

Thomas Aquinas on Creation, and the Argument for Theistic Evolution from *Commentary on Sentences, Book II*¹

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Abstract: For years Thomists have been using the argument from *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences* by Thomas Aquinas to defend theistic evolution. This trend was initiated with Dalmace Leroy's attempt to combine Christianity and evolution. The paper evaluates the argument in the light of two Christian interpretative traditions regarding Genesis account of creation. One comes from St. Ambrose another from St. Augustine. Thomas Aquinas evaluates both traditions, however, as neither of them is compatible with theistic evolution. The paper shows that the Thomistic argument for theistic evolution stems from misreading of Aquinas and shows that theistic evolution is incompatible with both Christian traditions regarding the manner of creation.

A Dominican and Theistic Evolution

In 1891 French Dominican Dalmace Leroy published a book entitled *Evolution Limited to Organic Species*. Its main idea was to defend the possibility of accepting biological macroevolution by Catholics as long as the Divine action in the process is not denied. Leroy's idea was not new. There were a few Catholic authors before him who endorsed similar opinions, but they usually faced negative evaluation of their views by Church congregations and the community of theologians. What was the core of their concept?

According to Leroy God could have used evolution as an instrumental cause to produce new species. Thus, Leroy did not defend the Darwinian idea of evolution understood as a purely materialistic process working through chance variations and natural selection alone. Leroy allowed God's cooperation in the production of new species, though he didn't explained how exactly God was to work. The concept of evolution

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somehow guided by God already in the 19th century was named “theistic evolution.” There were three basic ideas in theistic evolution:

1. Evolution cannot happen without God, but it still is a natural process, which doesn’t demand any supernatural interventions or activity on God’s part.
2. Evolution is understood as biological macroevolution, which means that all living beings have one or a few (polyphyletic evolution) common ancestors, which are natural progenitors (“parents”) to all organisms inhabiting the earth.
3. This process is continuous, that is, it has never finished and completely new forms of living beings can still arise through the same biological processes.

Leroy’s book was shortly denounced to the Congregation of the Index. The Congregation asked father Teofilo Domenichelli, a Franciscan, to examine the book and provide his opinion of the book should be proscribed or not. He submitted his 27-page report in August 1894. Although the Roman expert had some reservations, fortunately for Leroy, in his overall assessment he favored not banning the book. One of Domenichelli’s arguments to justify Leroy’s work was based on Thomas Aquinas’s teaching, specifically, a fragment of *Commentary on Peter Lombart’s Sentences, Book II*. Domenichelli claimed Aquinas taught there that it is not the *mode* or *way* of creation of the world that is essential to faith, but only the *fact* that the world was created. If the mode of world’s formation is just an accidental doctrine, it cannot be used against evolution (and, in fact, any other doctrine about the origins), unless evolution doesn’t exclude God’s causality. At least this was the logic of Domenichelli’s argument.

Since then many other Catholic scholars have quoted the same fragment to defend, promote or simply justify theistic evolution within the broader theological tradition. But the Congregation of the Index found Domenichelli’s report unsatisfactory. Could the Congregation have been skeptical of using the argument from Aquinas to reconcile evolution (understood as biological macroevolution) with Catholic tradition? In order to know the answer, we have to determine, what Aquinas really taught in his commentary to the *Sentences*.

Thomas Aquinas and *Commentary on the Sentences Book II*

Let's begin with the relevant quotation:

“It should be said that what pertains to faith is distinguished in two ways, for some are as such of the *substance of faith*, such that God is three and one, and the like, about which no one may licitly think otherwise. ... Other things are only *incidental to faith* insofar as they are treated in Scripture, ... such as many of the historical works [*multa historalia*]. On such matters even the saints disagree, explaining scripture in different ways.

Thus with respect to the beginning of the world something pertains to the substance of faith, namely that the world began to be by creation, and all the saints agree in this.

But *how* and *in what order* [*quo modo et ordine*] this was done pertains to faith only *incidentally* insofar as it is treated in scripture, the truth of which the saints save in the different explanations they offer.

For Augustine holds that at the very beginning of creation some things were distinguished according to their species in their proper nature, such as the elements, celestial bodies and spiritual substances, but others were [distinguished in their species] in seminal notions alone, such as animals, plants and men, all of which were produced in their proper nature in that work that God governs after it was constituted in the work of the six days. ... With respect to the distinction of things we ought to attend to the order of nature and doctrine, not to the order of time. ... Ambrose, however, and other saints hold the order of time is saved in the distinction of things. This is the more common opinion and seems more consonant with the text, but the first is more reasonable and better protects Sacred Scripture from the derision of infidels, ... and this opinion is more pleasing to me [*plus mihi placet*]. However—sustaining both—we should answer to all arguments.”²

Some scholars,³ referring to this utterance, drew conclusions which can be summarized in two points:

² Thomas Aquinas, *In II Sent*, Dist.12,q.1,a.2c. This is a modified translation of the one found in: *Thomas Aquinas: selected writings*, ed. and trans. with an introduction and notes by Ralph McInerney (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 91; <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/Sentences2.htm#12-1-2> (06.06.13).

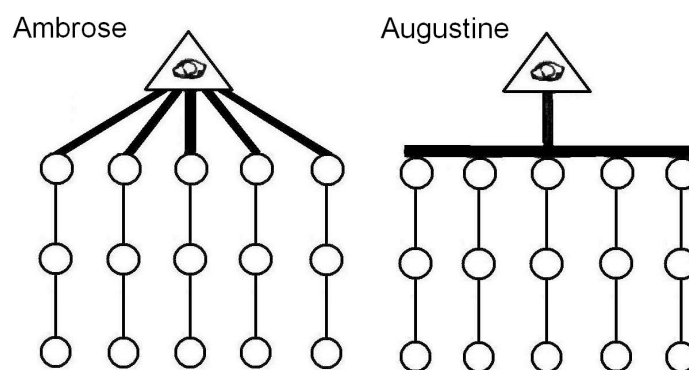
³ Cf. William E. Carroll, “Creation, Evolution, and Thomas Aquinas,” in *Revue des Questions Scientifiques* 171, no. 4 (2000): 319-347, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/science/sc0035.html> (06.06.2013). Piotr Lichacz, “Czy stworzenie wyklucza ewolucję?” in *Teologia św. Tomasza z Akwinu dzisiaj*,

1. Aquinas prefers the Augustinian interpretation of Genesis account to the Ambrosian one. In turn, the Augustinian concept of the origin of species is compatible (or, at least, doesn't exclude) theistic evolution. Therefore theistic evolution is compatible with Aquinas's teaching.
2. Since the mode (/manner) and order of creation is not essential to faith, God could have used evolution as an instrumental cause to produce different species of living beings.

Both claims, however, are based on misrepresentation of Aquinas's doctrine and thus unsatisfactory. In order to show it, we have to approach both claims with greater attention.

Two Christian Traditions According to Aquinas

In reply to the first claim, we need to ask what Aquinas really says in the quoted fragment. He says that there are two traditions in Christianity regarding interpretation of Genesis. One comes from Ambrose another from Augustine. The relevant question for us concerns the origin of species (understood as natural species or different natures of living beings). According to Ambrose species were created over time described in Genesis as "six days." According to Augustine, species were created all at once, but in a hidden form of seminal reasons (Lat. *rationes seminales*, Gr. *logoi spermatikoi*) which developed only later, during the course of time. These two Christian traditions can be depicted in the following schemas:



[Schema 1. Two Christian interpretive traditions for Genesis 1-2 account. Rings represent different species (understood as natural species or separate natures of living beings). Bold lines represent the

formation of species through God's direct and supernatural causation. Thin lines represent the generation, that is, reproduction, of subsequent organisms through secondary causation in nature.]

Aquinas points out advantages and disadvantages of both traditions. He says that the Ambrosian approach prevails among the Church Fathers and holy Doctors, and is more compatible with Scripture, but also more vulnerable to critics and ridicule by unbelievers. In contrast, the Augustinian approach is shared by a minority and is less compatible with Scripture, but it is more rational (*rationabilior*) and is more resistant to the attacks of infidels. It is only this “practical aspect,” namely, resistance to attacks of unbelievers, that makes Thomas say that he prefers Augustinian interpretation. Moreover, he doesn't draw any practical conclusions based on that preference. Instead, at the end he chooses to sustain both traditions and answer to all arguments against either of them. Thus, Aquinas's favor to Augustine's tradition stems mostly from its apologetic value and not its substantial content.

But even if Thomas favored the Augustinian tradition because of its content (the idea of simultaneous creation of all species), it could only help theistic evolution if Augustinian interpretation was really compatible or supportive to theistic evolution. Therefore we need to examine now, what is the relation between Augustinian approach and theistic evolution.

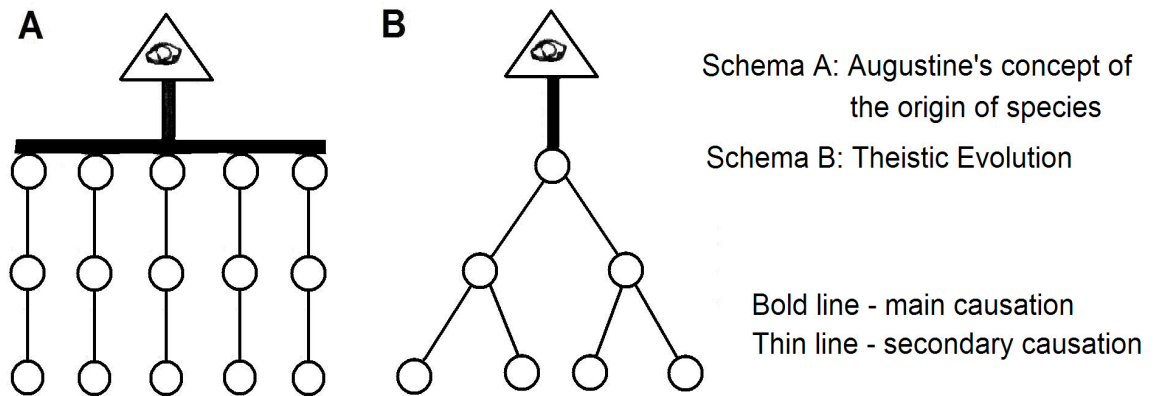
Augustinian Tradition and Theistic Evolution

Soon after Darwinian explanations gained popularity among scientists, some Catholic evolutionists (theistic evolutionists) attempted to show a kind of primordial evolutionary theory in Augustine's writings. If successful, they would have established a guiding thread for Christian evolutionism through the ages and Darwinism could not be called alien to Catholic theology. That is why in the early 20th century some Catholic philosophers have already called Augustine “the Father of Evolution.”⁴ As E. Gilson observed, however, Augustine and Darwin used the word “evolution” in substantially different senses.⁵ For the former evolution could mean only development of something which already existed in an “enveloped” form, for the latter evolution was a “creative” process which can produce virtually anything new in biology. In fact, Augustine spoke about the creation of all living beings in the beginning in a form of seminal reasons (*rationes seminales*). Whatever those seminal reasons meant for Augustine, it clearly contains no hint of universal common ancestry.

⁴ M. McKeough, *The Meaning of rationes seminales in St. Augustine* (PhD diss, Washington, D.C., 1926), 109-110. The idea of compatibility between Augustine's theology of creation and Darwinian evolution appeared in early 20th century in writings of Catholic scholars such as J.A Zahm, H. Dorlodot, E. Messenger.

⁵ E. Gilson, *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again*, trans. J. Lyon (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press 1984), p. 50-52, 87.

The substantial differences between Augustinian notion of creation and theistic evolution can be shown in the following schemas:



[Figure 2. According to Augustine, God created all beings in the beginning in one act, although some of them acquired their proper nature in the course of time, after creation was completed. Augustine's concept of creation (A) contradicts universal common ancestry as well as the production of new species (understood as completely new natures) through secondary causation.]

Augustine, as well as Thomas, strongly opposed the idea that one nature can be changed into a totally new nature through accidental change. Accidental change can only lead to accidental differences, but turning one being into a being of totally new nature demands substantial change. Augustine explained this point in the following words:

“I attribute the creating and originating work which gave being to all natures to God [...]. And although the various mental emotions of a pregnant woman do produce in the fruit of her womb similar qualities—as Jacob with his peeled wands caused piebald sheep to be produced—yet the mother as little creates her offspring as she created herself. Whatever bodily or seminal causes, then, may be used for the production of things, either by the cooperation of angels, men, or the lower animals, or by sexual generation; and whatever power the desires and mental emotions of the mother have to produce in the tender and plastic foetus corresponding lineaments and colors; yet the natures themselves, which are thus variously affected, are the production of none but the most high God.”⁶

⁶ *De civitate Dei*, XII,25, op. cit., c. 374. Also the idea of the universe having possibly participated in creation was commented by St. Augustine: “We have nothing to do with those who do not believe that the divine mind made or cares for this world. As for those who believe their own Plato, that all mortal animals— among whom man holds the pre-eminent place, and is near to the gods themselves— were created not by that most high God who made the world, but by other lesser gods created by the Supreme, and exercising a delegated power under His control—if only those persons be delivered

Augustine knew that living beings, belonging to different natures, can be modified through different natural causes, but the natural formation of different natures of living beings exceeds capabilities of such causes. In contrast, according to theistic evolution all living natures came about through slow accumulation of minor accidental changes over time.

If Augustine's views is different from the evolutionary theories on the origin of species, then Aquinas's preference for Augustine's view is no argument in favor of theistic evolution. Moreover, if Aquinas is going to defend the Ambrosian tradition, which explicitly contradicts theistic evolution, then Thomas's stance cannot be consistent with theistic evolution. So we already have two reasons to refuse this defense of evolution from Christian theology: (1) The Augustinian tradition's incompatibility with theistic evolution and (2) The Ambrosian tradition's incompatibility with theistic evolution. Thus we cannot say that Thomas is consistent with theistic evolution.

This is the answer to the first argument given by theistic evolutionists based on Aquinas's *Commentary to Sentences Book II*. Now we shall approach the second argument.

What does *mode* and *order* mean in Aquinas's *Commentary*?

As we said before, some Thomists maintain that theistic evolution is compatible with Aquinas's teaching because the *mode* (or manner) and *order* of creation is not essential to faith. Of course, this is a *non sequitur*. Even if the way the world was formed is not substantial to Christian doctrine, it doesn't follow that Christian doctrine is compatible with theistic evolution, that is, with the idea of species being formed through natural causes. But the bigger problem with this argument is that it attributes to the two Latin words *modus* and *ordo* meaning that Aquinas did not intend.

The argument in question implies that because the *mode* or the *order* of the formation of the world is not substantial to faith, we can say that either species were formed supernaturally or they emerged through natural evolution—in other words, that both solutions would be equally compatible with longer Christian tradition. Analogical arguments are developed by some Biblical scholars, who claim that the Bible tells us only *that* the world was formed, but it doesn't tell us *how* God did it. Similarly, some philosophers of

from the superstition which prompts them to seek a plausible reason for paying divine honors and sacrificing to these gods as their creators, they will easily be disentangled also from this their error. For it is blasphemy to believe or to say (even before it can be understood) that any other than God is creator of any nature, be it never so small and mortal. And as for the angels, whom those Platonists prefer to call gods, although they do, so far as they are permitted and commissioned, aid in the production of the things around us, yet not on that account are we to call them creators, any more than we call gardeners the creators of fruits and trees". Ibid., XII, ch. 24.

nature say that it falls to science to answer the question of *how* the species emerged, whereas theology tells us only *that* ultimately the whole evolutionary process depends on God as the deeper, first or hidden cause.

But this reasoning contradicts what Aquinas says in the *Summa Theologiae*, when he returns to the presentation of two Christian traditions of Genesis interpretation. He says:

“If, however, these two explanations [Augustinian and Ambrosian] are looked at as referring to the mode of production, they will be found not greatly to differ, if the diversity of opinion existing on two points, as already shown between Augustine and other writers is taken into account” (*STb*. I,q.74,a.2c).

Thus, according to Thomas, Augustine’s explanation of the Scriptures does differ from other writers, but the differences between these two interpretations are not so significant. Specifically, there is no big difference in the understanding of how animals and plants emerge. Both traditions acknowledge that at the first production of things living species didn’t exist in their actual proper forms and both acknowledge that only God could have produced distinct natures.⁷ In fact, as Aquinas explains further, Augustinian teaching on the *mode* of origin of plants and animals boils down to the one held by the majority of saints (the Ambrosian tradition). It is evident when Thomas writes that the majority of saints agreed that animals and plants had been produced actually in the work of the six days of creation. Augustine, on the other hand, maintained that they were produced only potentially. “However”—says Thomas—“as far as he [Augustine] understands the work of the six days as something which happened simultaneously it follows that he maintains *the same mode* of production of

⁷ For example, Thomas disproved Avicenna’s and Aristotle’s opinion that secondary causes can take part in the production of new species: “This cannot stand . . . because, according to this opinion, the universality of things would not proceed from the intention of the first agent, but from the concurrence of many active causes; and such an effect we can describe only as being produced by chance. Therefore, the perfection of the universe, which consists of the diversity of things, would thus be a thing of chance, which is impossible” (*STb*, I,47,1,c). In another place Aquinas says that chance cannot be the cause of difference constituting species: “Those things whose distinction from one another is derived from their forms [and these are different natural species – M.Ch.] are not distinct by chance, although this is perhaps the case with things whose distinction stems from matter. Now, the distinction of species is derived from the form, and the distinction of singulars of the same species is from matter. Therefore, the distinction of things in terms of species cannot be the result of chance; but perhaps the distinction of certain individuals can be the result of chance” (*S:G*, II,39,3).

things.”⁸ Therefore, even if according to Augustine species were produced only potentially in the work of the six days and according to the majority of saints they were produced actually, the mode (i.e. the way) of their production is the same. In this respect, according to Thomas, Augustine didn’t differ from the rest of the holy writers. What is more, once the work of the six days was finished, nothing entirely new could emerge, specifically, it is not possible that any completely new natures of living beings could appear.⁹

So, how did Thomas understand the *mode and order* of the emergence of the universe? He himself gave an example of many historical issues (*multa historalia*) as those truths accidental to faith. Thus, it is not important for the faith how many people exactly gathered at the Mount of Beatitudes or where exactly Israel crossed the Red Sea. In the *Summa* he further explained that the difference between Augustine and other holy writers concerns their understanding of words like “light,” “earth,” “firmament.” For Augustine the creation of earth and water means the first creation of totally formless corporal matter (and only the subsequent creation of firmament and gathering of waters means that forms are impressed by God in corporal matter). Other saints, in contrast, by creation of earth and water understood creation of different elements of the world with their proper forms right from the beginning and only then their further distinction in the course of six days.

We see therefore, that when Thomas says the *mode or order* of formation is accidental to faith, he means either (1) the historical details of Genesis account or (2) the timeframe of the Genesis account (six days understood as one moment/day or six days as six natural days or some other period of time) or (3) the sequence of appearance of different beings in the universe. Applying this reasoning to the contemporary understanding of natural history, it would be accidental to faith, for instance, how long the formation of the universe lasted, whether six thousand, six million or six billion years. It would be also accidental whether flying reptiles appeared before or after crawling reptiles or dinosaurs. But neither of the Christian expositions challenged the direct and supernatural formation of species. Yet, according to the principle adopted by Aquinas himself, if all the saints agreed on the supernatural formation of species, this truth cannot be

⁸ Et hoc propter duo in quibus, exponendo, diversificatur Augustinus ab aliis, ut ex supra dictis patet. Primo.... Secundo autem differunt quantum ad productionem plantarum et animalium, quae alii ponunt in opere sex dierum esse producta in actu; Augustinus vero potentialiter tantum. In hoc ergo quod Augustinus ponit opera sex dierum esse simul facta, sequitur idem modus productionis rerum” (*STb*, I,q.74,a.2c).

⁹ “Something can be added every day to the perfection of the universe, as to the number of individuals, but not as to the number of species” (*STb*, I,q.118,a.3,ad2).

considered accidental to faith. Therefore theistic evolutionist's reasoning fails for two reasons:

1. Even if a doctrine about the origin of species were accidental to faith, it wouldn't follow that species were formed naturally.
2. The supernatural origin of species is not accidental to faith, because it was held by both traditions Augustinian and Ambrosian.

Summary

We now know that according to Aquinas, two traditional approaches to the biblical account of creation are not substantially different from each other. We also know that they are not different specifically when it comes to the manner of formation of species. In Augustine's terms they were created all simultaneously in the beginning of time in some hidden form. In Ambrose's terms, in turn, they were created over the course of time described in the Bible as six days. In both traditions, however, species were formed directly and supernaturally by God who acted as the first cause in the natural order. This position is substantially different from the one held in the contemporary concept of theistic evolution. According to theistic evolution, species descended from one or a few ancestors by a natural evolutionary process which is generally called a secondary or instrumental cause. The differences can be summarized in the following table:

	Theistic Evolution	Christian Traditions
causation	instrumental (secondary)	immediate (primary)
causation	natural	supernatural
duration	non-stop	finished on the "sixth day"
origin	universal common ancestry	distinction of species from their inception

We can safely conclude that it is not possible to use Aquinas's argument from *Commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences Book II* to look for any justification of theistic evolution within traditional Christian understanding of Genesis 1-2. It is also not possible to find any primordial "evolutionary theory" in Augustine's or Aquinas's writings, if evolution is understood as biological macroevolution.

Epilogue

Fr. Francisco Domenichelli's report on Leroy's book, which employed Aquinas to justify evolutionary theory within Catholic theology, was found

unsatisfactory by the Congregation of the Index. Three more experts were asked to prepare another reports for the Congregation. Out of them only one was somewhat favorable to Leroy's ideas. Two other experts recommended that the book be condemned. Finally, the Congregation decided to ban the book, ask the author to withdraw it from bookstores and publish an official revocation in the French press. The author formally submitted to the decision, though, for another few years applied for a permit to publish slightly modified versions of his work. His endeavor remained unsuccessful until his death in 1905.

Even though Aquinas teaching has not changed since the publication of Leroy's book, the general approach of the Thomists has, indeed, changed. Today a great number of them employ Aquinas to justify different versions of theistic evolution. Regardless of whether one agrees with this endeavor or not, one needs to acknowledge that this effort is based primarily on an interpretation of Aquinas rather than on what he really taught. Thus, the modern charge against the Thomists remain valid: Thomas and Thomism happen to be two quite different things.

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