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Michael Liccione

The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review, Volume 59, Number 2, April 1995, pp. 223-245 (Article)

Published by The Catholic University of America Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1995.0031>



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MYSTERY AND EXPLANATION IN AQUINAS'S
ACCOUNT OF CREATION

MICHAEL LICCIONE

Houston, Texas

CONTEMPORARY philosophers of religion have devoted much worthy effort to analyzing and reconsidering such important traditional doctrines as those of divine omniscience and simplicity. But the similarly important and traditional doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* has not been enjoying the same kind of attention. One reason for this may be that its purport seems clearer, and its place in classical theism accordingly less controversial, than those of certain other doctrines, so that neither proponents nor opponents are as much inclined to puzzle over it as over those other doctrines. But in Aquinas's magisterial account, at least one of the doctrine's aspects bears a philosophical interest that is easy to overlook. In this paper I will bring out that aspect by resolving two alleged inconsistencies in Aquinas's account.

Two well-known writers have argued that Aquinas's explanation of God's creating is incompatible with his description of God's freedom in creating. In the late 1940s, most of the pertinent textual and philosophical matters were hotly debated between Lovejoy¹ on the one hand, who attacked the Common

¹ Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Duality of Thomistic Theology: A Reply to Mr. Veatch," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 7 (1947): 413-438; "Analogy and Contradiction: A Surrejoinder," *Phil. Phen. Res.* 7 (1947): 626-34; "Necessity and Self-Sufficiency in the Thomistic Theology: A Reply to President Pegis," *Phil. Phen. Res.* 9 (1948): 71-88; "Comment on Mr. Pegis' Rejoinder," *Phil. Phen. Res.* 9 (1948): 284-90.

Doctor's account as thus inconsistent, and Veatch² and Pegis³ on the other hand, who defended it as both consistent and true. More recently, Kretzmann⁴ has advanced a professedly tentative interpretation that offers what is, in effect, a weakened version of Lovejoy's attack; and though he refrains from citing Lovejoy—doubtless for good reason—Kretzmann is only the latest exponent of a line of criticism that the great historian's influence has been largely responsible for sustaining. But even though my sympathies lie with such traditional Thomists as Veatch and Pegis, much of their treatment was as unnecessary as it was tortuous. Rather than rehearse the details of the older debate, then, I shall analyze the passages to which we should attend most closely, and then use them to show why Lovejoy and Kretzmann are wrong.

That will in turn help to show that the existence of the world is both *fully explicable* and *essentially mysterious*. It is fully explicable inasmuch as God effectively wills it, with good and sufficient reason for doing so. It is essentially mysterious inasmuch as God freely wills it, with *no* reason to create *rather than* not, and *no* reason to create this world *rather than* any other he could have created. The question why the world exists thus has a good answer that preserves the wonder which Aristotle says is the beginning of philosophy.

God's Reason for Creating

Aquinas says that

. . . the distinction and multitude of things is from the intention (*ex intentione*) of the first cause, who is God. For he brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated

² Henry Veatch, "A Note on the Metaphysical Grounds for Freedom, with Special Reference to Professor Lovejoy's Thesis in *The Great Chain of Being*," *Phil. Phen. Res.* 7 (1947): 391-412; "A Rejoinder to Professor Lovejoy," *Phil. Phen. Res.* 7 (1947): 622-25.

³ Anton C. Pegis, "*Principale Volitum*: Some Notes on a Supposed Thomistic Contradiction," *Phil. Phen. Res.* 9 (1948): 51-70; "Autonomy and Necessity: A Reply to Professor Lovejoy," *Phil. Phen. Res.* 9 (1948): 89-97.

⁴ Norman Kretzmann, "Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy in the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983): 631-49.

(*propter suam bonitatem communicandam*) to creatures, and be represented by them. And because his goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, he produced many and diverse creatures . . . (*ST Ia Q47 A1*).⁵

Therefore, God's creating the world is intentional: the intention is to communicate his goodness to creatures and adequately represent it by them (better: *through* them). Nevertheless, what God thus intends by creating the world is not the same as his reason for creating it. To understand that reason, it is essential to understand first why, for Aquinas, the communication (and representation) of the divine goodness must be God's intention in creating.

Consider a key use Aquinas makes of the venerable Neo-platonic principle *bonum est diffusivum sui et esse*—"the good is diffusive of itself and being." On that use, any action performed by any agent *entails* the agent's communicating its goodness:

The communication of being and goodness proceeds from goodness. This is clear both from the very nature of good and from its concept (*ratio*). For by nature, the good of anything whatever is its act and perfection. Now something acts insofar as it is in act, and by acting, it diffuses its being and goodness into other things . . . For this reason it is said that "the good is diffusive of itself and being." This diffusion belongs to the God (*Deo competit*), for . . . He is the cause of being for other things. (*SCG I.37.5*)⁶

Now if communicating its goodness to other things is what any agent does just by acting, then, it seems, God's acting at all entails his creating something-or-other. At any rate, Aquinas clearly implies that God communicates his goodness by diffusing it into other things, and Aquinas *seems* to imply that some such diffusion is entailed by God's doing anything at all.

⁵ Cf. *II Cont. Gent.* c. 45, 9. English translations of the *Summa theologiae* (abbreviated here as *ST*) are from *Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Anton C. Pegis, ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1948).

⁶ The phrase *Deo competit* is difficult to render; "belongs to God" is a short way of expressing its meaning here, which is something like "befits and is rightly attributable to God." Unless otherwise indicated, the translations from the *Summa contra Gentiles* (abbreviated here as *SCG*) are my own.

Moreover, just by producing something, God *represents* his goodness: “. . . everything seeks after its own perfection, and the perfection and form of an effect consist in a certain likeness to the agent, since every agent makes its like . . .” (*ST Ia Q6 A1*). Creatures necessarily “participate” or partake in their first efficient cause by being, and tending to be, like it; creatures thus necessarily represent that cause. By the same token, that cause is their final cause. As Aquinas continues in the same passage:

. . . hence the agent itself is desirable and has the nature of good. For the very thing which is desirable in it is the participation of its likeness. Therefore, since God is the first producing cause of all things, it is manifest that the aspect of good . . . belong[s] to Him . . .

Indeed Aquinas answers the question “whether God is the final cause of all things” affirmatively by arguing that

. . . every creature intends ⁷ to acquire its own perfection, which is the likeness of the divine perfection and goodness. Therefore the divine goodness is the end of all things (*ST Ia Q44 A4*).

Creatures are ordered to God’s goodness by tending to be like it, and that is what God’s final causality consists in. Just by being the efficient and final cause of other beings, then, God represents his goodness.

If so, then God’s representing his goodness by creating is necessarily equivalent to his communicating his goodness by creating. That is because, for Aquinas, an agent’s producing something entails the communication of its goodness, and every agent produces its like, which as such represents it. Therefore, assuming that creation is intentional and that he knows what he is about, God necessarily intends by creating both the communication and the representation of his goodness.

For all that has been said so far, we could conclude that God’s intention in creating the world is simply to do “adequately”

⁷ Although the Latin is *intendit*, a better translation for contemporary ears might be “aims at.” Aquinas is not insinuating a form of pan-psychism, according to which every agent harbors a conscious or quasi-conscious intention to do what it does; he is merely describing a necessary tendency to act for an end, in line with his essentially teleological conception of the universe.

what his doing anything at all entails. If so, and assuming that God is necessarily active in some-or-other sense, then what reason other than what we have heard God intends could he have for creating the world? Indeed, since Lovejoy's now-classic lectures,⁸ something like this view has not only been respectable as exegesis of Aquinas but has also been upheld as a truth in its own right. For we have heard that God cannot represent his goodness adequately except by creating "many and diverse things"; representing his goodness is necessarily equivalent to communicating his goodness; and communicating its goodness *ad extra* is what any agent does just by acting. Or so it would seem.

Certainly, if Aquinas is right, both the communication and the *adequate* representation of his goodness is what God is *about* in creating the world. (For brevity, let us simply say henceforth that what God is thus about is the diffusion of his goodness.) Moreover, we regularly cite what somebody intends in doing something as their reason *for* doing it or the reason *why* they do it; and the diffusion of one's own goodness seems fit to be called such a reason, as well as what God intends by creating. So one might think that, for Aquinas, the diffusion of his goodness is God's *reason* for creating the world. But Aquinas never says this. What he does say is that the end or reason for which God creates is the divine goodness—period.

Prima facie, this is quite puzzling. When we say that somebody has a reason for performing an action *A*, we typically mean or imply that there is some good they want to achieve by performing *A*. One might thus say that they are *after* some good that they believe performing *A* would secure or attain. But it would be utterly false to Aquinas's notion of the divine perfection to suggest that God could be *after* anything by creating, for there neither is nor could be any good that God seeks to attain or secure thereby. Thus, although it "belongs" to "imperfect" agents, "to intend, by acting, the acquisition of something," this "does not befit the First Agent, who seeks only to communicate

⁸ Published as *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936).

His perfection, which is his goodness" (*ST Ia Q44 A4*). Whatever other goods they may seek and achieve by acting, imperfect agents always act so as to become more perfect; but that cannot be the case with an absolutely perfect being. Hence, even though the diffusion of his goodness is what God intends *by* creating the world, to say that what God thus intends is his reason *for* creating the world would involve too close an analogy between God and lesser agents.

At the same time, however, Aquinas rejects "the error of certain people who say that all things (*omnia*) depend on the simple divine will, without any reason,"⁹ since "every agent acts for an end."¹⁰ When an *intelligent* agent acts as such (i.e., acts *per intellectum*), it acts "under the conception of the good (*sub ratione boni*) that is the object of the will" (*SCG III.3.6*). In creating, God is the First Agent; and since an agent by intellect and will is "prior" to an agent that acts merely "by nature," God must act "by intellect and will" (*ST Ia Q19 A4*). In this way, the end or good for which an agent acts may be called the reason (or at least a reason) for the agent's so acting. Hence, there must be a good or end that constitutes a reason, perhaps *the* reason, for God's willing other things (*ratio volendi alia*; *SCG I.86.2*)—even though God has nothing to gain, and cannot improve reality, *by* so willing.

That the divine goodness must be the reason for which God wills that there be other things follows if "[the divine will] wills nothing . . . except by reason of its goodness" (*nisi ratione suae bonitatis*; *ST Ia Q19 A2 ad3*). That God wills only by reason of his goodness is said in turn to "follow" from the fact that God's "own goodness suffices the divine will." It is plausible but insufficient to read this argument as a truncated version of another argument that God is *liberal*: "since the goodness of God is perfect and can exist without other things, inasmuch as no perfection can accrue to him from them, it follows that for him to

⁹ *II Cont. Gent.*, c. 24, 7. From the context of this passage, it is clear that "all things" means "what God has created."

¹⁰ *Sum. theo.*, I, q. 44, a. 4; cf. *III Cont. Gent.*, c. 2, 17-18.

will things other than himself is not absolutely¹¹ necessary" (*ST* Ia Q19 A3; cf. *SCG* I.81.2); yet God does will other things; hence "God alone is the most perfectly liberal giver, because he acts not for his own profit (*utilitatem*), but only out of his own goodness" (*propter suam bonitatem*; *ST* Ia Q44 A4 *ad*1). As evidence of his liberality, God's creating the world is *explicable* by his goodness. But this cannot be the sense in which God's goodness is the *reason for which*, or *reason why*, he creates the world. That God is perfectly liberal is only an inference—albeit a valid one—from the fact that God has nothing to gain by creating and yet diffuses his goodness by doing so. Yet we are still left with the question: Why create?

Strictly speaking, nothing can be a *cause* of God's willing to create (*ST* Ia Q19 A5; *SCG* I.87). God's goodness can, it seems, be called such a cause (*SCG* I.87.2; cf. *ST* Ia Q19 A1 *ad*3), inasmuch as it moves his will as the latter's principal object.¹² But since God's goodness is identical with his existence, his "act and perfection" (*SCG* I.37.6), and thus with his "act of will" (*SCG* I.87.2),¹³ to cite God's goodness as a cause of his act of will is not to explain that act in any clear and non-trivial way. So, one should not assign a cause to God's act of will according to the sense in which some philosophers say that reasons can be causes. Rather, "the will of God is reasonable insofar as he wills one thing to be because of another" (*ST* Ia Q19 A5 *ad*1). More specifically, for every creature, there is at least one other creature such that God wills that "one of them is the cause of the other's being ordered to the divine goodness" (*SCG* I.87.3). In characteristically lapidary style, Aquinas concludes that God "wills this to be as means to that; but he does not will this because of that" (*ST* Ia Q19 A5). God's goodness is the *ratio* of creation: his goodness is that to which each creature is ordered

¹¹ We shall discuss the distinction between absolute necessity and necessity *ex suppositione* below.

¹² For an inventory of texts on this point, see *Basic Writings*, 56ff.

¹³ This is a consequence of Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity, which is beyond our scope. My aim here is merely to indicate how Aquinas thought we could say that there is a reason for creating.

by causal relations with other creatures. *What God creates* is thus *intelligible*—as well-ordered.

But this cannot be the complete answer to the question why God creates the world. If it were, the answer would come to: “Because the world is well set up.” But God *in se*, who wills and loves his own infinite goodness “by the necessity of natural order” (*De Ver.* Q23 A4) and cannot augment it by creating, is set up better than anything else can be. So even leaving aside the question whether God has reason *enough* to create, such an answer by itself would not tell us how God has *any* reason to create. It supplies a *ratio* of creation, but no *rationale* for creation.

Fortunately, a fuller answer may be extracted from Aquinas’s account. Consider:

. . . if natural things, insofar as they are perfect, communicate their good to others, much more does it pertain to the divine will to communicate by likeness its own good to others as much as is possible. Thus . . . [God] wills both Himself to be, and other things to be; but Himself as the end, and other things as ordained to that end, inasmuch as it befits (*condecet*) the divine goodness that other things should be partakers therein (*ST* Ia Q19 A2).

As we have heard before, God communicates his goodness to other things by producing them and ordering them to it; things so produced and ordered somehow “partake” in God’s goodness by being “ordained” to it. That communication is a diffusion of God’s goodness, which is God’s intention in creating; and to execute his intention in creating is for God to act reasonably, since creation, as ordered to God’s goodness, is well-ordered. Here, however, we also hear that the communication especially “befits” God. Since that communication is a diffusion of God’s goodness, it follows that to diffuse itself also “befits” the divine goodness. Therefore, *there-being-other-things-ordered-to-God’s-goodness* befits the divine goodness. And it is in that sense that the divine goodness is creation’s *rationale*.

To see why, consider an analogy. A good work of art will naturally reflect the artist in various ways; in Aquinas’s sense, it

will diffuse and befit the artist's goodness, his characteristic "act and perfection." That can be one of the artist's *reasons for creating* a work. When it is, it forms part of the work's rationale. Of course, it is both more common and commonly right to say that the *work itself* is the reason for creating it; but if we ask *in what respect* the work counts as such a reason, its befitting the artist in its composition is sometimes a good and sufficient answer. Now if Aquinas is right, we may infer that the world itself is a reason for creating it. But the world counts as such a reason because, in diffusing God's goodness by its order, it befits that goodness. If so, then his goodness is God's reason for creating the world: it is creation's rationale.¹⁴ Therefore, though Aquinas did not say so explicitly, I conclude from his account that God's goodness is his reason for creating the world in the following dual sense: the world's existence *befits* his goodness in diffusing it and diffuses it by *being ordered* to it. That is also the reason why the world exists.

Now following Lovejoy,¹⁵ some would object that, on this interpretation, Aquinas faces an insoluble dilemma. On the one hand, if creation neither adds anything to God's goodness nor otherwise serves as a means to his perfection, then God can acquire no good by creating; if so, then there is no reason *for God* to create *rather than not*; and thus there seems no explanation for God's creating. On the other hand, if there is a reason for God to create, then God secures some good by creating that he does not enjoy just by existing; if so, then God does have a reason to create *rather than not*; and thus there is an explanation of God's creating, namely, that in some sense he is better, or better off, for creating. And even though it does not follow from

¹⁴ Professing to agree with Aquinas, James Ross asserts that God's reason for creating is simply "what he makes" (see "Creation II," in F. Freddoso, ed., *The Existence and Nature of God* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983], 135). Aquinas, however, never says this explicitly; moreover, this only invites the question as to *why* what God makes counts as a reason for his making it. What I am claiming that Aquinas *does* in fact say, however, would answer that question.

¹⁵ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 425ff.

this alone that something is added to the divine goodness by creation, it is natural to conclude that creation's being ordained to the divine goodness consists not just in God's being its final cause, but in its being a *means* to the end of God's goodness.¹⁶ Thus, God's goodness requires both the act and the content of creation in order to be the infinite goodness it necessarily is. The dilemma, in short, is this: Either God has no reason to create rather than not, or his goodness necessitates that he create.

But conceiving this choice as a dilemma derives from an unfounded prejudice. It is true, as Lovejoy would have insisted, that the sort of interpretation I am giving does not have Aquinas explaining why God created *rather than* not. But if God has a reason to create, it does not follow that there is a reason why he created the world rather than not—either for Aquinas or in general. That is partly because there is no general principle of explanation according to which a reason-why-*x* must also be a reason-why-*x*-rather-than-anything-incompatible-with-*x*.

To be sure, it is trivially true that a reason-why-*x* is also a reason-why-*x*-rather-than-*some-things*-incompatible-with-*x*. For example, suppose that I plan to devote a particular evening to doing something befitting a good husband, and that any of several alternatives open to me would fill the bill. I thus have a reason for doing *any one* of them that is also a reason for *not* doing anything incompatible with *each and every one* of them. So, whatever I do to carry out my plan, the reason why I do it is, in this rather trivial sense, also a reason for doing it *rather than* anything incompatible with being a good husband. But there is also a sense in which my reason for doing it could be a reason for doing any of a number of things that would befit a good husband but that are also mutually incompatible as things stand. For suppose also that, as it happens that evening, I can fulfill my plan either by taking my wife to the movies or by staying home and cooking dinner for her, but that there is no time for both. Even so, given my

¹⁶ That is why Lovejoy generally favored the translation of *ordinata ad finem* and *ea quae ad finem* as “means to an end” rather than as “directed to an end.”

reason for doing one or the other, either would serve just as well; and thus my reason for doing the one is equally a reason for doing the other, even though they are mutually incompatible as things stand. Therefore, my reason for doing the one need not also be a reason to do the one *rather than* the other. The same goes, I think, for a great many exercises of what the later scholastics called "liberty of spontaneity."

If so, then we can reasonably say, on the one hand, that the fittingness of God's diffusion of his goodness *ad extra* is a reason for him to create and, on the other hand, that it is no reason for him to create *rather than* not. For the fittingness of that diffusion makes neither for more good-in-general nor a better God in particular than there would be if that diffusion were not to occur. "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good"; but since creation is purely contingent and derivative, the world is good in its diffusing the goodness of its source only by being ordered to that source—i.e., only inasmuch as the divine goodness is its reason for being. There is no such thing as a quantity of goodness that purely contingent good things could augment; still less is there a virtue of goodness that their production would enhance. There is only infinite and self-sufficient goodness, which *can* intelligibly diffuse itself *ad extra*, but need not.

God's Freedom in Creating

If, as Aquinas maintains, God creates the world intentionally but not necessarily, then God creates it strictly "of his own accord" (*propria sponte*; SCG I.88.2), by free choice (*liberum arbitrium*). I shall not try here to expound this claim fully or reconstruct all of Aquinas's arguments for it. But I shall adduce considerations that help us to appreciate its import. Thus, just as God has good reason to create, though no reason to create *rather than* not, so too does God have good reason to create *this* world, but *no* reason to create this world *rather than* any other he might have created.

Lovejoy thought that Aquinas also commits himself to the negation of that proposition. If Lovejoy were right, then

Aquinas's account of creation would be so fundamentally inconsistent that its interest would lie not in its synthesis of mystery and explanation but in the question how to explain its inconsistency. So, I shall first show that Lovejoy was wrong. Next, I shall refute Kretzmann's view that Aquinas implies, inconsistently, that God must create some world or other, though not this world in particular. I shall thus exhibit the full extent to which, for Aquinas, creation is mysterious.

According to Lovejoy, Aquinas holds the "principle of plenitude," which here entails that God "necessarily" creates, and creates "all things that he understands as possible."¹⁷ From this point of view, Aquinas seems committed to a version of what I call *monomodalism*: the doctrine that the actual world is the only possible world. The two main texts Lovejoy cites to support this interpretation are *SCG* I.75 and *SCG* II.45; but before considering them, note how grossly he misreads an important passage that militates against his view.

Aquinas therein implies that God has *not* created all that he understands as possible:

. . . the universe could not be better than it is, because of the supremely befitting order which God has assigned to things, wherein the good of the universe consists. If any one of these things were [separately] better, the proportion which constitutes the order of the whole would be vitiated . . . Nevertheless, God could make other things than he has, or could add others to the things he has made; and this other universe would be better. (*ST* Q25 A6 *resp.* & *ad* 6)

Lovejoy asserts that the third sentence of this argument is "the formal negation of the first."¹⁸ That assertion, of course, is a mistake about logical syntax; but it is also wrong as textual interpretation. Aquinas says, in effect, that given the *constituents* of the universe, its *composition* is optimal, though there could have been other or more things that would have made for a better universe—one that, in God's wisdom, would have been optimally composed in its own way.¹⁹ There's nothing odd about this:

¹⁷ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 73ff.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁹ Kretzmann, "Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy," 640-41.

from the fact that God makes the world as good as he can make it, it does not follow that he makes as many good things as it is possible for him to make. And so neither does it follow that God creates all that he understands as possible.

Indeed, Aquinas elsewhere implies that *no* possible world *could* contain all that God so understands.²⁰ Whatever one may think of his actual arguments—a matter that need not detain us—the conclusion seems unassailable. For not all things that are severally possible for God to create are *compossible*—even if, *per impossibile*, a collective actualization were to consist in all the several possibilities' being actualized in a particular order. Whatever the order, it seems that another would have been logically possible, because whatever God creates, there is always something different he might have created as well or instead. So, why think that Aquinas is committed to the principle of plenitude?

Lovejoy quotes:

Everyone desires the perfection of that which for its own sake he wills and loves: for the things we love for their own sakes, we wish . . . to be multiplied as much as possible. But God wills and loves his essence for its own sake. Now that essence is not augmentable or multipliable in itself but can be multiplied only in its likeness, which is shared by many. God therefore wills things to be multiplied, inasmuch as he wills and loves his own perfection. (*SCG* I.75.3)
 Moreover, God in willing himself wills all the things which are in himself; but all things in a certain manner pre-exist in God by their types (*rationes*). Therefore in willing himself God wills other things. (*SCG* I.75.5)²¹

In essence, the argument Lovejoy builds on this passage runs as follows. For Aquinas, any being other than God multiplies the divine essence in its likeness, and nothing can be unless God wills

²⁰ This implies of course that God cannot create any "best possible world" and therefore that no such world is really possible. See *In I Sent.* d. 44, q. 1, a. 2 and Kretzmann's explication of it; cf. *De Veritate*, q. 23; *De Potentia Dei*, q. 1, a. 2; Veatch, "A Note on the Metaphysical Grounds for Freedom," 401ff.

²¹ The translation here is that of Fr. Rickaby, used by Lovejoy. The phrase "multiplied in its likeness" would be better translated as "multiplied by way of likeness."

it. So if, as the quotation seems to imply, God has willed as many things-that-multiply-his-essence-in-its-likeness as possible, then God has willed all the things that are really possible. Given divine omniscience, this result is equivalent to God's willing all that he *understands as* really possible. Therefore, Aquinas is committed to the principle of plenitude, despite his all-but-explicit disavowals of it elsewhere.

If this argument were sound, Aquinas's account of creation would indeed be inconsistent. And it would be sound if the first sentence of the passage meant: "Necessarily, if x wills the perfection of some F that x wills and loves for F 's own sake, then x wills that there *actually be produced* as many F s as possible." But construed this way, the sentence is so patently false that we should doubt that a thinker of Aquinas's robust good sense would have believed it. If I will my perfection for its own sake—in whatever sense that is so—it does not follow that I want there to be as many beings like me as possible. One may ask: Does it not follow for God in particular if not for everyone in general? Not according to Aquinas, who not only *implies* that it does not (in what I quoted above from *ST Ia Q25*), but expressly denies it a few chapters after the passage we are now considering (in *SCG I.81*). In fact, Lovejoy's quotation omits part of the first sentence, which when fully translated reads: "Everyone desires the perfection of that which for its own sake he wills and loves: for the things we love for their own sakes, we wish *to be most perfect, and always to become better* and to be multiplied as much as possible" (emphasis added). Aquinas obviously did not believe that the divine essence can become better. What, then, are we to make of the sentence at issue?

Well, Aquinas thinks that the other things God wills *necessarily* are things *as they pre-exist in him*—in Neoplatonic terms, the "divine ideas." In necessarily knowing his essence, God necessarily knows all the ways in which it can be imitated (*SCG I.54*); the divine essence as known necessarily includes all the divine ideas; hence, so does the divine essence as willed and loved. It is in this sense that, necessarily willing his own good-

ness, God necessarily wills other things. But it simply does not follow that he necessarily wills to *create* those things, i.e., to invest them with actual existence *ad extra*. Whatever one may think of the notion of divine ideas (or of Aquinas's understanding of it), its role in *SCG* I.75 is clear. In light of this, the sentence in question is not intended as a premise in any argument that God must create. At most, it introduces an analogy meant to show how reasonable it is that God wills some possible things to be actual.

Needless to say, a difficulty remains, and we shall have to make a detour to dispose of it. Lovejoy makes much of Aquinas's insistence, in the very next chapter of the *SCG*, that God necessarily wills by one act of will *whatever* he wills (I.76). Thus, it is in some sense necessary that, in willing his own goodness or perfection, God wills not only all the divine ideas themselves but also wills *to create* what some divine ideas are ideas of. Quite so; but if so, then does not God necessarily will whatever he wills?

No. To see why, note first that Aquinas is unquestionably committed only to :

(1) Necessarily, for any *F* not identical with God, if God wills that there be an *F*, then God wills himself and there-being-an-*F* in one act of will.

This is an instance of what the scholastics called the "necessity of the consequence." But Lovejoy seems to read Aquinas as claiming also that :

(2) For any *F* not identical with God, God necessarily wills himself and there-being-an-*F* in one act of will.

This is an instance of the "necessity of the consequent." Now (2) implies that God necessarily creates. But (1) does not, and (2) neither means the same as (1) nor follows from (1) in virtue of their logical form. If Lovejoy thought that Aquinas either means or is committed to (2) in virtue of meaning or being committed to (1), then the problem is that Lovejoy is attributing his own fallacy to Aquinas.

But the problem is more likely his failure to appreciate the subtleties of certain other texts. For one thing, it is, all-too-easy to have Aquinas sliding from (1) to (2), because as we will shortly see, there is a sense in which, for Aquinas, (2) is true—never mind that it does not follow from or mean the same as (1). If (2) is true in any sense at all, then from (1) and in the absence of other considerations, one easily concludes that God wills to create not just by reason of his goodness but by just the same necessity by which he wills his goodness. In order to show how to forestall this result, we must consider three points Aquinas makes later in the *Summa theologiae*: one about necessity, the other two about will.

He consistently distinguishes *absolute* necessity from necessity *ex suppositione*. Absolute necessity arises from the relation of terms—e.g., “a man is an animal” or “numbers are odd or even.” Necessity *ex suppositione* might be explained as necessity on a given hypothesis—e.g., *given* that God wills something in particular, he cannot not will it, for his will is unalterable (ST Ia Q19 A7 *resp.* and *ad7*). Hence, “on the supposition” that God creates anything at all, (2) is true if construed as:

(2*) For any *F* not identical with God, God unalterably wills himself and there-being-an-*F* in one act of will.

Now since Aquinas constantly affirms that creation is not absolutely necessary, he would clearly have said that, where ‘*F*’ ranges over creatures as well as the divine ideas, (2*) holds only *if* God creates. Hence, even though God wills both himself and creatures unalterably, the modal operator in (2*) is weaker than that in (1), which also signifies absolute necessity.²² That is why (2), on that construal of it which Aquinas would have affirmed, in no way follows from (1).

As to will, there are two dispositions that “pertain to the will”: by the first, one “seeks” (*quaerat*) some good or “tends”

²² I avoid calling (1)’s modal operator one of “logical” necessity because (1) is not true in virtue of its logical form, but only in virtue of richer conceptual considerations on its terms.

toward it if one lacks it; by the second, one "rests" (*quiescat*) in a good when one has it (*ST Ia Q19 A1*). For Aquinas, it is clear that God's will does not seek his goodness—i.e., his "act and perfection"—by doing things to bring it about or augment it, but simply rests in it. And though I cannot pause to do justice to this profound and readily misunderstood claim, we can understand it well enough for present purposes by considering the related point that there are two ways in which something can be, or come about "by will" (*ST Ia Q41 A2*).

In one way, use of the ablative *voluntate*—"by will"—only designates "concomitance" (*concomitantia*) between the will and an already obtaining state of affairs. For example, "I am human by my will" would mean not that I have willingly made myself human but that I happily accede to being human (it is worth noting that the example Aquinas uses here involves my will's acceding in something *necessarily* true of me.) In the other way, the ablative form *voluntate* is used as a way of characterizing the *cause* of some state of affairs: e.g., "an artisan works by his will" means that the artisan's will (rather than any necessity of his nature) is the cause of his work. We may take the former way in which something can be "by will" to be one of the ways—or aspects—in which someone's will can "rest" in something he possesses. In context, Aquinas employs this distinction between two uses of *voluntate* to argue that, although the Father begets the Son by will in the former sense, the Father only produces creatures by will in the latter sense.

From what he says here and elsewhere, it follows that God as triune must will the divine goodness in the same way in which the Father wills the Son: God's will thus rests and accedes in the divine goodness by natural necessity. The same goes for the divine ideas as belonging to the divine essence; for given divine simplicity, the latter is identical with the divine goodness. But what of creatures? Even if God wills in one act of will whatever he wills, it would be absurd, in Aquinas's terms, to say that God's will necessarily rests in creatures, for they are not the terminus of his will: such "other things" are willed only "by reason of"

and “as ordained to” God’s goodness. So Aquinas must rather say that, in one and the same act of will, God rests in his own goodness and brings about creatures as ordered to that goodness. And so the question arises: How can one and the same act of will be both a resting in its end, which is absolutely necessary, and a production of things ordered to the end, which is necessary only *ex suppositione*?

Lovejoy’s answer would almost certainly have been: “It cannot.” But I confess I cannot see why not. Take our own case: We will our own act and perfection—i.e., our own goodness—by natural necessity, yet freely will various things we believe, rightly or wrongly, will contribute to it. That is because, as regards all except the “principal object” or last end of its will,

any rational nature . . . so has its inclination within its power that it does not necessarily incline to anything appetible which is apprehended, but can incline or not incline. And so its inclination is not determined for it by anything other than itself. It can come about that something determines for itself its inclination to an end only if it knows the end and the bearing of the means to the end. . . . (*De Ver. Q22 A4*; my translation)

Given this connection of freedom with rationality, we can see that there are many cases in which, in one actual intentional state, an agent wills its own goodness by natural necessity and yet freely wills what seems to him best suited to producing it. There are of course major differences between God’s willing to create and our willing to do produce anything—differences on which I need not here elaborate. The point is simply that it not only logically possible, but the most common thing in the world, for one act of will to have more than one object, one of which is willed by natural necessity, the other either by hypothetical necessity or only contingently.

Lovejoy’s major difficulty was that he was bent on proving a larger historical thesis with which the above considerations are incompatible. The thesis was that a “principle of plenitude” stretching back to Plato’s *Timaeus*, and handed down to the theologians of the Latin West through the Pseudo-Dionysius, en-

tailed that God necessarily created as much as was compossible. Adherents of that principle tended to believe that, had God not created as much as was compossible, he would have been less than perfectly liberal and hence not perfectly good. Since this result would have been wholly unacceptable to them, they concluded that God's producing as many things as possible was necessary to his being perfectly good, and hence that creation was a "means to the end" of God's goodness. And if "to will the end is to will the means to the end"—as Aquinas was rightly fond of saying—then God's willing his goodness by absolute, natural necessity entailed his willing to create by the same necessity. But we can now see why, for Aquinas, it just was not so.

Having completed this lengthy but, to my mind, rewarding detour, we can now see that the first major passage Lovejoy considers (*SCG* I.75) is no evidence that Aquinas is there committed to a principle of plenitude that he tries to evade in the larger body of his work. And the other passage Lovejoy quotes—a large section of *SCG* II.45—suits his purposes even less. Since his treatment of it may be rejected for roughly the same reasons for which I have rejected his treatment of *ST* Ia Q25, I leave the matter to the interested reader.

Still, when Aquinas says elsewhere that "the divine will communicates its own good by likeness to other things *as much as possible*" (*ST* Ia Q19 A2, emphasis added), his aim is to argue that God creates other things. And we do find a closely related, more detailed argument to that effect at *SCG* I.75.6:

To the extent to which something has the perfection of a power, its causality is extended to more things and over a wider range . . . But the causality of an end consists in the fact that other things are desired because of it. Therefore the more perfect and willed an end is, the more the will of the one willing the end is extended to more things by reason of that end. But the divine essence is most perfect in the essential nature (*ratione*) of goodness and of end. Therefore *it will diffuse its causality as much as possible* to many things, so that many things will be willed because of it—and especially by God, who wills [the divine essence] perfectly in respect of all of its power.²³

²³ The translation is Kretzmann's (emphasis mine).

Kretzmann offers the latter passage as evidence that, in conjunction with two other claims, Aquinas is committed to concluding that God must create *something-or-other*, though not this world in particular.²⁴ If Aquinas were so committed, his account of creation would indeed be inconsistent.

The two other claims Kretzmann cites are clear and familiar: “in willing himself God also wills other things” (the thesis of SCG I.75) and “God wills himself and other things in one act of will” (the thesis of SCG I.76). The former, as Aquinas wants us to accept it, means that in one act of will, God wills himself as end and other things as ordered to it; the latter, that this willing, though it has more than one object, is no more than one act. But why, given Aquinas’s strong denials that God necessarily creates anything at all,²⁵ should we think that the three claims in question entail that God must create?

Kretzmann reminds us of Aquinas’s repeated invocation of the Neo-platonic principle we have heard about already—“the good is diffusive of itself and being” (call it ‘GD’ for short).²⁶ I have already quoted one passage (SCG I.37.5) where Aquinas invokes GD to describe an *essential* note of goodness; and the long passage I quoted above from SCG I.75.6 might also be construed as containing an application of GD. Now as Kretzmann acknowledges, Aquinas did not typically adopt GD as entailing that an agent, to the extent it is good, *efficiently* causes (produces) something-or-other (call this version ‘GD_e’). Indeed, if Aquinas be interpreted as consistent, he adopted GD only as entailing that, whatever things an agent produces, it exerts its *final* causality over them *as much as possible* (call this version ‘GD_f’).²⁷ Thus the more perfect it is, the more the agent makes

²⁴ Kretzmann, “Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy,” 636.

²⁵ To cite just a few of the better-known examples: *Sum. theo.*, I, q. 19, a. 3; I *Cont. Gent.*, c. 81, 2; II *Cont. Gent.*, c. 28, 10.

²⁶ Because a version of the principle had been lent authority in Christian theology by Pseudo-Dionysius, Kretzmann gives this principle the more specific name “Dionysian.”

²⁷ The wording of GD_e and GD_f is mine; the basis for it is *De Veritate*, q. 21, a. 1, ad 4, which Kretzmann says “may be Aquinas’ only explicit discussion” of GD_f (“Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy,” 635).

the things he makes as good-of-their-kind as possible. Now it is a wise rule of thumb, when dealing with a thinker of Aquinas's caliber, to interpret him as consistent if at all possible. But Kretzmann, while not exactly ignoring this rule, seems all-too-willing to break it. He claims that GD_r does not leave room for God to refrain from creating something-or-other, and that, recognizing as much, Aquinas implicitly embraces GD_e in *SCG* I.75.6.

To show why, Kretzmann supposes *arguendo* that only GD_r is true, and that God creates nothing at all. In such a state of affairs,

God's will has no object other than its principal object, goodness itself, or the divine essence; and so the final causation inherent in God's goodness must draw only God's will, and only in the direction of God himself. The diffusiveness of goodness conceived as final causation cannot be extended to the drawing of anything other than God himself toward it unless there *are* other things . . . But in those circumstances, why should God's will cause anything to begin to exist? . . . Granting that God's will is the efficient cause of the existence of something besides God, we are left with the need for an explanation of God's willing it.²⁸

The explanation, according to Kretzmann, can only be found in Aquinas's embracing GD_e . Essentially self-diffusive, God's goodness entails that God create something-or-other ordered to it. It is this explanation that Kretzmann says Aquinas "comes close to presenting" in *SCG* I.75.6, despite his "explicit rejection" of it elsewhere.

But the explanation we can derive from Aquinas's corpus is the one I have already presented: the world *benefits* God's goodness in diffusing it, and diffuses it by *being ordered* to it, i.e., by being finally caused by it. For the reasons I have given, this is explanation enough; so Aquinas does not need GD_e to explain why God creates the world. Rather, for him, the essential self-diffusiveness of his goodness entails only that *if* God creates, he diffuses his goodness as much as possible, and *in that way* has good reason to create. To be sure, that explanation shows neither

²⁸ Kretzmann, "Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy," 635.

that God must create *rather than* not, nor why God creates this world *rather than* some other. But it is by no means a trivial explanation. So Kretzmann's critique is misguided.

In light of this, the correct interpretation of *SCG* I.75.6 is that, *assuming he creates*, God so diffuses his *final causality* that "many things" share it. In creating many things rather than only one or a few, God causes things to cause other things' existing and resembling him. As we saw at the beginning of the previous section, that is what God must do to diffuse his goodness adequately. God therefore diffuses his goodness by diffusing his final causality in an optimally composed world—which serves to explain how he can communicate his goodness as much as possible in creating (cf. *ST* Ia Q47 A1).

The argument that Aquinas believes GD_e rather gains force from *SCG* I.37.5 and its background: "Something acts insofar as it is in act, and by acting, it diffuses its goodness into other things." Must not God, who is goodness itself (*SCG* I.38) and "pure act," (*SCG* I.16.5), therefore create?

No. Within a domain of causally interrelated beings, it does follow that if a being acts, it diffuses its goodness into some other being. But even supposing that *in general*, when goodness is diffused, it is diffused into an "other," Aquinas hints in an early text that God "communicates" or diffuses himself as much as possible *internally* in their being "more than one distinct person in the unity of the divine essence," i.e., in the Trinity.²⁹ This holds whether or not God creates. Kretzmann brushes that text aside, saying that

in Aquinas' system it is the *triune* God whose essence is goodness itself. Unless there is some further intrinsic diffusion, beyond the pluralizing of persons, the essential self-diffusiveness of goodness remains intact and calls for *extrinsic* diffusion.³⁰

But if the triune God "acts insofar as he is in act" and is pure act, it does not follow that he must act *ad extra*. According to the orthodox doctrine to which Aquinas adhered, each of the three divine persons, as subjects of intellect and will, necessarily

²⁹ *In I Sent.*, d. 2, q. 1, a. 4, *sed contra*; cited by Kretzmann (634).

³⁰ Kretzmann, "Goodness, Knowledge, and Indeterminacy," 634.

know and love each other (*ST Ia Q27*). Those relations are an "intrinsic diffusion" that satisfies GD_f . That is all Aquinas needs, if indeed he needs even that.³¹

To be sure, Kretzmann does adduce a passage from the *De Veritate* to try to prove that Aquinas thinks God must create something-or-other: "[God's] goodness has no need of things that are ordered to it *except as a manifestation of it*, which can be appropriately accomplished in various ways. *And so there remains for him a free judgment for willing this one or that one*, just as in our own case" (*De Ver. Q24 A3*).³² But this need only be interpreted as: If God manifests his goodness, then he must produce some-thing-or-other, though not anything in particular, that is ordered to it. To insist now that, for Aquinas, the persons of the Trinity must collectively diffuse the divine goodness *ad extra* by efficient causation, not merely severally diffuse it *ad intra* by final causation, would just be marching on the spot.

If Aquinas is both consistent and right in implying that God need not create anything at all, then the world has been produced by an act of perfect liberality. There is thus *sufficient reason for God to create, but no reason for him to create rather than not*. For no matter what God creates, what he ultimately intends thereby is already fulfilled just by his own existence. We might well say, with Miss Anscombe, that God creates out of "sheer exuberance." The question why the world exists is fully answered by a mystery.

³¹ He did not seem convinced he needed such a *deus ex revelatione*: in subsequent writings, he does not invoke such Trinitarian considerations in order to defend GD_f . Perhaps he thought that the *ad intra* diffusion required by GD_f is effected by the necessary ordering of God's will to his goodness as its principal object. If so, then he can be interpreted as adopting a still weaker version of GD_f than I have so far been considering. That version would *a fortiori* preserve the consistency of his overall account.

³² As John Wippel has pointed out to me, comparing editions of the original Latin helps here. The Latin that Kretzmann quotes, and translates by "except as a manifestation of it," is from the Marietti edition and reads *nisi eius ad manifestandam*. But the Leonine edition reads *nisi eius manifestationem*. The gerundive-with-*ad* construction in the first reading allows the translation, "unless his goodness is to be manifested," which would accord well with Kretzmann's interpretation. The second reading does not admit this translation and does not suggest Kretzmann's interpretation.