

Bartosz Adamski

Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Espana

xbartosz.adamski@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-4062-593X

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Why did God not Create us in Heaven? The Idea of Creation *in statu viae* in Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Talbott

Dlaczego Bóg nie stworzył nas w niebie? Idea stworzenia *in statu viae* u Tomasa z Akwinu i Thomasa Talbotta

Abstract. In his book *The Inescapable Love of God* (first published in 1999), Thomas Talbott, an evangelical professor of philosophy and universalist, responds to Michael Murray, who, working under the universalist assumption of universal salvation, asks the following question: Why did God not create us all *ab initio* in the ultimate state in Heaven? The article will compare Talbott's answer to the question posed by Murray with the teaching of Aquinas, which explains why Paradise was the right place for people before the original sin. In this way, the similarities and differences in the Aquinas' and Talbott's thinking will appear. It will serve to argue that Angelic Doctor's argumentation is still useful and valid in contemporary debates.

Streszczenie. Thomas Talbott, ewangelicki profesor filozofii i uniwersalista, swoim dziele zatytułowanym *The Inescapable Love of God* (wyd. 1999 r.), odpowiada Michaelowi Murray'owi, który, zakładając uniwersalistyczną powszechność zbawienia, zadaje następujące pytanie: Dlaczego Bóg nie stworzył nas wszystkich *ab initio* w stanie ostatecznym w niebie? W artykule zostanie porównana odpowiedź Talbotta na pytanie postawione przez Murraya z nauczaniem św. Tomasza z Akwinu, który wyjaśnia, dlaczego Raj był właściwym miejscem dla ludzi przed grzechem pierworodnym. W ten sposób zostaną ukazane podobieństwa i różnice w rozumowaniu Akwinaty i Talbotta. Posłużą to do wykazania, że argumentacja Doktora Anielskiego jest wciąż użyteczna i aktualna we współczesnych debatach.

Keywords: creation, Genesis, Paradise, Heaven, necessity, determinism, freedom, Thomas, Aquinas, Talbott.

Słowa kluczowe: stworzenie, Księga Rodzaju, Raj, Niebo, konieczność, determinizm, wolność, Tomasz z Akwinu, Thomas Talbott.

The inspiration for researching this topic came from reading Michael Murray's article *Three Versions of Universalism*. Murray, doubting the truth and relevance of universalism, observes that it seems epistemically possible that all free rational agents would finally turn to God after becoming fully informed about their true goodness. Because the earthly life seems to produce poor soteriological results, the question may be posed regarding purpose it is supposed to serve in the realisation of God's plan for the humankind. According to Murray, the post-mortem state is much better suited for the conversion of the unregenerate. But if so, why did God not create us all *ab initio* in Heaven (cf. Murray 1999, 62)?

An answer to this question will be given in three parts. First, I will present a response of Thomas Talbott who excludes a possibility of creation *ab initio* in Heaven, therefore confirming a theory of the world's establishment in "the only possible way". Then, a teaching of Thomas Aquinas about creation will be highlighted which will guide us towards his possible answer to Murray's question.

1. Talbott's response. Necessary conditions for creation of a person

Thomas Talbott, an evangelical professor of philosophy and a universalist from Salem in Oregon (US), answers directly to Murray's question in his book *The Inescapable Love of God* (first published in 1999) and in corresponding passages of some of his articles. When describing the structure or the rules of the created world, Talbott emphasises that it is necessarily true that God creates the universe in which indeterminism and chance have an important role in the lives of the created people (cf. Talbott 1988, 15–16). He also adds that God, when he wanted to create rational agents, had no other choice but to place them in a context of ambiguity, ignorance and even indeterminism (cf. Talbott 2009, 393). Talbott justifies these claims by presenting the necessary conditions for independent, free creatures such as:

- awareness of oneself as distinct from one's environment and from other beings,
- ability to act on their own and to make reasonable judgments about the best course of action,
- capacity to learn important lessons from their own experience and the consequences of proper actions (including the possibility of getting it wrong).

Talbott's proposition leads to a synthesis of two metaphysically necessary conditions for creating a person which correspond with those that are required for the freedom of the rational agent. Then, the created person has to be separated from God's direct causal control and has to experience frustrated desire and will which results from the separation from God. From this the author concludes that God, if he wanted to create a person of independent conscience, had no other choice but to do it in the context of ambiguity, ignorance and indeterminism. This requires an initial separation from God and therefore a causal break. Talbott notes that if God had created a fully deterministic universe, there would have been only one agent capable of independent action, namely God himself. This is so, because one can establish dependent beings capable of independent action only in a context, in which their individual choices are not generally determined (cf. Talbott 2014, 200). A perfect example of this is the biblical account of Adam and Eve. The first parents chose evil in a context of ambiguity and ignorance (see: Talbott 2008, 310–312).

In fact, all men begin making decisions in a context, in which wrong or mistaken choices are practically inevitable. Talbott stresses that God, in view of the goal of universal salvation, could not create rational free agents otherwise. This is so because it is impossible for created persons to attain supreme and eternal happiness in the absence of something like redemption from an imperfect condition (cf. Talbott 2014, 158–159 and 198).

Elsewhere Talbott argues that it seems to him utterly doubtful that even an omnipotent being could create *ex nihilo* conscious rational agents and constitute them simply with perfect understanding and absolute clarity of vision. This is so, because a degree of ambiguity, separation and ignorance is an essential element in the process by which God creates a free, independent and rational agent. So even angels in the process of their creation would need a stage of indeterminism for free choices made in ignorance, ambiguity and separation (cf. Talbott 1992, 503).

Having said this, one can turn to the question signalled in the title of this article. If God is limited in the creation of free persons by the conditions presented above, could he create all men *ab initio* in the final state in Heaven (see: Talbott 2014, 204; Talbott 2001, 102–109)? Talbott responds to this using his conception of universal salvation and his notion of freedom.

For him the metaphysically necessary conditions of the creation of a rational person set limits on the creative action only apparently. It is important to remember that God as the omnipotent and perfectly loving being always acts

according to the best course of action. Therefore, the Creator, even though he seems constrained, freely creates all rational agents in the context of ambiguity, ignorance and separation from himself, because he has in mind the supreme good, that is, full and eternal happiness in loving communion with him and with others. Talbott underlines that creation itself is still a mystery to us; hence, God who knew the best way to initiate this process must be trusted. At this point one thing seems clear to him: God must create rational agents under the conditions presented here in order to perfect them and then to reveal Himself fully to them in the process (cf. Talbott 2001, 104). An earthly life plays an essential role in the human emergence because through it we learn the lessons of love and we discover the redemptive activity which God can bring about in the Kingdom of Heaven. Consequently, for Talbott it may be logically impossible for man to attain the greatest possible happiness without experiencing all the imperfections of earthly life (cf. Talbott 2014, 204–205; see also: Talbott 2001, 107; Łukasiewicz 2004, 89).

In other words, Murray asks, if the universalism is true, why does the Creator not make the transformation more immediate, without lengthy trials and tribulations? Why are we just not constituted as saints from the beginning? Talbott would give him a short answer: even if feasible, such an immediate transformation would be far less worthwhile than a learning process of terrestrial life. Living outside the heaven, rational agents can choose freely, can experience the consequences of their choices, and finally are able to learn why God's love and reconciliation are better than egotism and separation (see: Talbott 2001, 107).

2. Aquinas' idea: *free God* and his creation in *statu viae* towards the divine goodness

If we look at the contemporary debate on “the only possible way” of creation, we can see that some thinkers, such as Talbott, claim that the creation of an evolutionary world *in statu viae* was the only alternative of the Creator (see: Southgate 2008). Others, called “the free will defenders”, say that such a world where living beings compete and kill each other is the price of freedom which exists only where there is a free and real choice (see: Mackie 1982; McLeish 2020). However, some believe that evolution is not the only possible way and, at least theoretically, it was possible that God could have immediately created the world in the state of Heaven (see Rodríguez 2021). Researchers of St Thomas'

legacy conclude that Aquinas strongly rejected the possibility of presentation of the act of creation as necessary by nature, so “the only possible way” cannot be a single option (cf. Roszak 2022, 2; see: Levering 2017).

It seems that the divine will is a beginning of the creation of the world by God. An interesting exposition of it, which will clarify our discourse, is presented by *Doctor Angelicus* in *Quaestiones disputatae De veritate*. He begins by saying that any will has a double volition (*duplex volitum*), there is something that is primarily desired (*principale volitum*) and other things that are desired secondarily (*secundarium volitum*). The principal desire is that to which the will tends by its nature: the will itself has a natural relation to something which the will naturally wills (*per modum naturae*). The human will, for example, naturally wills happiness (*potentia beatitudinis*). With respect to this principle, the will is necessary. Other things, which are desired secondarily (*secundarium volitum*) are related to the *principale volitum* as their end (cf. *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 4, c.).

Here we can say that there is a parallelism between intellect and will (cf. Pincakers 2007, 447). For the intellect, the principles to which it is naturally directed (*veritas*) correspond to the main desire of the will (*bonum*), and the conclusions which the intellect draws from these principles correspond to the *secundaria volita* of the will. From this, God’s will has the divine goodness as the *principale volitum*, which God wills naturally (*naturaliter vult*), and which is the end of his will (*finis voluntatis suae*) (cf. *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 4, c.). So we can conclude that God wills creatures by his goodness with a necessity of supposition (*necessarium ex potentia*), since God, when he wills, cannot not will, because his will cannot change (cf. *S.Th.*, I, q. 19, a. 3, c.). The necessity of supposition is more than a mere logical necessity because it is founded on the immutability of God, according to the words of Thomas: “God’s willing a thing is not by absolute necessity, yet it is necessary by supposition, on account of the unchangeableness of the divine will” (*S.Th.*, I, q. 19, a. 7, ad 4). That is because of the immutability of the divine will. It is necessary for God to will something according to what is supposed, when it is not absolutely necessary for him to will it. Thus, St Thomas states that whatever is willed by God is in this respect secondary (cf. Paluch 2016, 189). Moreover, the divine goodness is the cause of all things, just as his essence is the cause of his knowledge of all things (cf. *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 4, c.).

As can be seen, the divine will necessarily wills the goodness of God. This necessity is not a necessity of coercion or a tension to him from external causes, but comes from the natural order (*ordo naturalis*), which is not in conflict with freedom, because God cannot not be good, and, consequently, cannot will not to

be powerful or to be deprived of any attribute included in his goodness. Apart from the volition of divine goodness, the divine will does not necessarily act. The end is the cause for willing (*ad finem*). However, no divine effect is proportional to its cause and, in the same way, nothing that is directed towards the divine end is proportional to that end, since no creature is made perfectly as God is (cf. *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 4, c.). In this way, we can see that there are certain reasons to affirm that a necessary thing is the object of free will and that freedom and necessity are compatible, which can be understood by seeing the close relationship between will and intelligence (cf. Alarcón 2010, 29). This relationship is necessary for a free act because of its causal structure (cf. Enríquez Gómez and Montoya Camacho 2021, 346).

From this doctrine it is evident that there is no necessity in the divine will from the love that God has for his goodness to will this or that. The divine goodness is complete without the existence of any creature (cf. *S.Th.*, I, q. 19, a. 3, c.). In fact, the divine goodness is not an end that is achieved through things that aim towards it but, on the contrary, that which is directed towards the end receives the being and perfection of the divine end (cf. *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 4, c.). It can certainly be said, in general, that St Thomas' whole treatment of the freedom of the divine will has its centre in his conception of divine goodness as the principal object and ultimate end of God's will (see: *S.Th.*, I, q. 19, a. 3, c.; *De veritate*, q. 23, a. 4, c.; *De potentia*, q. 1, a. 5, c.; CG, I, cap. 74, n. 5.).

Thus, the volition of creation and the volition of himself in God is free, although in different ways. God is not bound to remain in his own goodness. Moreover, God is not only not obliged to create voluntarily, but is also free in himself to will or not to will every possible creature, neither of which determines or alters his nature (cf. DUBY 2012, 131). Moreover, Aquinas would add that God's wanting himself is not selfish, nor his wanting things other than himself is utilitarian, because only God is perfectly free in the fact that he does not seek his own utility, but only his goodness (cf. Argüello 2011, 34).

3. Aquinas' possible response. Potentiality and possibility of evil

According to Aquinas' teaching on creation the original justice is not considered as the final end of human existence because at the beginning Adam was not in the state of *visio Dei beatifica*. St Thomas thinks about paradise and original justice as a proper way to arrive at the beatific vision. Thus, according to this concept,

the shortest way to achieve the good, that is the life with God in Heaven, is not always the best, but God in his providence appropriately guides (*convenientia*) all entities to their end. His teleological plan does not include any salvific automatism. If Adam had not surrendered to temptation, it would have still been necessary for his descendants to choose freely the life under God's providence, even if Adam's offspring also had avoided sin. Hence, original justice and the state of being in conformity with God's commandments is not given naturally but depends on a personal act (cf. Roszak 2020, 66–67).

The peculiar exegesis of Genesis in Aquinas is interesting. Thomas took the story of the creation of man seriously. He concludes that man in paradise was meant to achieve certain goals, and therefore he was created “outside” paradise. He states: “God made man outside of paradise, and afterwards placed him there to live there during his whole natural life (*vita animalis*); and, after having attained to the spiritual life, to be transferred thence to heaven” (*S.Th.*, I, q. 73, a. 1, c.). In general, Aquinas understands paradise as those conditions in which man can realize his good (*bonum hominis*) through free will cooperating with divine grace. Freedom here is the necessity of both choice and this “good” (cf. *S.Th.*, I, q. 102, a. 3, c.). So, St Thomas reads Genesis in such a way that he sees there a human being who was not created as an already perfect or finite being. His reading of the text leads him to conclude that free creatures aim to find their fullness in returning to God in cooperation with grace. Moreover, the ultimate reality defined as heaven remains in a special relationship to created existence on earth. The Angelic Doctor also points to this prophecy in the Revelation of St John about “a new heaven and new earth” (Rev 21, 1). For him this double expression means that in the new creation there will be some relation to the old earth, that is, to the first creation. He believes that what is necessary must remain in its place because it testifies to the perfection of the universe (*primo et per se*) (cf. Roszak 2020, 68. 74 and 83).

The arguments made against the Christian vision of creation according to the Genesis, for example Murray's statements, can be rebutted by Aquinas' notion of life in paradise. It is defined as perfect, although as the terminology itself shows, it is not about a static and finished universe, yet an unfinished, progressive process, demanding confirmation (*confirmatio*) from the free creation (cf. Roszak 2022, 2).

In Aquinas' argument the natural inequality of creatures established by God cannot be seen as unfair because this “first establishment of things” reveals the justice of relations between entities. Moreover, in St Thomas' writings the diversity of beings alone is a sign of perfection (see: CG, IV, cap. 88, n. 3). Though some

things will be destroyed and others not, their variety multiplies the perfection of the universe, because beings are good in themselves and therefore we can say that it is better that there would be two good entities rather than just one. Because of that in the text about the creation he says that created individual entities are “good” but the whole is “very good”. Aquinas would agree with Talbott in his claim that we do not know how the providence of God organises everything and, to quote here St Thomas’ analogy, we could be in the situation of someone who finds him or herself in a workshop of a craftsman and wonders why there are so many different tools (cf. Roszak 2022, 3–4; see also: *De veritate*, q. 5, a. 5, ad 6).

Hence, the truth that God in his providence created imperfect and diverse beings is a sign of the greatness of the divine wisdom because the perfection of God’s goodness is bestowed upon his creatures in many ways. In Aquinas’ argument, God’s goodness as the origin and his divine purpose is the key to understand how the Creator acts in the world. At the same time, this facilitates comprehending the human salvation which is not simply a transition from one world to another, much better and very different. On the contrary, it is described in terms of a process and a deep arrangement of human agents oriented at the purpose of the entire universe, i.e. the goodness of God (cf. Roszak 2022, 4; see also: *De potentia*, q. 6, a. 1, ad 21).

Due to its potentiality and creation *in statu viae*, for St Thomas every created entity, given its act-potential hylo-morphic composition, has the possibility of non-being, that is, of losing its form or substantial perfection, and thus suffering corruption, just as it can also suffer from an action of other beings (cf. *De malo*, q. 1, a. 3). Then the general reason for the permissibility of this kind of imperfection or evil then is reduced to the aforementioned principle of convenience (*convenientia*) of the degrees of being, since God could not create material and spiritual beings without producing *per accidens* the ontological imperfection and the evil that such corruption implies (see: *S.Th.*, I, q. 49, a. 2). This does not exclude the fact that, from the theological point of view, some of these evils can also be considered as moral evils. All finite freedom is naturally fallible or flexible towards evil because, having to conform to a norm of action other than itself (the good and the moral law), it is within its power, at the moment of acting, to consider or not to consider the norm that should make its action right. God’s possible reason for creation of free beings, even when it is allowed the possibility of sin, is that the free will is a necessary condition for personal relations between God, angels and humankind which imply any possible evil (cf. Echavarría 2012, 539–540).

Conclusions

Thomas Talbott formulates the answer to the question posed by Murray in the perspective of his ideas on universal salvation and the greater good and happiness that come from free human choices. He believes that truly free man must be created in the context of incomplete knowledge and ambiguity that exposes him or her to the choice of evil. Only in this way can he or she discover that true goodness found exclusively in God. The human being who is in the *statu viae* experiences the consequences of his or her sinful choices, through which they learn the necessary lessons of love in order to choose, sooner or later, the eternal life with God. Talbott clearly defines the conditions necessary for the creation of a free person and states that they make it impossible to create free entities immediately in the state of Heaven. In this way he fits in the current of the Free-Will-Defence position.

Although no direct answer to the question posed in the title can be found in the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, by examining his writings, it can be said that, contrary to Talbott, St Thomas would not formulate a definite statement that the creation of man or the world *ab initio* in Heaven is logically impossible. Both agree that the very act of creation is for us a kind of mystery that must be considered in the key of the wisdom and the goodness of God, which is at the same time the source and purpose of all creation. However, Aquinas makes it clear that God in the process of creation did nothing by absolute necessity. Therefore, he neither had to create the world nor had to give it the shape he finally did. When reading Talbott's writings, one cannot say the same. Otherwise, we could get an impression that, according to the author, God in the act of creation is determined by the necessity of universal salvation and must act so as to bring all rational beings to a happy end. For Aquinas, on the other hand, God did everything in complete freedom, since the fact of creation and its condition does not add or take anything away from its perfection.

At the end St Thomas' application of the metaphysical apparatus enriches his probable answer to the presented question which, in comparison with Talbott's proposition, seems much more profound and comprehensive. The world created *in statu viae* is made good and contains a perfection that is also enriched by its diversity. Moreover, the potentiality that is inscribed in every being apart from God may lead us to conclude that the world may have had to come into being in a state of some kind of a process. However, St Thomas himself does not explicitly

state this, since he does not engage in hypothetical considerations, but bases his work only on the data of Revelation and reality.

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