



They say necessity is the mother of invention. Ingenuity is at its best when it sees a need, draws on the available resources, and finds a way to fill that need. Still, it is amazing how many things that we take for granted were not sought out but were stumbled upon by accident or even by error. Superglue and Teflon, plastic and vulcanized rubber, corn flakes and chocolate chip cookies, stainless steel and the microwave were all inventions that were stumbled upon rather than sought out. Both necessity and chance lead to invention.

Throughout history many people have tried to attribute the origins of everything either to chance or to necessity. There is a whole range of creation myths in ancient cultures that portray creation as a biological byproduct or the accidental result of some interaction of various deities. In contrast, many philosophers imagined the origins of the universe as a necessary emergence from a chaotic beginning or a necessary procession from a divine being.

A Judeo-Christian understanding of creation has always rejected both of these extremes, emphasizing the intentional and free nature of God's creativity. In creating out of nothing, God knew what He did, did it freely, and did it well. Importantly, this divine doing is not restricted to that moment "in the beginning," but includes His sustaining and ordering all of creation throughout time, activity rooted in His intelligence and love. St. Thomas Aquinas explains:

*God has brought things into existence not through any necessity of His nature but by His will. [...] God is infinite in power. Consequently He is not determined to this or that effect, but is undetermined with regard to all effects.<sup>1</sup>*

For St. Thomas, God was radically free to create or not to create, and He created everything as ordered to Himself.

While it surely takes a good dose of intelligence to recognize when a mistaken byproduct has some hidden potential, properly speaking the fortuitous accident is more reaction than act. To act through intelligence means to foresee the action and the result in our mind and then to bring it about in reality. St. Thomas often compares the foreseen ideas that God has of creation to the forms in the mind of an artist or builder:

## God's Knowledge and Love in Creation

**Br. Thomas Davenport, O.P.**

*In other agents [the form of the thing to be made pre-exists] according to intelligible being, as in those that act by the intellect; and thus the likeness of a house pre-exists in the mind of the builder. And*

*this may be called the idea of the house, since the builder intends to build his house like to the form conceived in his mind. As then the world was not made by chance, but by God acting by His intellect, there must exist in the divine mind a form to the likeness of which the world was made.<sup>2</sup>*

He foresaw the idea of every created thing in His divine intellect and set about to bring certain ones into reality. As with any analogy of God with his creatures, this comparison is imperfect. However, it is worth seeing exactly how it is imperfect.

It is almost impossible for any artwork to live up to the image the artist intends. First, there is the limitation of the artist. However vivid our imagination most of us, if armed with canvas and paintbrush, would end up with something more fitting for a refrigerator or dumpster than a museum. We do not have the skill to bring about what we see in our mind, and even in the most talented there will always be some gap, perhaps slight, between the idea and the reality.

Second, there can be a limitation in the materials. Even an artistic genius, if handed a crumpled up piece of brown construction paper and a half empty box of crayons can only do so much. Sure, the result would most likely be amazing

beyond anything the rest of us could hope to achieve, but the imperfection of the materials would prevent the perfect realization of the idea of the artist, or at least limit the possible ideas he could try to realize.

St. Thomas makes clear that in God neither of these limitations applies. God is omnipotent and so there is no limit to His creative activity.<sup>3</sup> Further, no limitation in the material of creation can limit His creative activity because no material is outside His creative power.<sup>4</sup> Thus, whatever image God sees in His divine mind He can make a reality. This truth raises another difficulty, though.

When we look at the world and see imperfection and evil, it can be unclear how God is both completely good and all-powerful. Some have tried to reconcile these ideas by claiming that this is the best possible world that God could have created. They argue that if any individual imperfection were removed from the world the overall effect would actually make things less perfect. Since God is good He would have made a perfect world, so this world is that world. While this exonerates God of all the blemishes we see, it also guts His freedom in creating and distances Him from any particular piece of His creation, including each one of us.

If this is the best possible world God created you because you were necessary to make things work out better for the whole. While there is honor in being a cog in a beautiful machine, God's will to create each of us is more than that. St. Thomas affirms that, although this world is good it is not some absolute of goodness.<sup>5</sup> God alone is perfectly good and had no need to create anything. His goodness is not increased because He created. God was absolutely free to create whatever He wanted and He created us. It is true that there is a greater goodness in the whole than in any particular part and that there are individual imperfections that are ordered to the greater good of the whole, but these facts do not constrain God's freedom. He sees every possible created thing and every possible creation, and He chose to make this one real and, in so doing, chose to make each and every part of it exactly as it is.

This freedom derives from God's will and His ability to choose to create whatever He



wants, but the first mover of the will, the root of every choice, is love.<sup>6</sup> When we look at the imperfection in the world, sometimes we can see a glimpse of why God might have chosen to make things in this particular way, but often it is hard to see how goodness can overcome some specific evil. We will touch on the idea of God's providence, His overarching plan for creation, in a later essay but there are two truths we can be certain of. God understood exactly what He was doing when He created each and every aspect of reality, and everything that exists does so because He loves it, including each and every one of us. T☉E

<sup>1</sup> *Compendium of Theology*, no. 96.

<sup>2</sup> *Summa theologiæ* I.15.1.    <sup>3</sup> *Summa theologiæ* I.19.6.

<sup>4</sup> *Summa theologiæ* I.45.2.    <sup>5</sup> *Summa theologiæ* I.25.6.

<sup>6</sup> *Summa theologiæ* I.20.1.

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