinity of foreknown “possibilities” eternally present in God’s self-knowledge? The awkward supposition, however, is that such essences have somehow already been constituted, before the act of creating them. But what else can creation be than the constitution of a creature (i.e. a defined form of imperfect or non-divine entity)? One of these interpreters rather gives the game away when he says that “every essence . . . is created as potency to be actualized by the participated *esse* which it receives.”²⁴ But if actualization by a creaturely act of existence can also scarcely be called anything but creation, then the logical moments assumed in the language here make for a curious picture: the essence is first created in order subsequently to be . . . created!

Of course, this crude summary can only do limited justice to the different accounts in question. But the point for now is that the basic approach to Aquinas upon which all of them are based has been subjected to a convincing critique by Rudi te Velde. Louis Geiger, for example, conceives the composition of essence and act of existence on the model of the union of subject and form construed Platonically, as “an accidental union between two principles which are foreign to each other.” But while Aquinas proposes this composition itself as an ultimate fact accounting for the constitution of the creature’s metaphysical structure, the attempt to juxtapose the principles in this extrinsic and dualist way vitiates its intended finality; the rival principles themselves now require ulterior, and indeed separable, explanatory principles in God.²⁵ Cornelio Fabro, in response, insists upon a double creation: essence springs from God’s fullness of perfection, act of existence from God’s purity of actuality. Te Velde comments:

²³ These interpreters have offered distinct but structurally similar proposals concerning the nature of participation in Aquinas and the relation of the act of existence to essence in creatures. Louis B. Geiger, *La participation dans la philosophie de saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Montreal: Institut d’Études Médiévales, 1952). Cornelio Fabro, “The Intensive Hermeneutics of Thomistic Philosophy: The Notion of Participation,” in *Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1974), 449-91. John F. Wippel, “Thomas Aquinas and Participation,” in *Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. John F. Wippel (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 117-58.

²⁴ Fabro, “Intensive Hermeneutics,” 474.

²⁵ Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality*, 147, cf. 88-9.

[A]uthors [like these] feel compelled, in one or another way, to assume a double participation, one according to which essence has actual being, and another which accounts for the formal determination of the created essence in itself as a partial likeness of the divine essence. . . . [But] one cannot tacitly presuppose a (possible) essence in the creature, which is subsequently constituted into a relation with God as origin of being Creating does not simply mean the actualization of a possibility; creation denotes the origin of things according to their entire being.²⁶

Te Velde's verdict seems unavoidable: this whole approach denies "the unity of the act of creation."²⁷

In reply, Te Velde consistently argues for a reading of Aquinas on creation that avoids from the outset any dualism of essence and act of existence; such a dualism automatically generates false dilemmas. Essence and act of existence are in fact mutually co-constitutive principles, and cannot be separated. The specific nature just is the determinateness existence acquires in what "receives" it; one must not be captivated by the image of existence being "limited by" essence since one could equally say that the limited essence itself is nothing but the product of the contraction of the act of existence.²⁸ The creature "receives" being as already specifically differentiated by divine wisdom; there is no need for a prior act that extrinsically limits an otherwise undifferentiated act of being.²⁹ The key point Te Velde accuses his opponents of missing is that for Aquinas the single fact of difference from God, the inherent deficiency of the non-divine existent, already implies and demands the composition within it of essence and act of existence. These are not two principles requiring differentiated modes of explanation, as if the imperfection of created essence were logically distinct from its relation to the act of being.³⁰ To be "not-God" means to be distinct from others that are also "not-God," and therefore to share a common being with them, i.e. the common "being-not-God" (*ens commune*).³¹ For Te Velde, in short, the formal differentiation of essences is identical with the diversity of relations that creaturely being bears to God's being. Created existence cannot be construed as a second moment of creation, extrinsic to the constitution of essential differentiation.³² The distinction of essence and act of existence is dialectically related to the sharing of non-divine status; they are two sides of the one state of affairs that is being a creature.

Unsurprisingly, Te Velde's critique has not been without answer, and the details of his full argument cannot be entered into here. But I believe the essential points of his interpretation of Aquinas to be profoundly insightful. For the purposes of our discussion, the consequences for the way divine ideas are understood will be readily drawn. God's essence is the one exemplar of all as diversely imitable, so the ideas are not "possibles" or mental pictures of essences. The idea as determined to creation already implies composition of essence and act of existence. Exemplarity and efficiency must be seen not as two different modes of divine causality but as together making up the one creative act.³³ Any other picture of the ideas is a form of

²⁶ Ibid., 147.

²⁷ Ibid., 90-1.

²⁸ Ibid., 152.

²⁹ Ibid., 107-8.

³⁰ Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality*, 95.

³¹ Ibid., 128.

³² Ibid., 110.

³³ Ibid., 113-5.

“essentialism” that leads immediately to the disruption of the unity of the creative act that Te Velde’s entire discussion is directed against. Traces of such a conception are to be found in Aquinas’s earlier works, but he gradually works his way out from under the influence of Avicenna’s existentially “neutral” essences as the implications of his own focus on the act of existence work their way into all aspects of his thought. Essence cannot be thought apart from the act of existence whose specific determination it is, since potency as such can in no way be neutral toward its own act.³⁴ Nor has Te Velde been the only one to notice this fatal conjunction of essentialist idea theory and flawed conceptions of creation. Harm Goris likewise complains of the “essentialism” of a view on ideas like that of John Wippel (grouped in Te Velde’s critique alongside Geiger and Fabro): “It is not as if there were a given number of logically possible things and events from which God were to choose some to exemplify and to grant them actual existence. Such a view was held by Scotus [but not Aquinas].”³⁵

The mistake of the accounts under criticism is to allow the genuinely Thomist insight of the composition of essence and act of existence to be skewed in an Avicennist direction and thereby to falsely inflect Aquinas’s view of divine ideas. It was Avicenna who famously regarded existence as related quasi-accidentally to essence, and who also posited the equally influential threefold scheme of universals whereby the universal essence subsists prior to (and existentially indifferent to) its mental and real (creaturely) modes, as an idea in God’s mind.³⁶ But for Aquinas the pivotal image for the metaphysical relation of essence and existence is not the extraneousness of substance and accident, but rather the intimacy of potency and its proper act. Consequently, creation cannot be the “attachment” of existence to a separately ideated essence. Yet these Avicennist themes were hard to resist in Aquinas’s era; his own unique perspective was chronologically bracketed by imposing elaborations upon them, in the persons of his teacher Albert the Great and of Henry of Ghent, who came to prominence after his death. Edward Booth describes in great detail how Aquinas broke with the Avicennian bent of Albert (who understood creation as a multiple, staged flux of universal formalities). But Aquinas “insist[ed] on the simplicity of the divine communication in its unmediated directness to each created thing”: “He differs from Albert in insisting on the singleness of God’s creative action in terms of *esse*.”³⁷ Anton Pegis diagnoses in Henry of Ghent a similar disruption of the unified act of creation by a flawed idea theory. In fact, he sees Henry and Albert as equally victim to the same Avicennist deviation in their account of divine ideas. The result: “When we turn to creation, Henry therefore argues that there is first a *production* of the *essential* being of creatures in the divine intellect which is followed by an external production of their *existential* being.”³⁸

This forced doubling of creation strikingly foreshadows the interpretations of Aquinas put forward by Geiger, Fabro and Wippel. That it is a result, in Henry, of “an enormous Platonism,” namely (to repeat Pegis’s indictment cited at the beginning of this section) “an

³⁴ Ibid., 68.

³⁵ Harm J.M.J. Goris, *Free Creatures of an Eternal God* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 273.

³⁶ See Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy*, 421-2 for the relation of essence to existence. For a sketch of the origins and influence of the threefold scheme, see Theo Kobusch, “Heinrich von Gent und die Neuplatonische Ideenlehre,” in *Néoplatonisme et philosophie médiévale*, edited by Linos G. Benakis (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 200-2. Aquinas did, as Kobusch indicates, invoke the scheme on occasion; but he does not allow it the crucial metaphysical role granted to it by others. For a good discussion of its limited use in Aquinas see Armand Maurer, “St. Thomas and Eternal Truths,” *Mediaeval Studies* 32 (1970), 99-103.

³⁷ Booth, *Aristotelian Aporetic Ontology*, 228. For Albert’s understanding of creation as emanation see 175.

³⁸ Pegis, “Dilemma of Being and Unity,” 175.

introduction of the Platonic Forms into the divine intellect as an order of essences . . . really distinct in their essential being,” is precisely why we must remain highly suspicious when the attempt is made to read Aquinas along such lines. Aquinas’s theory of ideas is anti-Platonic, in that it does not depend upon this dubious importation into God’s self-knowledge of an “ideal world” of dispersed and discrete possibles. This section has delineated the initial and most straightforward form of departure from his insights, that of the alternate scheme initiated by Bonaventure and yet also, even to this day, attributed to Aquinas himself. The impact of this deviation upon the conception of creation is immediate and impressive: the bifurcation of God’s unique creative command into distinguished stages or moments. The next section will show that this bifurcation allowed by forsaking Aquinas’s insights on divine ideas can have even more serious consequences than the splitting of the divine act, namely the splitting of the divine being itself.

III. Dissolving the Unity of the Creative Agent

Although his essay is concerned with medieval philosophy, Pegis affords the reader a momentary glimpse of the larger historical implications of rejecting Aquinas’s anti-Platonic ideas in favor of injecting “the multiplicity and the atomism of the Platonic Forms” into the divine intellect.

Within the order of creatures there is an order of essences which requires only the gaze of the human intelligence in order to declare an independence from sensible being which will make the Christian soul dream, however fugitively, of some of the privileges of a Platonic god. . . . But . . . however exciting it would be to tell the story of this Greek god seeking to recapture his lost divinity in a Christian world, it remains that for St. Thomas Aquinas the Christian world yields no such message.³⁹

One part, at least, of this “exciting” historical story passed over by Pegis has, in fact, found another narrator, one of rare gifts: Jean-Luc Marion. In a series of erudite and powerful publications, Marion has argued: 1) that developments in late medieval thought eroded the necessity for analogical displacement that safeguarded the distance between God’s ideas of the cosmos and our scientific knowledge; 2) that René Descartes, though lacking the scholastic tools of analogy, protested against this assimilation by asserting the willed creation of “eternal truths” (e.g. of mathematics, logic or essential predication); and yet 3) that the other key figures of early modern philosophy evaded or rejected the radicality of this protest, thus allowing the “march of univocity” in Western metaphysics to continue.⁴⁰

The kinship between the apophatic spirit animating Descartes’ intervention and the anti-Platonic thrust of Aquinas’s doctrine of ideas is noticeable at once. Indeed, Marion himself shows at length how it was the rejection of Aquinas’s position on eternal truth in God by the line

³⁹ Pegis, “Dilemma of Being and Unity,” 176.

⁴⁰ See especially Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la Théologie Blanche de Descartes*, rev. and enl. ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 9-139; Jean-Luc Marion, “The Idea of God,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 265-304; Jean-Luc Marion, “Creation of the Eternal Truths: The Principle of Reason—Spinoza, Malebranche, Leibniz,” in *On the Ego and on God: Further Cartesian Questions*, trans. Christina M. Geschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 116-38.

running from Duns Scotus to Suarez that enabled the triumph of univocity.⁴¹ But in spite of the great debt owed by scholars to Marion for his investigations, there is something not quite right in the way he reads Aquinas, and this means that the way he traces the consequences of the departure from Aquinas in the modern period largely misses a crucial dimension of the story, namely, the role of the divine will in the constitution of the ideas. In his discussion of Aquinas, Marion virtually ignores the crucial distinction of exemplar and intelligibility (*ratio*), and thus construes the ideas simply in terms of the self-expression of divine cognition in isolation from the voluntary intent to create.⁴² Moreover, he insists that the expression of the ideas in Aquinas is only comprehensible when situated within the space opened up by the eternal generation of the Son.⁴³ As will be clear from the discussion above, these are the hallmarks of a divine idea theory that is not that of Aquinas; it remarkably resembles that of Bonaventure.⁴⁴ The objections we have already outlined against the latter will apply equally to Marion's reading of Aquinas, but the issue of interest here is the way this skews his narrative of modern metaphysics. I will suggest in this section that Marion's resolute focus on the issue of analogy vs. univocity, encapsulated in Descartes' opposition to Suarez on the creation of the eternal truths, partially obscures the older and more basic opposition in divine idea theory between Aquinas and the inheritors of Bonaventure. Taking up and combining the two disputed points (i.e. the disconnect between the ideas and the divine will on the one hand, and their conjunction with the Trinitarian processions on the other) will show where we must augment Marion's story of the moderns. A further increment of insight into our own problem of creation from nothing will thereby be attained. For both these points are instances of that Platonism that Aquinas's ideas forbid, but that reach an illustrative culmination, fateful for later philosophical developments, in Leibniz.

How the marginalization of the divine will is an intrinsic feature of what we might call the "Franciscan" account of the ideas can be quickly sketched. In spite of considerable overlap between their respective treatments of divine ideas, comparison with Aquinas reveals Bonaventure's characteristic emphasis to be that the ideas emerge as distinct cognitive entities immediately, concomitant with the natural outflow of divine truth and light. As cognitive expressions of God's perfection, they must all naturally possess, even as merely possible, the full determinacy of the created actual; unlike the exemplars of Aquinas, these ideas, as such, require nothing from the divine will.⁴⁵ For all the genuine diversity amid Bonaventure's many successors, this particular aspect will come to seem almost axiomatic. Henry of Ghent shifts the emphasis from God's "expressibility" to God's "reflexive" capacity, elaborating multiple stages within God's self-comprehension as a kind of progressive discovery by God of his own imitability.⁴⁶ But the whole point is precisely that this imitability is captured in its determinate completeness by the reflective process itself, apart from the divine will. Duns Scotus criticizes Henry lavishly, and yet a central plank of his own alternative argument about the divine ideas is

⁴¹ Marion, *Sur la Théologie Blanche*, 70-109.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 36-9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 39-43.

⁴⁴ Indeed, Marion speaks of a "direct complicity" between Aquinas and Bonaventure on the doctrine of ideas. Marion, *Sur la Théologie Blanche*, 37.

⁴⁵ See the old but still valuable treatment by Jean-Marie Bissen, *L'Exemplarisme Divin selon Saint Bonaventure* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1929), especially 29-31, 58-9, 76-7.

⁴⁶ Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen, "Propter Dicta Augustini: Die Metaphysische Bedeutung der Mittelalterlichen Ideenlehre," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 64 (1997), 256-8.

the affirmation that “the ideas in God are antecedent to the act of will.”⁴⁷ Scotus’s follower Francis of Meyronnes even resurrected Henry’s “essential being” (*esse essentiae*) in order to secure the “truth of [our] necessary propositions” as formally distinct acts of being necessarily lodged within God’s self-understanding.⁴⁸ This entire trend of thought achieved authoritative formulation in early modern continental metaphysics through Francis Suarez, who does not shy away from the bold implications. Necessary propositions about creatures

are not true because they are known by God, but rather they are known because they are true; otherwise no reason could be given why God would necessarily know them to be true. For if their truth came forth from God himself, that would take place by means of God’s will; hence it would not come forth of necessity, but voluntarily. . . . [I]n regard to these enunciations, the divine intellect is related as purely speculative, not as operative.⁴⁹

Nor, for Suarez, can the necessity of our demonstratively or definitionally true predications about creatures have their source in the creature’s divine exemplar. This is Aquinas’s position, subordinating the modal properties of created things and truths fully to the divine will to create this world. Suarez rejects it out of hand: “the divine exemplar itself had this necessity of representing man as rational animal . . . this necessity arises from the object itself [i.e. the essence “human being”] and not from the divine exemplar.”⁵⁰

What is remarkable about this trend of thought is not just the focus on the divine intellect, but rather the accompanying pressure actually to pit it against the divine will. The arguments continually turn on juxtaposing God’s knowledge and volition, dividing them. This tendency received further impetus by way of the second divergence from Aquinas of the Bonaventurian idea theory, namely the conjoining of the expression of the ideas of creatures and the generation of the Son or Word. One might think that assigning a Trinitarian role to the ideas would provide a countervailing pressure against the wedge being driven between intellect and will in God. After all, classic Trinitarian discourse emphasizes the perfect unity of God as triune. But the “disintegrating” effect on the divine being could in fact be reinforced, not restrained, by this association with Trinitarian procession due to a noteworthy trait of the Franciscan tradition of theorizing the Trinity. Working from a detailed comparative analysis of (broadly speaking) “Dominican” and “Franciscan” currents of Trinitarian speculation, Russell Friedman shows how an early Franciscan propensity to ground the differences of Son and Spirit on their differing modes of origin or emanation (in contrast to the Dominican tendency, seen in Aquinas, to focus on relations of opposition) eventually resulted in a literalization of the psychological analogy. Aquinas was careful to root the two processions of Son and Spirit in the single divine essence, and to stress the limited, analogical nature of the claim that the Son proceeds “in the mode of

⁴⁷ Maarten J.F.M. Hoenen, *Marsilius of Inghen: Divine Knowledge in Late Medieval Thought* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 128. Gilson remarks: “There is no trace of voluntarism in [Scotus] even with respect to the essences of creatable beings.” Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy*, 460.

⁴⁸ Hoenen, *Marsilius of Inghen*, 133-4.

⁴⁹ Francisco Suarez, *On the Essence of Finite Being as Such, on the Existence of that Essence, and their Distinction. Metaphysical Disputation XXXI*, trans. Norman J. Wells (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1983), 200. Marion demonstrated that it was exactly this position of Suarez to which Descartes opposed his own assertion of the creation of the eternal truths. But he fails to highlight the role of the will, to which Suarez explicitly alludes.

⁵⁰ Suarez, *On the Essence of Finite Being*, 205-6.

intellect” while the Spirit proceeds “in the mode of will.”⁵¹ But the characteristic Franciscan emphases were taken in a contrary direction, in a line beginning with Henry of Ghent and further elaborated by Duns Scotus.⁵² The Trinitarian processions came to be directly linked to intellect and will as distinct divine powers. Whereas Aquinas had laid great weight on the ultimate identity of intellect and will within the divine simplicity, for the later Franciscan theorists the revealed distinction of Son and Spirit feeds back into the construal of divine understanding and will, solidifying their “opposition” as modes in spite of the acknowledgement of their unity. As the scholastic legacy filtered into early modern philosophy, it is at least arguable that this tradition, once its built-in apophatic safeguards were forgotten, led to a hardening of the analogical predications of divine intellect and will into quasi-“faculties.” The door was open for a kind of divine “psychology” that Aquinas would never have countenanced.

Leibniz glaringly illustrates the profound distortion introduced into the doctrine of divine creation by the combined impact of these two related developments (the exclusion of will from the constitution of the ideas, and the divine “psychology” of opposed knowing and willing faculties). As Aquinas and Bonaventure were confronted by the Arab philosophers, Leibniz was similarly confronted by Spinoza with a powerful conceptualization of the world as a necessary emanation from God. In his response he, too, turned to the discourse of the divine ideas, only now in an atmosphere conditioned by the later medieval dualisms we have identified. The result was a scheme in which Leibniz sought to affirm creation as free on the one hand, avoiding the Spinozist vision of a cosmos unintelligently emergent, springing directly and “blindly” from the divine nature, but equally, on the other hand, as not merely arbitrary, for that would mean the exciting new scientific truths currently unveiling the beauty of the physical order rested upon the mere meaningless fiat or whim of the creator. To avoid these extremes he posited an infinite series of potential creations (now aggregated into “possible worlds,” a post-medieval touch) eternally and necessarily presented to the divine understanding, from which God voluntarily chooses the uniquely best to actualize.⁵³ This account had the advantage of preserving divine freedom (the divine will is in no way compelled) while nonetheless assuring us that God has deliberately created our world as the best one (hence “optimism” in the technical sense); the divine choice is not coerced, but it is necessitated by a “moral necessity.”⁵⁴ But the cost of this maneuver is high when judged against the doctrine of creation from nothing as Aquinas has taught us to think about it. An array of entire pre-packaged “worlds” accost God from within, residing in his self-understanding quite apart from any intention; thus in creation the divine will is reduced to the role of a “selector” of “options.” The entire scheme rests upon a juxtaposition of intellect and will in God as extrinsic to one another; it is quite doubtful that the divine unity, the classically asserted absence of metaphysical composition which in Aquinas is the direct counterpart of created multiplicity, can escape intact from this “*Streit der Fakultäten*.”

In his famous letters to Mersenne from 1630 Descartes (in direct opposition to Suarez, as Marion showed) asserted the creation of the eternal truths by God. Although he does not name him, it was Suarez who said, as we have seen, that “the truth of something precedes God’s knowledge of it.” What must not escape our notice, though, is that for Descartes this is not just a

⁵¹ Russell Friedman, *Intellectual Traditions at the Medieval University: The Use of Philosophical Psychology in Trinitarian Theology among the Franciscans and Dominicans 1250-1350*, Vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 337-40.

⁵² Friedman, *Intellectual Traditions*, Vol. 1, 256-7, 388-9, 391-2.

⁵³ For sample remarks on God’s knowledge of possible worlds see G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, tr. E. M. Huggard, ed. Austin Farrer (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 127-9, 151 (encompassing sections 7-9, and 52).

⁵⁴ On moral necessity see Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 228-9 and 282 (sections 168, 282).

philosophical mistake but a blasphemy, for “[i]n God willing and knowing are a single thing.”⁵⁵ As Marion notes, Descartes drew from this the conclusion (a correct one from the Thomist perspective) that God creates the creature’s essence as much as its existence; but when Descartes says that “by the very fact of willing something, [God] knows it” (*ex hoc ipso quod aliquid velit, ideo cognoscit*), he perhaps peers even more deeply into the issues under discussion in this and the previous section.⁵⁶ Both essence and existence arrive together, products of a single act of creation that springs from a profound unity between God’s knowing and God’s willing. Marion followed Gilson and Gouhier in seeing the “revolutionary” nature of Descartes’s break with the picture of a “world of ideas” eternally situated in the divine understanding,⁵⁷ but when he presents the foregone option of Aquinas in terms of an “expression” of all possibility in the eternal Son, he comes perilously near the Suarezian bifurcation of divine intellect and will that Descartes instinctively avoided. It is our examination of Leibniz that has enabled us to recognize this danger.

But there is an ambiguity here, for Leibniz can retort that it is actually Descartes who is wrongly separating divine will from understanding. Leibniz regularly defended his unfashionable indebtedness to the scholastics, notably the “profound” Suarez.⁵⁸ In a letter from 1680, Leibniz’s hostility to Descartes’ “most strange” doctrine that the good or evil of created things depends upon the divine will is explained in terms strongly reminiscent of Suarezian reasoning: if Descartes is right, “the good cannot be a motive of [God’s] will, being posterior to his will. His will, then, would be a certain absolute decree, without any reason.”⁵⁹ As will be seen in the conclusion, Aquinas offers a way to resolve this issue such that both perfect wisdom and radical contingency unite in God’s willing of the world. This dissolves the Leibnizian fear of creation as an act of naked arbitrariness, but without yielding an inch to Leibniz’s own solution: yet another attempt to foist Platonic ideas upon God as an infinite set of distinct possibilities eternally fixed before the divine understanding. At the conclusion of his *Theodicy* Leibniz symbolizes his position by imagining the creator as Jupiter, dwelling in an immense palace whose halls comprise all the possible worlds, rising pyramidally to a summit, the unique, best world which Jupiter’s wisdom cannot avoid selecting.⁶⁰ From the perspective on creation being developed in this essay, it is hard to see in this parable (no doubt intended as a retort to Descartes) anything but an unintentional confirmation of Descartes’ complaint that denying God’s will a role in creating all ideal possibility is “to talk of him as if he were Jupiter . . . and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates.”⁶¹

This section has tried to portray another kind of impairment of the doctrine of creation that results from forsaking Aquinas’s approach to the divine ideas. Both the Franciscan tradition and its renewal in Leibniz preserve the Platonic necessity of ideas only at the cost of playing God’s mind and God’s will off against one another. At stake here is the disruption of the unity

⁵⁵ John Cottingham et al., eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. 3, *The Correspondence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 24. The three letters, found on 20-6 of this edition, date from April 15, May 6 and May 27, 1630.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* For Marion’s discussion see Marion, *Idea of God*, 273-4.

⁵⁷ Meinhardt et al, “Idee,” cols. 101-2.

⁵⁸ G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 431.

⁵⁹ G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2nd ed., ed. Leroy Loemker (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1969), 273.

⁶⁰ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 369-73 (sections 413-7).

⁶¹ Cottingham et al, eds. *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. 3, 23.

not just of the divine creative act, as in the previous section, but of the divine being itself. We may decide that Descartes' dismissal of ideas was an overreaction, but in its context it showed a healthy refusal of late medieval divine psychodynamics in favor of an embrace of God's absolute simplicity.

IV. The World as God's Inner Life

Guided by our reading of divine ideas according to Aquinas, namely as voluntarily elicited exemplars, we have pursued the more Platonic counter-tradition over the centuries in order to uncover what appear to be the serious problems for theorizing creation to which it gives rise. A final efflorescence of this unhappy legacy remains to be delineated before in the conclusion we return briefly to Aquinas to set out the logical pattern relating divine will and creation that would forestall all the Platonic aberrations discussed. We have already seen how construing God's knowledge of creation (the ideas) along the lines of a Platonic aggregation of discrete possibles can result, first, in the problem of a double constitution of the creature, and, second, in the more serious problem of an extrinsic relation of divine knowledge and will. The problem under investigation now is the gravest of all: identifying God's self-knowledge with the knowledge of the ideas. This is one way of deciphering the real meaning of the speculative Trinity in German idealism, but variants of this theme appear among Christian theologians as well. This move, though not as a rule recognized as such, represents the most daring culmination of the Platonic idea tradition, the annexation of the divine self-cognition by the paradigms of non-divine being. God's freedom and true otherness vis-à-vis the creature is vitiated, and the divine majesty is compromised if its fullness of intelligible content is reduced to the collected patterns of worldly realities, even if these latter are infinite in number.

The roots of such a position can once again be traced back to the different decisions of Aquinas and Bonaventure. In response to the Arab thinkers it was recognized by all that God's ideas of the world must formally encompass all worldly minutiae, and yet ontologically be identical with the divine essence. But with this development a decisive reckoning with the Platonic idea tradition became most urgent; that this happened in Aquinas yet failed to happen in Bonaventure and his lineage marked the parting of the ways in divine idea doctrine. Without the introduction of divine willing into the constitution of the ideas, the influence of Avicennian essentialism combined with the inclusion of the "possibles" in the natural (non-voluntary) generation of the eternal Son to populate God's intellect with a necessary, determinate multiplicity. In other words, the failure to purge the divine ideas of the remnants of their Platonic origin left the door wide open to a fusion between God's self-contemplation and God's detailed apprehension of this (or of any possible) world. It was left to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, to G. E. Lessing and those inspired by his daring Trinitarian speculations to draw the forthright conclusion: the created order as divinely known is an inherent and essential dimension of the eternal divine identity. The great Christian confession (shared with Jews and Muslims) of a free creation from nothing was completely and consciously overthrown. The role of the divine ideas is an indispensable part of this story, as is shown by the inspiration Lessing drew from his illustrious predecessor as ducal librarian at Wolfenbüttel: Leibniz.

The suggestions Lessing took from Leibniz are clearest in his early, posthumously published writings. There he argues that what Christian tradition calls the Son is actually the result of God thinking his own infinite perfection in discrete, separated form, as an unlimited plurality of distinct degrees and modes of perfection. But since God's thinking is most perfect,

this multiplicity, capable in itself of infinite variety since infinite perfection is subject to a limitless variety of arbitrary analysis, takes on the single most harmonious and continuous arrangement. The echo of Leibnizian “moral necessity” is clear. But not only is the choice of this world necessitated, its production is as well, since “every thought for God is a creation” and “the concepts which God has of real things” are “these real things themselves.”⁶² Here, too, Leibniz shows the way, for Lessing seems to have grasped that Leibniz’s fundamental substances or monads are in fact the old divine ideas now transformed into cosmic constituents. Leibniz perhaps even suggested the Trinitarian force of this “naturalization” of creation within God by referencing (albeit with disapproval) thinkers like Lull and Keckermann, at whose hands the old psychological analogy is literalized and becomes a quasi-proof that God’s self-knowledge rationally requires an eternally generated Son.⁶³ All these basic elements remain in the famous later passages from *The Education of the Human Race* where Lessing rationally “decodes” the ancient dogmas of the Trinity and of Christ’s satisfaction: The Son is the substantial duplication within God of God’s perfections as represented, and individual human moral failings drop from God’s sight when situated within the cosmic context of the Son’s generated plenitude, allowing divine justice to be satisfied with the incremental improvement of the race in history.⁶⁴ The key to it all is a replay of the archetypal Platonic scenario: Lessing has transformed God’s self-knowledge into a cosmic order (our own) that is necessarily and eternally ingredient in God, that indeed simply is God’s own being, thought discretely. Thus divine idea theory became the midwife of German idealism, as Leibniz quite unwittingly communicated the dangerous “Franciscan” variant of that theory to Lessing, thereby shaping the ferment of German speculation about God and world in his wake.

Schelling in his turn invoked Lessing even as he knowingly took a step beyond him. While Lessing blurred the distinction between the Son’s generation and creation, for Schelling creation is actually the deciphered meaning of the dogma of incarnation; the reality of the world marks a genuinely new stage in which God’s eternal self-apprehension takes on a reality over against the Father as finitude and history, marking a breach within divinity itself that requires reconciliation.

[T]he eternal Son of God, born of the essence of the Father of all things, is the finite itself, as it exists in God’s eternal intuition; this finite manifests itself [i.e. in a distinct, second moment] as a suffering God, subject to the vicissitudes of time, who at the culmination of His career, in the person of Christ, closes the world of the finite and opens the world of the infinite, i.e. the reign of the Spirit.⁶⁵

Finally, Hegel accepted this basic framework but went further still. God as “spirit” necessarily posits its own “other.”

⁶² G.E. Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 27, 31.

⁶³ H.B. Nisbet, “The Rationalisation of the Holy Trinity from Lessing to Hegel,” in *Lessing Yearbook* 31 (1999), 67-8.

⁶⁴ Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, 234-5.

⁶⁵ F.W.J. Schelling, *On University Studies*, trans. E.S. Morgan, ed. Norbert Guterman (Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 1966), 91.

The other grasped in the pure idea is the Son of God, but this other in its differentiation is the world, nature and finite spirit: the finite spirit is thus posited as a moment of God. Hence the human being is itself contained in the concept of God.⁶⁶

By now it should be clear that this is no eminent containment, as in Aquinas, but a true coincidence of created reality and divine idea. Moreover, the implication of finite with infinite spirit extends to their exemplifying an identical spiritual or conceptual logic. The discursive rhythm that rationally conducts human thought from one concept to another replicates the unfolding of God's very actuality. As Lonergan saw, here the Platonic epistemology of objective ideas fully triumphs over Aristotle's intellect-as-unity, as the latter's self-contemplating deity becomes a "thinker," a developing entrainment of multiple, interrelated "thoughts."⁶⁷ As a constituent of God for both Schelling and Hegel, creation might seem to be exalted; but in fact instead of the world Aquinas saw, the harmonious refraction of divine perfection, it has become a "fall" into finitude, a tragic but necessary rupture in reality whose otherness demands rectification. The Platonic idea-world, after centuries of dwelling in God's mind like a dormant virus, eventually displays its true virulence.

V. Lingering Consequences

It has been the repeated contention of this essay that, contra Aquinas's more voluntarist appropriation of the divine ideas, the Platonic model introduces the worldly modes of multiplicity and formal differentiation as a necessary and ultimate feature of being into God himself. The speculative Trinity of German idealism pursues the logic of this misstep to its fateful end: the idea of the world has become, in the most real sense, God's inner life. While this conclusion may seem remote, confined to the thinnest upper atmosphere of speculation, in fact variations on this theme keep cropping up, wittingly or not, among respectable Christian theologians. I can do no more in the space remaining than suggest three examples in more recent theology that take on a dubious appearance in light of the standpoint of Aquinas and divine ideas as I have sought to define it. The need for haste means that full justice cannot be done to them here, but at least the question must be sharply put: are the following proposals ultimately compatible with the transcendence of the creator God as Aquinas's ideas elucidate it?

In his great posthumously published work *The Bride of the Lamb* (1945), Sergei Bulgakov proffers a "sophiology" to overcome the spectre of arbitrariness that he thinks has tainted theological conceptions in the West. Unfortunately, in attempting to use Aquinas on the divine ideas as a prime exhibit of the malaise he subjects that thinker to a nearly perfect misreading. On all the key points—God's "simple knowledge," the relation of intelligibilities to exemplars, the preexistence in God of creative possibility (not, *pace* Bulgakov, "possible worlds")—where we have argued Aquinas is signaling his voluntarist bent, Bulgakov stubbornly insists on reading him against the grain, in fact attributing to him just that opposition of necessary intellect to capricious will that Aquinas's account enables theology to avoid.⁶⁸ In the name of Pseudo-Dionysius he denigrates ideas in Aquinas for being merely cognitive, failing to see the hybrid aspect of Aquinas's account which, faithful to Pseudo-Dionysius, builds willed intention into the exemplars. In the end, Bulgakov complains that the ideas of creation are left

⁶⁶ Nisbet, "Rationalisation of the Holy Trinity," 80.

⁶⁷ Lonergan, *Verbum*, 196.

⁶⁸ Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 22-6.

arbitrary and extrinsic in relation to God. Failing to detect Aquinas's solution to this problem, Bulgakov offers his own. Unfortunately, "sophia" as the perfect preexistence of the unique cosmos in God, the necessitated expression of the divine perfection, looks like an instance of fleeing Scylla only to fall into Charybdis. When he rules out the notion that God could create a better world, or that God knows a field of possibility beyond his willed act, he adduces as a principle that in God "all is equally necessary and equally free."⁶⁹ But for Aquinas this would be little more than a confusion of the ontological status of exemplars as sharing God's act of being (and consequently God's transcendence of worldly modal categories) with their intentional content (which is inevitably contingent by comparison). As a result, for Aquinas Bulgakov's talk of "the uniqueness of the ways of God [in creation] . . . that excludes all other unactualised possibilities" would be incoherent.⁷⁰ Yes, God's way in this world could only be God's way, but this world need not be the only one. We cannot get back behind the willing of this world to find some deeper, "natural" grounding in God's being that determined this world as the uniquely possible "shape" or externalization of God. Indeed, Sophiology, adopting the position of German Idealism that makes our cosmos both uniquely preexistent in God and necessarily emanated, opens an ontological space that looks very much like the half-way house between God and creature that Bulgakov says he wishes to avoid.

For Aquinas, our creation is contingent not as arbitrary, but as one of the innumerable harmonious reflections sustainable by God's essence. No created world could fail to be an imitation of the divine being and goodness, perfect in its own unique order. But because the distance between perfection and imperfection is infinite, there could always be other likewise perfect worlds, and no single one could be "best." The lesson to be drawn from Bulgakov for a doctrine of creation is that the freedom of God vis-à-vis the creation must be a freedom of choice (though not of fixed options necessarily pre-given). But also to be noted is the way God's act, as God's being, modally transcends the modal categories of its effect. This leads to our second example, Karl Barth's doctrine of election, especially as interpreted by Bruce McCormack.⁷¹ Barth radicalizes the central Reformed notion of eternal election, making it in effect God's choice, "prior" to all creation, of his own identity, his existence in an eternal covenantal commitment to humanity incarnated in creation as Jesus Christ. The many interpretive difficulties that attend this notion cannot be entered into here, but what is important is to see the way in which Barth has taken the contingent choice of God to create just this world as the context for his incarnation, and projected that choice backward into God's own eternal self-relationship, such that God's very identity is conditioned upon a "prior" decision. For Aquinas, the sheer impossibility, not to say absurdity of this act of divine self-creation is plain: as the perfection of total actuality God has no "other" way to be God, no variety of "identities" to select from or fashion. God's being is the chosen "means" to nothing; it is simply and supremely encompassed end. "Choice" or "election" apply only to God's will-to-create-a-world; this creative will is an impassible barrier: no defined creature, and thus no definite relation of God to creature, can be prior to it, nor can any modality of God's infinite being be located posterior to it. Indeed, the will to elect humanity in Jesus Christ cannot be prior to the will to elect this world

⁶⁹ Bulgakov, *Bride of the Lamb*, 31.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Bruce McCormack, "Grace and being: The role of God's gracious election in Karl Barth's theological ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-110. Whether the position outlined is genuinely Barth's or is rather confined to McCormack is immaterial to my criticism here.

because this world is precisely the world in which God's Word is incarnate as Jesus, and there is no other. *De facto* there is no other world, and *de jure* there is no other God: any variable disposition of God to the world is a feature of the world, not of God. If the creation of this world is contingent, and in no way a matter of God's eternal constitution, then his identification with Jesus of Nazareth is utterly contingent in exactly the same way. God must love, but not necessarily in this way. The field of choice is the range of possible effects of the creative act, i.e. it opens out "in front of" God and not "in" him. It is impossible to miss once again the strong whiff of German idealism in Barth's account: yet another attempt is being made to inscribe the contingent cosmic order into the divine being as an essential, identifying component of God. Stipulating that God freely "chooses" this identification really does not mitigate the problem; the complete freedom God enjoys in being God simply excludes the very notion of self-election with its impossible implication of alternative options for divinity.

So if we follow Aquinas on divine ideas, then creating a world, any world, including this world into which God projects himself in solidarity with humanity, is not a different way of being God. God is already the only way to be God. The lesson to be learned from this example is that some kind of absolute distinction must be made in the mode of free divine willing depending upon its object: God's being, or the world's. God is God freely, but God is not free to be God differently, as that could only be freedom to be worse than he is, i.e. it is no freedom at all. The concept of "choice" supposes the presentation of differentiated opportunity, hence an articulation of divine self-knowledge which, as we have argued, is only intelligible within the intending of what is not-God, and which cannot be a necessary imprint upon God's essence. This question of articulation introduces our last example. In a brilliant stroke of speculation, John Milbank seized upon the classical Augustinian language of the Son as the eternal "word" and "art" of the Father in order to apply a rigorous analogy with human artistic production.⁷² Thus the Son is not just the reflection of the Father's knowledge but a shaping and particularizing concretion of that knowledge as a quasi-poetic "utterance." This move presumes Gadamer's attempt to make language itself, as "infinite" concept-formation, a kind of transcendental perfection. This in turn enabled Milbank to secure a necessary speculative role for the Spirit by employing Hans Robert Jaus's theory of interpretive reception: just as the work of art only "exists" as fulfilled in the achieved event of its receptive interpretation, so too the Spirit is the co-primordial principle that "reads" the eternal Word "back" to the uttering Father, the indispensable co-enabler of the eternal "art." This is exhilarating stuff, but by equating the utterance of the Son with the emergence in God's intellect of a constitutively new concrete artifact, a particularized act of "meaning," it has once again summoned up the ghost of Plato's "cosmos" of ideas within God. Against this, for Aquinas as we are reading him the determination of exemplars, the "articulation" of divine knowledge, is not in any way a natural, unelected emergence, and hence the natural procession of the Son simply cannot be represented as itself the artistic determination of the Father's knowing (a quintessentially Bonaventurian move). Besides, the ancient metaphor of the Son as "art" has here been surreptitiously modernized; for practical capability has been substituted the creative self-concretion of the romantics. Therefore, it seems that Milbank's ingenious "semiotic" model, where the Trinity is an eternal circuit of utterance-sign-interpretation, is finally compatible neither with Aquinas, nor with creation from nothing. The willed event of producing what is not God can be the only "articulation" of God's eternal self-apprehension; hence the latter cannot be a constitutive moment within God's being. This is the

⁷² For what follows see John Milbank, "The Second Difference," in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 171-93.

force of the distinction Aquinas draws between what is “known” in the Son (the unified fullness of God’s self-knowledge) versus what is “spoken” in the Son (the chosen complex of participations that reflects that fullness from an infinite remove).⁷³

VI: Conclusion

As with all of the previous non-Thomist approaches we have examined, each of the three theological proposals just canvassed bears one or both of the marks of the “Franciscan,” that is the Christian-Platonic, idea tradition: an eternal pre-presence in the divine essence of articulated or differentiated being, and an entanglement of the production of exemplars with Trinitarian procession. We have been suggesting all along that Aquinas’s opposed conception has something in it that neutralizes these Platonic elements, something we have been crudely labelling his “voluntarism.” The time has now come to see whether a final clarification can be achieved from Aquinas’s writings as to how the divine will provides the key concept that polices the boundary between divine and worldly being and prevents the subtle coalescences of the two that threaten the very notion of creation classically conceived. For Aquinas, not just the actualization but the formal constitution of the world must be freely willed, or else creation simply is not creation, and God is not God. We have seen that the Platonic prioritization of divine ideation over divine willing (sometimes abetted by its “naturalization” as a Trinitarian event), left unexposed, has led in the history of ideas to the splitting of the singular creative act (Section III), the degrading of divine simplicity into dueling “faculties” (Section IV), and finally the fraudulent elevation of the world into the very mystery of God’s life (Section V). All of this can be prevented if, with Aquinas, God’s exemplary causality in creation is fully united with the willful intention of this world, without at the same time confusing that intention with God’s free embrace of his own necessary goodness. The elements needed for making the requisite distinctions are available in Aquinas’s theory of the will.

But before turning to that theory and some concluding comments, it is important to assert the peculiar importance of the more rigorous theorization of creation that Aquinas’s idea theory enables. The religious imagination chafes at the way this rigor blocks and channels its exercise; then, too, the most suggestive and exciting speculative avenues (a sophiology; a God who freely elects his own identity; a semiotic Trinity) are shut off. But such constraints are in fact precious, and necessary. The living traffic with deity in worship and prayer can only take shape via a traditional stock of vital and indispensable images and ideas, but a second-order conceptual discipline is required to keep the embedded meanings and claims coherent with each other. Theology’s role is to provide this discipline through some kind of transcendental reflection.⁷⁴ This is the interpretive work by which, in Ricoeur’s words, the symbol gives rise to thought.⁷⁵ This cannot occur when the symbols of worship and the narratives of confession are simply pressed into service as ersatz thoughts, so theology, when it remembers what it is about, always includes demythologization, that is some sort of processing of religious expressions through a conceptual machine that detaches, preserves and purifies their residual semantic core for experimental deployment in propositional terms. Not even the most meticulous restatements of the kerygma can do without the abstract discipline of self-consistent transcendental reflection.

⁷³ Aquinas, *QDV*, q. 4, a. 7.

⁷⁴ Nicholas Lash, “Ideology, Metaphor and Analogy,” in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 95-119.

⁷⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 236-7.

Trying to ground theology exclusively in “revelation” does not succeed in avoiding speculation; it only results in undisciplined speculation, which is just another form of mythology. I would suggest there have been at least four great eras of fruitful demythologization that remain living resources today: the third and fourth centuries C.E., with the conciliar definitions as high points; the great period of mature scholasticism, with Aquinas as a high point; the post-Kantian ferment in Germany, with its resulting technical sophistication in idealism but especially with the anti-speculative, even apophatic protest of romantic thought (Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard); and finally so-called dialectical theology in twentieth-century German Protestantism, with its twin giants Barth and Bultmann.⁷⁶

All four of these great epochs arguably in their critical projects employed a similar conceptual machinery: the most careful thinking through of God as absolute source, absolute origin. But unlike the devices of dialectical theology, which turned for their anti-mythical protocols to a foundational *Offenbarungstrias* on one side (Barth), and to a phenomenology of *Dasein* on the other (Bultmann), it was the classical dynamic of creation *ex nihilo* that motivated the first two epochs, and, perhaps in a way, the third as well. Theorizing creation in a conceptually precise way is, I would maintain, a metaphysical transcription of Israel’s *shema*: a way of confessing the one source of all, whose *kabod* can only be aniconic, and who foments an implacable revolution against the world of gods.⁷⁷ Only the patient working out of all this in thought can show that calling God creator “from nothing” is not the result of minds dazzled by the *doxa* (both glory and traditional communal opinion) into paying God empty “metaphysical compliments,” as the great Whitehead believed.⁷⁸ Against the latter it should be said that God is not the highest “instance” of any principle, nor the coordinator of the most general elements of organic process. God is the fecund abyss of all principle, the free fountainhead of all formed actuality. Followers of Aquinas in particular will want to insist that the notion of creation from nothing, *pace* Whitehead, is no myth, but in fact our most important conceptual safeguard against the uncritical absorption of myth into our theological thinking. Undeterred by German polysyllabics, let them cry: creation *ex nihilo* is our *Entmythologisierungsprogramm!*

With these general remarks in mind, it is time to conclude with a specification of Aquinas’s voluntarism of creation. It is an ontological axiom for Aquinas that nothing is indifferent to its own act of existence; part of what it means for anything to be is to display some kind of impetus toward its own persistence and completion, its own formal actuality. When this drive is an unconscious causal weight or instinct, it is natural appetite. But intellectual existence is formally perfected by union with the intelligible; the impulse toward this union with the understood, whether the latter is possessed or sought, is intelligent appetite or will.⁷⁹ It is another given for Aquinas that perfection or goodness seeks to propagate itself beyond its possessor,

⁷⁶ For the Nicene Creed as demythologization see the tantalizingly brief remarks in Rowan Williams, “The Nicene Heritage,” in *The Christian Understanding of God Today*, ed. James M. Byrne (Dublin: Columba Press, 1993), 45-8. On German idealism the remarks of Gilson are apt: “Kant [is] the first [modern] philosopher who, after a long interlude of brilliant amateurs, has claimed for philosophy the right to a ‘scholastic’ method of exposition. . . . [T]echnically speaking, the doctrines of Kant, of Fichte and of Hegel belong in the same class as the most perfectly elaborated Scholastic philosophies and theologies of the Middle Ages.” Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 113.

⁷⁷ It was the often repeated message of Herbert McCabe that Jewish monotheism was a cultural and ethical upheaval with the most profound historical consequences, overthrowing the domination of humanity by “gods.” See, for example, Herbert McCabe, “Trinity and Prayer,” in *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2002), 54-63.

⁷⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 179.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, Part I, q. 19, a. 1.

which is the deep metaphysical significance of causality and its replication in effect; hence it is fitting for God, too, to disperse his own goodness as creatures. But as the simple totality of all perfection he can only will the good of creatures as partakers of that totality, and because the diffusion of the totality is variable without limit, creatures can only be willed as contingent means to the necessary end of all ends, himself.⁸⁰ But this introduces a crucial distinction: a gap like that between heaven and earth yawns between God's self-will or self-appetite or self-love and his willing of creatures: God necessarily wills himself as the perfect intelligible good, but no creature is an indispensable means to that end, so God can only will any creature contingently. And as befits will as intellect's appetite, this distinction in willing follows from the different cognition of end and means. But really there is but one act of cognition with two objects, for God knows the creature in knowing himself.

Hence, as in God to understand the cause is not the cause of his understanding the effect, for he understands the effect in the cause, so, in Him, to will an end is not the cause of his willing the means, yet He wills the ordering of the means to the end.⁸¹

In other words, God's necessary self-willing does not compel the creation, but the willing of creation is a contingently intended ordering known virtually in the cause.

The lesson learned from Aquinas's anti-Platonic stance toward the ideas, i.e. their voluntary elicitation, is that God's intellect can never be played off against his will, but rather God knows as he wills and wills as he knows. But then for saving the logic of creation "*ex nihilo*" everything turns on rightly unifying the two different intellectual objects (himself and creatures) with proper and coordinate modes of God's willing act. Contrary to a perennial confusion, free willing is not identical with choice. The will's freedom to choose is always grounded in a prior deep orientation toward its own fulfillment, its one inalterable desire for its good. As the very nature of desire, this is no coercion; the usual opposition of natural and voluntary is here transcended, for this ingrained impulsion toward perfection is the quintessence of the voluntary.⁸² But when the good is not perfectly possessed, or when some free play of its dispersal, its overflow, is sought, then the logically derivative question of choice first arises. Hence Aquinas demands a sharp distinction in voluntary acts, calling upon the ancient distinction between *boulesis* and *thelesis*, between will as such (*velle*) and choice (*eligere*).

[O]n the part of the appetite to will implies the simple appetite for something; hence the will is said to regard the end, which is desired for itself. But to choose is to desire something for the sake of obtaining something else, and so, properly speaking, it regards the means to the end.⁸³

So the unity of knowing and willing presupposed by Aquinas's idea theory demands the correct alignments: God self-willing is a dynamism of enjoyment, in unity with his cognitive act of sheer self-transparency; but God's willing of the creature must be an election, an exercising of one among a virtually unbounded range of options, concretized in the elicitation of the ideas, i.e. a single, defined articulation of his power or essence. Steady attention to this alignment inoculates

⁸⁰ Aquinas, *ST*, Part I, q. 19, a. 2.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, a. 5.

⁸² *Ibid.*, q. 82, a. 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, q. 83, a. 4.

theology against the Platonic maladies that have attended idea theory from its origination. Contrary to the spurious symmetry of idealistic speculation, for God to know ideas (as exemplars), even an infinity of them, is not to know himself, though to know himself is to know an infinity of ideas (as intelligibilities). And contrary to the Franciscan or Christian-Platonic scheme which some interpreters still attempt to foist on Aquinas, the only necessity that attaches to the intentional content of exemplars is hypothetical necessity, and this is exclusively annexed to the creative act itself. That is, proper ideas or exemplars are not a necessary, fixed and pre-given array, but derive their only necessity from the supposition of the act of creative will.

Given the intimate and necessary relation in God of will to intellect that Aquinas insists upon, a certain nicety in the correct connecting of intellectual objects and volitional ones is just what we should expect. On the other side, in one way or another, the serial mutations of the doctrine of creation which have passed in review above have involved some breach of these rules of connection; at the basis of these breaches has been one or another attempt to equip possible non-divine entities, “creatables” so to speak, with an intra-divine necessity that did not befit their status as ultimately contingent objects of divine will. Pegis has perfectly captured the ontological vision of Platonism that underlies this perennial impulse within theism.

Being in its ultimate nature is an organized whole of distinct and hierarchically arranged Forms. Each Form is the same as itself and different from all others; each Form introduces into the very heart of being that character of sameness and difference which is necessary to the preservation . . . of the intelligibility of Forms By nature being is, therefore, a system of determinate essences. By nature being is possessed of what may be called the principle of interior diversification or otherness.⁸⁴

Pegis calls this Platonic ontological prejudice, where “non-being [i.e. otherness, difference] is the mysterious co-principle of [the] interior intelligibility” of being, the “alphabet theory of reality.” We are struck by the similarity to Saussure’s insight: linguistic systems are reducible to an ensemble of signs poised in patterns of mutual differentiation or exclusion. But for Aquinas “in the unity of a God Who is Being we have transcended the reign of *otherness* and *difference* within being.”⁸⁵ Otherwise put, Aquinas’s doctrine of ideas enables us to see that only created being is “linguistic,” while being as such is just God.

Aquinas’s God is infinite actuality, that is, God knows all ways of existing because God is the perfect act of existence. Only this “existentialist” approach will avoid the “essentialist” importation of multiple differentiated essences into God. God’s essence relates to created essences not as general to particular but as perfect act to imperfect acts. One who knows the more perfect act knows the less perfect.⁸⁶ James F. Ross unforgettably described the results of this for divine ideas: God knows creatures by knowing himself, just as anyone who recognizes W. C. Fields perfectly by that very act also implicitly recognizes every imitation of Fields.⁸⁷ Thus God’s perfect knowledge of creatable possibility in no way requires an infinite “set” of determined others as cognitive objects, nor as the perfect idea of all things does his essence resolve itself into such a set. This is why the knowledge of creatures, even in their concrete

⁸⁴ Pegis, “Dilemma of Being and Unity,” 156.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁸⁷ James F. Ross, “Aquinas’s Exemplarism, Aquinas’s Voluntarism,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1990), 171-98 at 186.

actuality as the world, adds nothing to God; they are all decompositions and complex negations of the simple fullness of God. And their exemplars in God are voluntarily elicited from this fullness, not eternally fixed and “installed” in an intellect divided against will.

In this way, Aquinas came to abandon the traditional but impossible marriage between Platonic ideas and monotheistic creation. The argument of this essay has been that a rigorous conceptualization of creation has been undercut over a period of centuries by repeated attempts to revive that marriage. With Aquinas’s purge of Platonism, the mode of God’s freedom in creating is harder for our imaginations to come to grips with; this, as was suggested above, is the price of demythologization. Even so, we are not totally bereft of an analogy for that supreme freedom. In God there is no mere assemblage of givens, no timeless reservoir of homogenous possibilities, and hence creation is basically neither externalization nor replication. The emergence of the features of this world is more like a deep chess problem: not simply unpredictable in advance, but incalculable in principle. There is no algorithm moving from primitive principles to the final total order; instead, logically prior fields of possibility, as they come into willed focus, give rise to posterior fields whose range cannot be fully fixed in terms of the earlier domain. So from our perspective there is an infinite discontinuity between (using Aquinas’s terms) ideas as intelligibles and ideas as exemplars, as in the latter a cascade of defined possibility and ramified relation is instantaneously realized. The “fact” of exemplars in God (though it “adds” nothing to his being) is only and could only be a divinely willed fact, and for this fact (identical to the “Let there be . . .”) the best, albeit distant, analogy we have is the flash of artistic insight, the mysterious intuition that pounces on us from nowhere and tells us, “This is the way to do it.” Furnishing God with Platonic ideas invites us to imagine creation as a selection, a deduction, a derivation; Aquinas invites us to see it as more akin to a stroke of genius, a coup, a feat of legerdemain. Or, perhaps, it is an improvisation, indeed the grandest of improvisations: the theme is the variation and the variation is the theme. Like a perfect artwork, its immanent necessity (how could it have been other than it is?) remains, mysteriously, a freely expressed contingency. Thus the abyss of freedom from which God first snatches our cosmos gives beings a depth even beyond their beauty and sublimity. It is that uncanny halo of the aleatory that plays along the edges of all things, the surprise that starts the metaphysician awake.