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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Mark, "Aquinas's Changing Evaluation of Plato on Creation" (1992). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 884.

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American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Winter 1992): 81-88. [DOI](#). This article is © Philosophical Documentation Center and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Philosophical Documentation Center does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without express permission from Philosophical Documentation Center.

Aquinas's Changing Evaluation of Plato on Creation

Mark Johnson

In an article published a few years back in this journal, I suggested that, despite longstanding claims made by some, St. Thomas Aquinas does attribute a doctrine of creation to Aristotle.¹ From the outset of his writing career, when he wrote his *Scriptum* on Book 2 of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*,² to its end, when he wrote his expositions on Aristotle and his own *De substantiis separatis*,³ he maintained that Aristotle held for a first, solitary cause of being for all things—which Thomas takes to be a doctrine of creation—but that the Philosopher also claimed that the causal dependence of all things upon that cause was eternal. In short, Thomas thinks that Aristotle had a doctrine of eternal creation, and in disputing the latter's teaching he only takes issue with the claim for eternity and its demonstrability with regard to creation, and not, of course, with the claim of total dependence in being. After all, the description of creation as the total dependence in being of all things upon a solitary first cause is Thomas's own.⁴

In many of the places in Thomas's writings where he discusses the philosophers on creation, particularly Aristotle, he also mentions the doctrine of Plato in this regard. My suspicion had been that Thomas's evaluation of Plato with regard to creation may have changed, unlike his constant thinking regarding Aristotle, but I did little more than suggest this in passing in a footnote.⁵ It now seems certain to me that Thomas did significantly change his mind about whether Plato held a doctrine of creation,

and in the remainder of this short note I would like to point this out. In the course of doing so I shall also present a new text on this matter from Thomas's recently discovered Roman commentary on Book 1 of the *Sentences*.⁶

At the outset of his career in the early 1250's, and in the same place in his *Scriptum* on Book 2 of the *Sentences* where he first attributes a doctrine of creation to Aristotle, Thomas maintains that Plato held that there was a God who made things, but that this God made things from a pre-existent stuff.⁷ Thomas also attributes this teaching to Anaxagoras, about whom, of course, Lombard had said nothing regarding creation.⁸ He continues to hold this judgment until at least the early 1260's, where he repeats it in his short work, the *De articulis fidei et ecclesiae sacramentis*. In the context of listing six errors that have occurred concerning the Catholic faith's teaching regarding the creation of things, Thomas again lists Plato along with Anaxagoras, claiming that these two held that the world's composition came from God, but not its matter.⁹ Interestingly, in another treatise of the same kind, Thomas's *Expositio super primam decretalem*, and one as well from his Italian sojourn, he has another occasion to discuss errors concerning creation. But while he speaks of Aristotle and the error of his positing an eternal creation, he says nothing of Plato, even though he does discuss the very error he had attributed to both Plato and Anaxagoras in the *De articulis fidei et ecclesiae sacramentis*, and which he again attributed to Anaxagoras here: the positing of a God who makes things from a pre-existent matter, uncreated by God.¹⁰ One is understandably tempted to suggest that Thomas has his doubts about his earlier evaluation of Plato. And in fact Plato's absence is conspicuous, given both Thomas's erstwhile consistency in naming him as holding the same error as that of Anaxagoras, and given his own immediate goal in the *Expositio super primam decretalem*, which is to list errors concerning creation and the names of those who held them. This absence has led me elsewhere to propose tentatively a more refined dating of 1262–1264 for the work, which is otherwise usually dated anywhere from 1261 to 1269.¹¹ But in any case a dating after 1265–1266 would be after an important intervening development.

This development, which could until now only have been pointed out first in Thomas's disputed questions *De potentia* (1265–1266), is simply that Thomas changed his mind about Plato, and began to believe that the philosopher held that the being of all things depended upon a single first principle, a cause of being for all things. In the context of a discussion of creation and with the teachings of past philosophers regarding it, Thomas gives a historical overview of possible opinions, and in the end groups Aristotle and Plato together, along with their followers, saying that these came to a consideration of universal being itself, and that on this account they maintained a universal cause of things, from which all other things came forth into being, a teaching, Thomas thinks, that is consonant with that of the Catholic faith.¹² This formula for presenting creation is Thomas's own¹³ and is the one he continues to employ in subsequent discussion of philosophers and creation.¹⁴

Another such attribution on Thomas's part, and one from around the same time, but from an unusual context, is the one found in his recently discovered Roman commentary on Book 1 of the *Sentences*, which is what remains of lectures he gave at Santa Sabina in Rome in the middle 1260's. Book 1 of Lombard's work is not, of course, the place for discussions of creation, but, in Thomas's discussion of God, there is a text that more or less duplicates what is said in the *De potentia*. In an article asking whether human reason can come to a knowledge of the Trinity, an objected difficulty claimed that it

can come to such a knowledge. Augustine had claimed that he discerned by natural reason all that was contained in the Gospel of John from the beginning to the passage "and the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14), and the Trinity of persons is found there. Now Plato had this knowledge—the argument did not substantiate this—only by means of natural reason, and so it seems possible that human reason can come to a knowledge of the Trinity.¹⁵ In his response Thomas is compelled, of course, to deny that Plato came by human reason to a knowledge of the Trinity—for Thomas this is impossible. But he is willing to suggest that Plato had something to say that he and Christians hold in common. Plato, he thinks, maintained there to be a single first being, which is the cause of being for all things—a God and father of the whole universe of things. This first being created a divine mind beneath himself, and in that divine mind were the ideas. This is not the Trinity of faith, and for this reason Augustine did not really find the Trinity through natural reason, but something similar.¹⁶

Although the doctrinal setting of this new text from the Roman commentary is the knowability of the Trinity, it is important to note that while Plato's presence in the article is doctrinally incidental, what Thomas says about the teaching of Plato is markedly different from his more youthful judgment. Here in the Roman commentary, as in the *De potentia*—it is difficult to date the two relative to one another—Thomas maintains that Plato taught that the very being of all things depends upon a single first being. And again, to speak in this way is to speak of creation.

Thomas never revoked this judgment. It is true that in 1266 or so he speaks with apparent caution in some texts in the *Prima pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*,¹⁷ but in his exposition on the *Physics*, which dates from 1271,¹⁸ and in his *De substantiis separatis*, which dates from around 1272,¹⁹ he was clear in his conviction that Plato held for a first cause upon which all other things depended for their existence. In short, whereas in Thomas's earlier writings Plato was linked together with Anaxagoras in holding for a God that makes the universe out of pre-existent, uncreated matter, in Thomas's later writings Plato is linked together with Aristotle, to whom Thomas consistently attributes a doctrine of creation.²⁰

It is beyond the scope of this short note to suggest in any detail what led Thomas to change his thinking regarding Plato. There is, of course, no authoritative citation of a writing of Plato that Thomas provides along with his new teaching about him. But a possibility may be that Thomas, early in his Italian sojourn, was able to read the relevant passages in Augustine's *De civitate dei*, where the latter speaks so highly of Plato, and his teaching regarding what Augustine took to be a creator God. It was in Italy, and in a text from his disputed question *De potentia* (1265), one notes, that Thomas invokes the authority of Augustine after discussing Plato and creation. And the suggestion that Thomas's teaching on a matter changes after a fuller encounter with Augustine has been made before, though in markedly different contexts.²¹

In the early 1260's, then, perhaps on the basis of the authority of Augustine, or at least together with textual support that coincided with some thinking that arose from other sources, Thomas takes a more benign view of the teaching of Plato on creation. Nor was Plato the only beneficiary of this benignity, since in a startling passage in the *Summa contra gentiles* Thomas allows that the ancient naturalists may themselves have come to a doctrine of creation.²² In any case, it seems clear that Thomas does change his mind about Plato, and attributes to him a teaching he had attributed to Aristotle all along: a doctrine of eternal creation. The question of the philosophical legitimacy of such an attribution immediately urges itself, but only after the establishment of this historical fact.

Notes

- 1 Mark F. Johnson, "Did St. Thomas Attribute a Doctrine of Creation to Aristotle?," *The New Scholasticism* 63 (1989): 129–55. For the sake of convenience, all citations will first be given in full, and thereafter in abbreviated form. References to Thomas's writings will likewise be given first in full, and thereafter according to standard form. The dating throughout is that of J. A. Weisheipl, as found in a chapter entitled "A Brief Catalogue of Authentic Works," pp. 355–405 of his *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought and Works*, 2nd ed. with *corrigenda* and *addenda* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1983). Note that Weisheipl changed his view as to the dating of certain works. See the appropriate pages in the *corrigenda* and *addenda*, pp. 465–87.
- 2 See Johnson, "Did St. Thomas Attribute...?," pp. 131–38.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 146–53.
- 4 See *In II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 2, in corp., in *S. Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia*, vol. 1, ed. R. Busa (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980), p. 123: "Hoc autem creare dicimus, scilicet producere rem in esse secundum totam suam substantiam." John F. Wippel, in his "Thomas Aquinas on the Possibility of Eternal Creation," in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), pp. 191–214, maintains that it was in his *De aeternitate mundi*, usually dated during his second regency at the University of Paris (1269–1273), that Thomas first held the possibility of an eternal creation. See *ibid.*, p. 213: "As regards the major concern of this study, therefore, in my opinion Thomas Aquinas did not clearly defend the possibility of eternal creation or of an eternally created world prior to his *De aeternitate mundi*." One might grant all of Fr. Wippel's claim, but to my mind other important questions remain. First, the later dating of the *De aeternitate mundi* is anything but certain, and to my mind there still exists the possibility of its being a product of Thomas's first Parisian regency—see the most recent article of the most ardent defender of this position, Thomas P. Bukowski's "Rejecting Mandonnet's Dating of St. Thomas's *De aeternitate mundi*," *Gregorianum* 71 (1990): 763–75.

Second, even granted a later dating for the *De aeternitate mundi*, one would still have to note that Thomas attributed a doctrine of eternal creation to Aristotle from one of his earliest works, his *Scriptum* on Book 2 of the *Sentences* (ca 1253?), onwards. If such a doctrine was perhaps of dubious intellectual coherence for him at that point in his career, then would not he have said so in his evaluation of Aristotle, especially at a time when Aristotle's role in the question of the eternity of the world was so pivotal? In short, if Aristotle's maintaining of the eternity of creation did not, to Thomas's mind, vitiate the fact that he did hold for creation, then does not that amount to at least an implicit admission of the possibility of an eternal creation? See *In II Sent.*, d. 1, *expositio textus*: "Ad quod [dictum Magistri dicentis Aristotelem plura principia posuisse] dicendum quod Aristoteles non erravit in ponendo plura principia, quia posuit esse omnium tantum a primo principio dependere, et ita relinquitur unum esse primum principium.

Erravit autem in positione aeternitatis mundi." For a presentation of why Thomas is able to see such a teaching in Aristotle, along with a defense of the plausibility of creation's being compatible with Aristotle, see Lawrence Dewan, "St. Thomas, Aristotle, and Creation," forthcoming in *Dionysius* 15 (1991).

- 5 Johnson, "Did St. Thomas Attribute?", p. 154, note 56. For some background on how philosophers were evaluated with respect to creation, particularly by Albert, see Lawrence Dewan, "St. Albert, Creation, and the Philosophers," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 40 (1984): 295–307, especially pp. 295–96, and note 6.
- 6 Thomas lectured on Book 1 of the *Sentences* during his tenure at Santa Sabina in Rome in the mid-1260's. A student report, or *reportatio*, of these Roman lectures survives, and is now called somewhat misleadingly "the Roman commentary"—"misleadingly," because we are not at all sure whether Thomas ever intended the classroom lectures to result in a written work, or that he ever reviewed and corrected the student's report, thus making it an *ordinatio*. For an account of this *reportatio* or "Roman commentary" on Book 1 of the *Sentences*, along with a transcribed list of the new texts to be found in it, see my "*Alia lectura fratris thome: A List of the New Texts of St. Thomas Aquinas found in Lincoln College, Oxford, MS. Lat. 95*," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 57 (1990): 34–61.
- 7 Thomas's comments there arise from the claim made by Lombard about Plato and the Christian teaching of creation. See Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in iv libros distinctae*, lib. 2, dist. 1, cap. 1, no. 1, ed. I. Brady (Grottaferrata [Rome]: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae Ad Claras Aquas, 1971), tomus 1, pars 2, p. 330: "Plato namque tria initia existimavit, Deum scilicet, et exemplar, et materiam; et ipsa increata, sine principio, et Deum quasi artificem, non creatorem." Thomas agrees with the teaching of Lombard. See his *In II Sent.*, d. 1, *expositio textus*, where he clarifies this after providing a lemma from Lombard: "*Plato namque tria initia existimavit: sciendum quod in hoc Plato erravit, quia posuit formas exemplares per se subsistentes extra intellectum divinum, et neque ipsas neque materiam a Deo esse habere.*"
- 8 *Ibid.*, d. 1, q. 1, a. 1, *in fine corp.*: "Tertius error fuit eorum qui posuerunt agens et materiam, sed agens non esse principium materiae, quamvis sit unum tantum agens. Et haec est opinio Anaxagorae et Platonis: nisi quod Plato superaddidit tertium principium, scilicet ideas separatas a rebus, quas exemplaria dicebat; et nullam esse causam alterius, sed per haec tria causari mundum, et res ex quibus mundus constat."
- 9 See *De articulis fidei et ecclesiae sacramentis*, in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia*, ed. Leonine (Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1979), vol. 42, p. 246: "Secundus error est Platonis et Anaxagore, qui posuerunt mundum factum a Deo sed ex materia preiacenti; contra quos dicitur in Psalmo 'Mandavit et creata sunt,' id est ex nichilo facta."
- 10 See *Expositio super primam decretalem*, in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia*, ed. Leonine (Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1968), vol. 40, p. E35: "Alius [error] fuit Anaxagorae qui posuit quidem mundum a Deo factum ex aliquo principio temporis, sed tamen materiam mundi ab aeterno praeevitisse et non esse eam factam a Deo, cum tamen Apostolus dicat ad Rom. iv: 17 'Qui vocat ea quae non sunt tamquam ea quae sunt'; et ad hoc excludendum addit *de nihilo*." Note how the focus in this criticism is upon *ex nihilo*, just as it was in the *De articulis fidei et ecclesiae sacramentis*, cited in the previous note.

- 11 Our knowledge of the circumstances surrounding this work, which is a commentary upon the creed *Firmiter* of Lateran IV, extends only to the addressee, Gifredus d'Anagni the Archdeacon of Todi, who held that position during the entire 1260's—hence the traditional, wide-ranging dating from 1261–1269, when Thomas left Italy for Paris. See the late H. F. Dondaine's editorial introduction, *ibid.*, p. 6. See also Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas*, pp. 393–94. For more on this, see my "A Note on the Dating of St. Thomas Aquinas's *Expositio super primam et secundam decretalem*" forthcoming in *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 59 (1992).
- 12 See *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 5, in corp., in *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Questiones Disputatae*, ed. P. Pession (Turin: Marietti, 1965), vol. 2, p. 49: "Postiores vero philosophi, ut Plato, Aristoteles et eorum sequaces, pervenerunt ad considerationem ipsius esse universalis; et ideo ipsi soli posuerunt aliquam universalem causam rerum, a qua omnia alia in esse prodirent, ut patet per Augustinum...cui quidem sententiae etiam catholica fides consentit." The reference is to Augustine's *De civitate dei*, lib. 8, cap. 4.
- 13 See, for instance, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 44, aa. 1–2, and q. 45, a. 2, in corp., in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Summa theologiae*, ed. Paulinae (Rome: Editiones Paulinae, 1960), p. 222: "...nihil potest esse in entibus quod non sit a Deo, qui est causa universalis totius esse." See also *Compendium theologiae* I, cc. 68–70.
- 14 An aside on the interpretation of *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 2. Because of an amazingly influential footnote in Etienne Gilson's *L'Esprit de la philosophie médiévale* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1932), vol. 1, pp. 240–42, cited authoritatively in Ignatius Eschmann's *apparatus fontium* to this article in the Ottawa edition of the *Summa theologiae* in 1953—the entire *apparatus* was later lifted and inserted verbatim into the Pauline edition of 1960—it has become customary to read this text as though Thomas is denying that Plato and Aristotle held a doctrine of creation. In the text, Thomas speaks of three sets of philosophers and the various modes of causality they discerned. Aristotle and Plato are mentioned in the second set of philosophers. When Thomas later says that each (*utrique*) considered being from a particular point of view, and not from a universal point of view, which he finds necessary to any sound discussion of the causing of prime matter, Gilson took the *utrique* to be a direct reference to Aristotle and Plato, which is a mistranslation of the Latin, since Thomas would have to use *uterque* for that. The *utrique* refers instead to the two sets of philosophers discussed to that point, and Aristotle and Plato, though named in the second group, need not be confined to the mode of philosophical consideration it exercised. And in fact Thomas does not so confine the two in the other pertinent texts in this issue, texts to which Gilson either did not refer, or did not read correctly, since his misreading of *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 44, a. 2, was for him the rule against which all other such texts were measured, even the just-cited *De potentia* q. 3, a. 5., in corp., which is explicit in attributing a doctrine of creation to both Plato and Aristotle.

Also, to my mind far too much has been made of this article's character as a "history of philosophy." Such emphasis suggests that the mentioning of particular names formed an integral part of Thomas's task as a teacher in the text, which cannot be true. Thomas's concern here is with the difficulty in showing how prime matter can be said to be caused, given that the causality that we usually encounter is such that it presupposes the existence of matter. The way to do this, in Thomas's mind, is to lead his student *pededentim* from particular causes, through

less particular, more universal causes, to a universal cause, thus gradually stripping causality of the notion of particularity that it possesses in our common experience. His obligation is, if anything, to mention the most particular causes, as he does when mentioning "strife" and "friendship," then the more universal causes, as he does when mentioning the "ecliptic circle" and the "forms," and finally the most universal cause, as he does when mentioning God. The names of the particular philosophers who posited the various causes Thomas employs in his teaching are quite incidental to his goal here. Still less could Thomas's incidental mention of a philosopher's name mean that he confines that philosopher to the group under discussion when the name is mentioned. And in fact, for Thomas, Aristotle belonged to all *three groups* under discussion here, since the latter posited particular causes for accidental changes, more universal causes for substantial changes—*homo generat hominem, et sol*—and, as Thomas sees it, a single, most universal cause of the most universal effect, being. The same can be said for Plato, though it took Thomas some time to make this judgment.

- 15 I have listed this text as no. 24 in Johnson, "Alia lectura fratris Thome," p. 46. Here is my transcription from Lincoln College, Oxford, MS Lat. 95, fol. 13v *in calce*: "Ad tertium sic proceditur. Videtur quod per rationes naturales possit deueniri in cognitionem trinitatis personarum in diuinis. Augustinus enim dicit uii *Confessionum* se inuenisse totum quod habetur in principio Iohannis usque ad *uerbum caro factum est*. Set in illis ponitur personarum distinctio. Ergo cum non habuit hoc Plato nisi naturali cognitione, uidetur quod naturali cognitione deueniatur in cognitionem trinitatis."
- 16 See *ibid.*: "Ad primum ergo dicendum quod Plato se habet ita in libris suis sicut nos habemus. Ipse enim posuit unum primum ens, quod est causa omnibus rebus esse, deum et patrem / (fol. 14r *in calce*) totius uniuersitatis rerum. Et posuit mentem diuinam sub ipso, et dixit eam creaturam esse dei, et in ipsa mente posuit ydeas. Et cum non sit ponere trinitatem, nec inuenit Augustinus, sicut ponit fides, set aliquid simile."
- 17 In question 15, article 3, on the divine ideas, Thomas discussed whether all the things God knows are divine ideas. In this context Thomas repeats the claims of some—Lombard and Calcidius—that Plato held that prime matter was uncreated. See *ibid.*, ad 3: "Dicendum quod Plato, *secundum quosdam*, posuit materiam non creatam.,"; and *ibid.*, ad 4: "...per materiam, quam [Plato] ponebat esse incretam, *ut quidam dicunt...*" (my italics).
- 18 In his exposition on Book 8 of the *Physics*, Thomas treats of the question of creation because of Averroes's attack upon the intelligibility of creation, and in this context he again mentions Plato along with Aristotle. See *In VIII Physicorum*, lect. 2, ed. P. Maggiòlo (Turin: Marietti, 1965), p. 506, no. 975: "Quod etiam [Averroes] introducit de antiquis philosophorum opinionibus, efficaciam non habet: quia antiqui naturales non potuerunt pervenire ad causam primam totius esse, sed considerabant causas particularium mutationum. Quorum primi consideraverunt causas solarum mutationum accidentalium, ponentes omne fieri esse alterari: sequentes vero pervenerunt ad cognitionem mutationum substantialium: postremi vero, ut Plato et Aristoteles, pervenerunt ad cognoscendum principium totius esse." See also *ibid.*, no. 974: "Sicut ergo si intelligamus rerum productionem esse a Deo ab seterno, sicut Aristoteles posuit, et plures Platoniorum..." Does Thomas mean to include Plato here in this latter text when he speaks of the *Platonici*? It is hard to say, but, when seen in light of his attribution to Plato of a doctrine of

total dependence in being upon a single first cause, there is good reason to think so. See also *ibid.*, no. 981.

- 19 *De substantiis separatis*, cap. 9, in *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Opera Omnia* (Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1968), vol. 40 p. D58: "Non ergo aestimandum est quod Plato et Aristoteles, propter hoc quod posuerunt substantias immateriales seu etiam caelestia corpora semper fuisse, eis subtraxerunt causam essendi; non enim in hoc a sententia fidei deviarunt quod huiusmodi posuerunt increata, sed quia posuerunt ea semper fuisse: cuius contrarium fides catholica tenet."
- 20 Even in his unfinished exposition on Aristotle's *De caelo*, which dates from after June 15, 1271, when William of Moerbeke finished translating the commentary of Simplicius that so influenced Thomas, Thomas continues to read Plato as holding that the being of the world depends upon a higher cause, despite the fact that his use of the word "generation" would seem, on the surface, to suggest an "out of which." See *In I de caelo*, lects. 6, 22 and 29, in *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis in libros Aristotelis de caelo et mundo, de generatione et corruptione, meteorologicorum expositio*, ed. R. Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1952), p. 30, no. 61; p. 109, no. 228; and p. 138, no. 283.
- 21 Henri Bouillard, in his *Conversion et grace chez St. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Aubier, 1941), argued that a change in Thomas's teaching on man's preparation for grace may well have been brought about by a first, complete reading of Augustine's writings against the Semi-Pelagians, where Thomas saw that the teachings against which Augustine argued were disturbingly like his own! More recently D. Juvenal Merriell, *To the Image of the Trinity: A Study in the Development of Aquinas' Teaching* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), has argued that Thomas's treatment of the image of the Trinity in man deepens as he appropriates the doctrine contained in Augustine's *De trinitate*.
- 22 See *Summa contra gentiles*, lib. 2, cap. 37, in *S. Thomae Aquinatis Liber de Veritate Catholicae Fidei contra Errores Infidelium*, ed. C. Pera and D. P. Marc (Turin: Marietti, 1961), vol. 2, pp. 152–53, no. 1130: "Et hanc quidem factionem [totius entis] non attigerunt primi naturales, quorum erat communis sententia ex nihilo nihil fieri. Vel, si qui eam attigerunt, non proprie nomen factionis ei competere consideraverunt, cum nomen factionis motum vel mutationem importet, in hac autem totius entis origine ab uno primo ente intelligi non potest transmutatio unius entis in aliud...."