CHAPTER 9

The Dissolution of Creation

Ask what there was before God made the world. The traditional answer is nothing, except God. Notice what that answer gives away. If God was there, then something was there. So whatever God did, it was never the bringing of being out of a state with none in it.

The doctrine under examination is creation ex nihilo, creation from nothing: God brought the universe into being from the complete absence of anything. The chapter cuts it in two. One half is origination, the claim that being was produced where there had been none. The other half is dependence, the claim that the world owes its whole being to God. Origination is incoherent, the chapter argues, and dependence comes through untouched.

It is open about which argument does the work. Three ways of picturing creation as a passage out of non-being each fail. But the developed traditions do not picture creation that way. Reaching them takes a separate argument, given below.

Three pictures of a passage out of non-being

Suppose creation is a transition: a passage from a state of non-being to a state of being. Then there are exactly three ways to fill that picture in. Either non-existence itself causes being. Or being appears with no cause at all. Or an existing agent causes being out of non-existence.

Take the first. Non-existence is the absence of everything, including the capacity to do anything. Asking it to produce being asks a state with no capacities to exercise one.

Take the second. Creation is a kind of change, and change needs the capacity to change. That capacity is exactly what the earlier state was supposed to lack. So the transition needs, before it starts, the very thing it was meant to produce.

Take the third, the religious one. God, existing for ever, brings the universe out of nothing. If God exists, God has being. A state that contains God is a state in which being is present. That is the absence of non-being.

The doctrine the three pictures miss

Here the chapter makes a concession. All three pictures share one assumption, that creation is a transition, and the developed traditions do not hold it. For Thomas Aquinas, restated today by Edward Feser, creation is not a change at all. No subject passes from one state to another, and the Latin phrase means not out of anything. What is asserted is that God causes the whole being of the world, in a dependence that may even be eternal. Treating the three arguments as the end of the matter would be, in the chapter’s words, to “win an argument the tradition is not having”.

So the chapter reaches that doctrine by another road, the agent dilemma. Causing requires an agent, something that acts, and acting requires internal structure. Either the agent has that structure, in which case it is one being among others, and its act rearranges a reality that already includes it. Or the agent is the simple ultimate source of all being, with no internal distinctions at all. On that side a constraint from Chapter 6 applies, and the agent has no dispositions, no intentions and no agency. There is no third place to stand, because any agent either bears internal distinctions or lacks them.

Either way, the word creation names dependence or it names transformation. It never names the bringing of being out of non-being. The dilemma is the one thing that stops the dependence doctrine from silently taking back the origination it had given up. Closing the second horn in full is a debt owed to Chapter 10.

One reply must be answered first. The theist objects that creation works upon nothing, so words like transformation assume what the doctrine denies. The chapter answers with the totality argument. Any act by an existing agent works on at least the whole of reality, and that whole includes the agent. The whole after the act, God and world, differs from the whole before, God alone. A whole containing God was never non-being. Now suppose the dependence is eternal, with no before. Then imagine the act away. What is left is God alone, which is still being. So on no reading is non-being a term of the act.

What theism’s own premises give

A second argument uses only what the theist already believes. It is aimed at every version of the doctrine that keeps an origination component. The pure dependence reading was met above, by the agent dilemma. Theism holds that God is eternal, so God has always existed. If God has always existed, non-existence has never obtained. If non-existence has never obtained, no passage out of it ever took place. What the traditions call creation is therefore better described as transformation, one form of being turned into another. The chapter says this section mainly clears the ground for Chapter 10.

The redescription has two readings, and they are different theologies with different costs. On the first, what gets diversified is the whole that includes God. Nothing here makes the world out of God. Read as dependence, this is the mature doctrine under a licensed name. On the second reading, God transforms undifferentiated being itself. The book calls that state equality, meaning being with no internal distinctions at all. Such a state has no features for an intention to select among. Chapter 10 closes that route in full.

Leibniz’s question, divided

Now the famous question. Why is there something and not nothing? The question assumes that non-existence is the default alternative, so that something’s existing needs explaining. Non-existence cannot coherently obtain, because its obtaining would be its own negation. Being has always

obtained, either as endless diversity or as equality. So the question is ill-formed as asked.

A better question survives: why is being differentiated instead of undifferentiated? On the branch where time's series has a boundary, that question splits. Its mechanism side is closed off, since equality has no features an explanation could use. Its obtaining side is a gap, which the chapter owns as one bare fact. On the branch where diversity has always existed, the question does not arise. The chapter calls this a disambiguation with a remainder.

The objections the chapter answers

The first objection comes from omnipotence. God can do anything logically possible, so why not this? The chapter replies that creation from nothing is incoherent, in the way a contradiction is. The usual account of omnipotence already leaves contradictions out. Some theologians, Descartes among them, hold that God can do even the logically impossible. If omnipotence is understood that broadly, the chapter's argument does not constrain it. But then no argument could be trusted, the chapter adds, even one for God's existence. Most theologians accept the logical limit to keep theology rational.

The second objection says the chapter gives the theist too much, since transforming being would still be a remarkable act. The chapter answers that the concession is deliberate, and that it denies only origination.

The third objection, the chapter says, has found the argument's load-bearing joint. This is the vehicle premise: a possibility is a way reality could be. A primitivist about possibility holds that "possibly, nothing exists" can be true with nothing to carry it, and nothing making it true. Then the chapter's conversion of nothing into equality never begins. Describe the possibility, and a condition with no internal distinction has been supplied, which is equality if it obtains. Decline every description, and the clause rules nothing in and nothing out. The chapter admits that the premise can be refused without self-defeat, and that the objection marks the boundary of its claim.

What the chapter claims

Every result here is graded *established*, the rung below the book's top mark, which is *self-vindicating*. *Established* means validly derived from premises the book defends, so a challenger has to reject one of them.

That creation pictured as a passage out of non-being is incoherent is *established*. The chapter adds that this result, on its own, does not reach the doctrine the developed traditions hold.

The redescription of creation as transformation is *established* by two routes against two opponents. Against views keeping an origination component, the route is God's eternity. Against pure dependence readings, it is the agent dilemma, which borrows from Chapter 6 and owes a forward debt to Chapter 10. A second condition comes with it, since the support runs through the end of

the grounding hierarchy. The result holds only if that hierarchy terminates, and whether equality is possible at all stays open.

A third result comes from a principle the tradition holds itself: nothing gives what it in no way has. The world has differences in it, so a source of the world had difference, and a source of difference is not simple. That is *established*, and the step leans on a fork drawn in Chapter 10. A Thomist who denies that holding something always marks the holder can reject the step. Chapter 10 states the cost: her source cannot be both featureless and specific to each kind of thing.

The disambiguation of Leibniz's question, with its remainder owned, is *established*. It leans on the two-names result of Chapter 3, so a critic who collapses equality into non-existence can resist it. The cost, Chapter 4 argued, is losing any ground without distinctions. That leaves only endless diversity or unexplained differences at the base. The vehicle premise under it is *established* too. The premise can be refused without self-defeat, so the result is not *self-vindicating*.

Chapter 10 takes up the other old route to a divine origin. It asks whether one thing can be both the ground of everything and a maximally intelligent agent.