

Philosophical Antecedents to Thomas Aquinas's *Second Way*

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In this paper I aim to explore the relevant antecedents to Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* in order to argue that such antecedents are essential for a proper understanding and interpretation of his famous arguments for the existence of God, known commonly as his *Five Ways*; paying particular attention to his *Secunda Via* or *Second Way*. My primary concern is the philosophical ideas that serve as the background and context within which Thomas' arguments must be situated and interpreted. In seeking to highlight these philosophical ideas and to show their relevance to his arguments, I will set out the immediate context of the *Five Ways*, briefly summarize the relevant works that Thomas wrote prior to and during his writing the *Summa Theologiae* himself, and finally briefly explore the ideas that serve as the arguments' broader philosophical context.

The *Five Ways* are no doubt the most famous pericope of the writings of Thomas. They have found their way into almost every text book that deals with the existence of God. It is my contention, however, that these arguments are often taken out of their philosophical which has left a misimpression on many as to what Thomas' case for the existence of God actually is.¹ As philosopher William Lane Craig observes:

Probably more ink has been spilled over his celebrated Five Ways for proving the existence of God than over any other demonstrations of divine existence, and yet they remain largely misunderstood today. No doubt this is because these five brief paragraphs are so often printed in anthologized form and are therefore read in isolation from the rest of Aquinas's thought. To take these proofs out of their context in Aquinas's thought and out of their place in the history of the

¹ Perhaps the most common misinterpretation of Thomas argument is taking his three references to the impossibility of an infinite regress to be a Kalam type of argument. For my case that this is not what Thomas is arguing in his *Five Ways* see, Richard G. Howe "Two Notions of the Infinite in Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* I, Questions 2 and 46," in *Christian Apologetics Journal* 8 (Spring 2009): 71-86.

development of these arguments will tend only to obscure the true nature of the proofs.²

It is my contention that a consideration of the *Five Ways* in their proper context, with a particular consideration of their philosophical backdrop, will show that the *Five Ways* themselves are stronger arguments than they might first appear. Philosopher Richard J. Connell recognizes the importance of considering these issues when examining Thomas' arguments, noting especially the Second Way. "The second way ... requires many considerations on agent causes that Aquinas takes up in several contexts, and which are omitted from the proof as it is presented in the *Summa*."³ I should now like to turn to a consideration of this context and philosophical backdrop by way of a survey of certain philosophical issues antecedent to the *Five Ways*.

The Immediate Context of the *Five Ways*

Question Two of the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* is concerned with the existence of God. It is composed of three articles dealing with whether the existence of God is self-evident (to which Thomas answers 'no') whether the existence of God can be demonstrated (to which Thomas answers 'yes') and whether God exists (to which Thomas answers with his famous *Five Ways*). It is interesting to note that Thomas takes up the issue of the existence of God before he seemingly gives any content to the concept of God. This should not be surprising given both the context of the writing and the audience to whom he was writing—or more precisely, the students for whom the *Summa*

² William Lane Craig, *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1980), US publication (n.c.: Harper & Row, Barnes & Noble Import Division, 1980), 158.

³ Richard J. Connell, "Preliminaries to the Five Ways," in *Thomistic Papers IV*, Leonard A. Kennedy, ed. Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, n.d.

Theologiae was aimed as a teaching manual. Philosophically speaking, it is not necessarily a problem to take up the issue of the existence of a thing before one attempts to give a full accounting of the nature of that thing. It is only necessary that the audience has a general idea about the thing being discussed in order for the discussion to be meaningful. It is evident that Thomas thought his audience sufficiently understood the object under discussion by the use of the phrases to the effect that "all men call this God" or "all men know this to be God."⁴

Works of Thomas Aquinas Antecedent to His *Summa Theologiae*

While his *Summa Theologiae* is perhaps the most famous of his works, Thomas wrote a number of other works, several of which predate *Summa Theologiae*. The significance of these antecedent writings is that they can perhaps shed light on how one should consider the content of the *Summa Theologiae* itself. I think that this is especially true when it comes to understanding the *Five Ways*. As Martin Grabmann comments:

It is a just demand of the modern scientific mind that the genesis of a theory out of previous elements be investigated. Such an historical method sheds light on the position of the theory in the general development of the science, and tries to understand a great mind from its relation to its own time and environment. The method is the more appropriate with regard to an author who has not spun his system *a priori* out of his inner consciousness, but rather like Thomas absorbed all the elements of previous learning and synthesized them into a unified system of thought. The dialectical method must, therefore, be supplemented and corrected by the historico-genetic method.⁵

If it is important to factor in the immediate context of the *Five Ways* within the *Summa Theologiae* itself in order to highlight philosophical assumptions with which

⁴ et hoc omnes intelligunt Deum; quam omnes Deum nominant; quod omnes dicunt Deum; et hoc dicimus Deum; et hoc dicimus Deum

⁵ Martin Grabmann, *Thomas Aquinas: His Personality and Thought*, trans. by Virgil Michel (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), 185.

Thomas was working while making these arguments, it seems then that a consideration of the more extended context—works antecedent to the *Summa Theologiae*—could be all the more helpful. Thus, a brief survey of those antecedent writings is in order.

On Being and Essence (De ente et essentia)

On Being and Essence is considered by most to be Thomas' first writing. It is one of the few of his writings that is purely philosophical.⁶ Most of his other writings are theological in orientation or are commentaries on a philosophical work by someone else. Written before March 1256, this short work is his brief explanation of the basic categories of his metaphysics, including 'being' (*ens*), 'essence,' 'matter,' 'quiddity,' 'existence' (*esse*), and how these are related to logical notions of genus, species, and difference.

The importance of a consideration of *On Being and Essence* is not so much because any of the *Five Ways* are contained in it, but rather because it demonstrates an important metaphysical assumption (perhaps one of the most important) that was already in place in Thomas' mind, viz., the distinction between essence and existence. I shall have occasion to explore this distinction in due course.

Writings on the "Sentences" of Peter Lombard (Scriptum super libros Sententiarum)

Peter Lombard was a theologian and bishop of Paris and author of his *Book of Sentences* written around 1158.⁷ This work became the official text of the bachelor's

⁶ By 'purely philosophical' I mean that the work does not utilize philosophy for a theological agenda nor is it a commentary on another's philosophical work. For an English translation together with commentary see: *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer, 2nd revised ed. [Mediaeval Sources in Translation 1] (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968); Joseph Bobik, *Aquinas on Being and Essence: A Translation and Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965).

⁷ Ignatius Brady, "Peter Lombard" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 8 vols., ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1967), vol. 6, p. 124.

teaching at the University of Paris. Students seeking the bachelor's degree were expected to comment on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*.

Around 1230, one might say, the *Book of Sentences* had become the official text at the moment when the teaching of theology was split into two stages, with the master, titular of a chair, 'reading' Scripture, while his young collaborator, the bachelor, took the four books of the *Sentences* as his text, whence his title, *baccalaureus sententiarius* [Bachelor of the Sentences]. In 1254, this arrangement was the basis of all University regulations.⁸

Though much younger than others who had performed the same task, "in the late summer of 1252 Thomas Aquinas and at least one companion arrived in Paris for the beginning of the academic year" having been commanded to "prepare himself to lecture on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard as a bachelor in theology."⁹

Thomas' comments on Lombard's *Sentences* constitute the first attempt to bring the tools of philosophical analysis to bear on otherwise strictly theological considerations. The significance of these texts by Thomas is that they represent "his earliest and most succinct account of creation. These texts contain the essential Thomistic doctrines on the subject ..."¹⁰ Repeated in this work is Thomas' commitment to the essence/existence distinction discussed in *On Being and Essence*. Further, Thomas discusses the distinction

⁸ Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry and D. Hughes. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964), 265.

⁹ James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works with Corrigenda and Addenda* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983), 53. Only parts of Thomas' *Writings on the "Sentences" of Peter Lombard* have been translated into English perhaps because of "the difficulties in not having an established text which meets the critical demands of the Leonine Commission." [Steven E. Baldner and William E. Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1997), 35]. Baldner and Carroll's work is a translation of Thomas: *Writings on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* Book 2, Distinction 1, Question 1. "The definitive text of Thomas: writings is being published by the Leonine Commission, established by Pope Leo XIII in 1880." (Weisheipl, *Friar*, 357. The commission was established by Leo's encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. This 1879 encyclical is contained in the first volume of the English Dominican Province's translation of the *Summa Theologiae*.

¹⁰ Baldner and Carroll, *Aquinas on Creation*, from the frontispiece.

between something being caused in terms of metaphysical priority and something being caused in terms of temporal priority. He revisits this issue in Question 46 of the *Summa Theologiae*.¹¹

Commentary on the "De Trinitate" of Boethius (Expositio super librum Boethii De trinitate)¹²

Thomas composed his commentary about 1255-1259 "during the beginning of his tenure as Regent Master at the University of Paris."¹³ Marie-Dominique Chenu suggests that the text on Boethius "is a redaction of a course actually taught by Saint Thomas."¹⁴ While Chenu claims that it should come as no surprise that a text of Boethius should serve as a text for teaching at the university of Paris in the Thirteenth Century given the "prestige enjoyed by the 'first of the scholastics'"¹⁵ Armand Maurer suggests that the circumstances surrounding Thomas writing a commentary on Boethius is unknown given this was a practice long out of fashion.¹⁶ Be that as it may, the significance of this writing lies in the fact in it Thomas directly deals with the question of the legitimacy of the use of philosophy in the service of the claims of faith. Here we have his definitive arguments for

¹¹ For a treatment of the contrast between the infinite of the *Second Way* of Question 2 of the *Summa Theologiae* with the infinite of Question 46 of the *Summa Theologiae* see my article referenced in footnote 1.

¹² Thomas: *Commentary on the "De Trinitate" of Boethius* is available in English under the titles *Faith, Reason and Theology*, [questions I-IV] trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987) and *The Division and Methods of the Sciences*, [questions V and VI] trans. Armand Maurer, 4th ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1986).

¹³ Maurer, *Faith, Reason and Theology*, vii.

¹⁴ Chenu, *Toward Understand St. Thomas*, 277.

¹⁵ Chenu, *Toward Understand St. Thomas*, 277.

¹⁶ Maurer, *Faith, Reason and Theology*, vii.

natural theology, the legitimacy of which is largely presupposed in the *Summa Theologiae*.

On the Principles of Nature (De principiis naturae)

On the Principles of Nature is an important work showing Thomas' early thoughts about the philosophical notions of form, matter, change and cause.¹⁷ The work was written in Paris before 1256 and is dedicated to Friar Sylvester, about whom nothing else is known.¹⁸ The treatise shows Thomas' commitment to Aristotle's four causes. In addition, there is an illuminating discussion on the two ways that a cause can be said to be prior to its effect, viz., temporally and in substance and perfection. This distinction will allow Thomas to argue for God as a prior cause of the world without any commitment on his part as to whether or not the universe had a beginning of its duration.¹⁹

Truth (De Veritate)

Written from 1256-1259, *Truth* is one of Thomas' most extensive works on any given single subject though the content is not confined to just the notion of truth.²⁰ The work is one of a several of his arising out of a number of disputed questions. Torrell

¹⁷ This work is available in English as *On the Principles of Nature* in *The Pocket Aquinas*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Washington Square Press, 1960) and as *The Principles of Nature*, in *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. R. A. Kocurek (St. Paul: North Central Publishing, 1948) revised edition (St. Paul: North Central Publishing, 1951), 4-19.

¹⁸ Weisheipl, *Friar*, 79.

¹⁹ See my work referenced in footnote 11 above.

²⁰ This work is available in English. *Truth* (3 vols), vol. 1 trans. Robert W. Mulligan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952); vol. 2 trans. James V. McGlynn (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953); vol. 3. trans. Robert W. Schmidt (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954). The three volumes were reprinted as *Truth* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

comments on the activity call the "dispute." "The second function of the master was the 'dispute.' This still meant to teach, but under another form, that of active pedagogy where one proceeded by objections and responses on a given theme."²¹

Thomas held a number of disputes in his lifetime which covered topics such as truth, the power of God, evil, spiritual creatures, the soul, charity, and the virtues in general.²² In *De Veritate*, Thomas covers other topics including the nature of God's knowledge, the nature of angels' knowledge, providence, predestination, prophecy, faith, conscience, the good, free will, grace, justification and more. Though there is nothing that seems to tie directly into the *Second Way* as such (though there is a version of the *Fifth Way* in the discussion on providence), the work as a whole lays out the foundation for Thomas of many philosophical notions and can serve as a context against which his discussions in the *Summa Theologiae* are made.

Summa Contra Gentiles

Titled in some MSS as *Liber de veritate catholicae fidei contra errors infidelium* (*On the Truth of the Catholic Faith Against the Errors of the Infidels*), the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is perhaps Thomas' most famous and widely read work outside of the *Summa Theologiae*.²³ It is here that one will find perhaps the most definitive arguments for the

²¹ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2 vols., vol. 1 *The Person and His Work*, and vol. 2 *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), vo. 1, p. 59.

²² Some of his other disputed questions are available in English, including *On Evil (De malo)*, trans. Jean Oesterle (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); *Questions on the Soul (De anima)*, trans. James H. Robb (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1984); *Disputed Questions on Virtue (De virtutibus in communi and De virtutibus cardinalibus)*, trans. Ralph McInery (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 1999); *Quodlibetal Questions 1 and 2 (Quaestiones de quodlibet)*, trans. Sandra Edwards [Mediaeval Sources in Translation 27] (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983).

²³ This work is available in English as *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 5 vols., trans. Anton Pegis (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975).

existence of God anywhere in the writings of Thomas. They are certainly more protracted than what one finds in the *Summa Theologiae*. Further, it is here where one will find Thomas acknowledging the sources of the arguments that he employs. There is tremendous value in this work for understanding Thomas' arguments in the *Summa Theologiae* (particularly the *First Way*—the argument from motion). The *Second Way* also occurs in the work in virtually the same language. In addition, other philosophical doctrines that one finds in other of his works antecedent to the *Summa Theologiae* will invariably find that same doctrines put perhaps to their greatest use anywhere antecedent to the *Summa Theologiae*.

On the Power of God (De potential Dei)

Written from 1265-1266, *On the Power of God* is one writing of Thomas that most closely resembles the *Summa Theologiae* in style and format.²⁴ Its significance lies in what it has to say about the power of God with respect to creation. A number of important philosophical issues are discussed including creation *ex nihilo*, whether creation constitutes change, whether anything can exist outside of God that is not created, whether the world can be eternal, how the categories of form and matter relate to the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, whether God sustains creation in existence, the essence/existence distinction, God's simplicity, how God relates to His creation and much more. Virtually all of these issues are discussed in the *Summa Theologiae* after the *Second Way*. Their presence here shows how developed these notions were in the thought of Thomas prior to the writing of the *Summa Theologiae*.

²⁴ This work is available in English as *On the Power of God*, 3 vols., trans. English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1932) and reprinted *On the Power of God (Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei)* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004).

While much more could be said about the significance of each of the above works, perhaps this brief survey suffices to show that Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* is not without its philosophical antecedents. Further, there is perhaps reason to consider that the audience of the *Summa Theologiae* either was acquainted with Thomas' earlier teachings or (more likely) that the teacher of the *Summa Theologiae* (whether Thomas himself or someone else) would be able to cull from these earlier writings in order to make explicit certain philosophical doctrines that could illumine as needed the material being taught from the *Summa Theologiae*. I should now like to turn my attention to some specific philosophical doctrines and explore these doctrines as they bear on an understanding of Thomas' *Second Way*.

Specific Philosophical Doctrines Antecedent to the *Second Way*

A consideration of the philosophical doctrines that are antecedent to Thomas' arguments for the existence of God will illumine the arguments and place them in their best possible light. Granted some might argue that these antecedents are not there since Thomas does not inform his readers of them. Clearly, however, Thomas utilizes Aristotle's notions of causality in his arguments without explaining them to his readers. Perhaps Thomas had every reason to think that these notions were already in his readers' minds or, at the very least, that the teacher teaching from the *Summa* would be able to inform the students of such notions when necessary.

If Aristotle's notions of causality are implicit or presupposed (or are explained to the students during the teaching time) in the *Five Ways* how many other philosophical doctrines might there be? I shall argue that there were several significant ones.

Natural Theology

In medieval terms, natural theology contains those truths about God that can be discovered by the light of natural reason. The light of natural reason here means the faculty of investigation and demonstration that is possible for humans by virtue of their powers of observation and reasoning unaided by God. For the natural theologian, observation and reasoning are powers given by God simply because humans are created by God. But these powers function for the most part the same in each human being regardless of whether that human being has any saving relationship with God.

The discussion about the limits of natural theology is often referred to in more modern discussions as the relationship between faith and reason. Thomas held that there were a number of things that could be known about God by these natural powers, including God's existence. In contemporary terms, this is the domain of reason. The realm that reason can know is sometimes referred to as 'general revelation.' The content of general revelation regarding God is natural theology. Other things could not be discovered by these natural powers but can only be known by Special Revelation of God. In contemporary terms, this is the domain of faith. These two sources together (which may at times overlap) constitute our knowledge of God. Thomas summarizes:

There is a twofold mode of truth in what we profess about God. Some truths about God exceed all the ability of the human reason. Such is the truth that God is triune [and one]. But there are some truths which the natural reason also is able to reach. Such are that God exists, that His is one, and the like. In fact, such truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of the natural reason.²⁵

²⁵ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 3, trans. Maurer, vol. 1, p. 63. Est autem in his quae de Deo confitemur duplex veritatis modus. Quaedam namque vera sunt de Deo quae omnem facultatem humanae rationis excedunt, ut Deum esse trinum et unum. Quaedam vero sunt ad quae etiam ratio naturalis pertingere potest, sicut est Deum esse, Deum esse unum, et alia huiusmodi; quae etiam philosophi demonstrative de Deo probaverunt, ducti naturalis lumine rationis.

In his *Commentary on the "De Trinitate" of Boethius*, Thomas takes on the issue of the legitimate use of reason and philosophy in investigating the "divine realities" (*divina*). In Question One, Thomas argues four points. First, the human mind does not need new illumination by the divine light in order to know the truth. Second, the human mind is able to arrive at knowledge of God, not in terms of knowing by way of the form, but rather knowing as a cause is known by its effects. Third, in an important sense, God is not the first object of knowledge for the mind, but rather sensible objects are. Fourth, despite the fact that many things can be known by natural reason to be true of God, there remain certain things about God that cannot be discovered this way, such as the fact that God is a Trinity.

In Question Two, the issue of the role of philosophy, which is to say natural reason, is more directly addressed. Here Thomas argues four points, the first three of which are relevant for my purposes. First, humans "must have access to the divine to the fullest extent possible, using everything in our power, that our mind might be occupied with contemplation and our reason with the investigation of divine realities"²⁶ taking care (1) not to presume to be able to fully fathom the divine, (2) not to make reason illicitly precede faith, and (3) not to pursue speculation beyond one's own abilities. Second, there is a legitimate science (body of knowledge) of the divine. Third, philosophy, as far as it goes, is itself a gift from God and as such cannot be contrary to the gift of faith. It is in discussing this third point that he makes his most direct comments regarding the legitimacy of philosophy (reason) in investigating divine realities, including arguments

²⁶ *Commentary on the "De Trinitate" of Boethius*, Q. 2, Article 1, Reply. ... oportet quod homo ex omnibus quae in ipso sunt, quantum possibile est, ad divina annitatur, ut intellectus contemplationi et ratio inquisitioni divinarum vacet ...

for God's existence. While philosophy has its limits, it nevertheless has its place. Thomas comments, "Rather, since what is imperfect bears a resemblance to what is perfect, what we know by natural reason has some likeness to what is taught to us by faith."²⁷

The following chart summarizes the relationship between faith and reason in Thomas

Faith	Reason
<p>Believing those things revealed by God through Christ and Scripture that could not be discovered by reason alone</p> <p>Certain truths are revealed both about God and creation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Trinity - The Gospel - Man's fallenness <p>Special Revelation 2 Peter 1:21 Col. 2:9; John 14:9</p>	<p>Believing those things demonstrated by appropriate disciplines, e.g., philosophy, science, mathematics</p> <p>Certain truths can be discovered both about God and creation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - God's existence - God's attributes - The moral law <p>General Revelation Rom. 1:19-20; 2:14-15 Psalm 19:1-4</p>
Figure 1: The Relationship Between Faith and Reason	

Faith and reason can be said to complement one another. Some things can be known about God and about the creation by means of faculties of knowing that God has created in us as human beings. This is not to say that these faculties are infallible. It is to say that they are basically reliable. Other things can only be known about God if God chooses to reveal them. In the religion of Thomas Aquinas, God has revealed them through Holy Scripture and the Church.²⁸

²⁷ *Commentary on the "De Trinitate" of Boethius*, Q. 2, Article , Reply. Sed magis cum in imperfectis inveniatur aliqua imitatio perfectorum, in ipsis, quae per naturalem rationem cognoscuntur, sunt quaedam similitudines eorum quae per fidem sunt tradita.

²⁸ Another important way to distinguish faith and reason is to say that reason knows things on the basis of demonstration while faith believes things on the basis of authority. Stated this way, the medieval way of talking about these matters might appear odd to contemporary ears since for Thomas it is not

Act/Potency Metaphysics

Act and Potency in Aristotle

The categories of act and potency are how Aristotle accounts for change. Potency in Aristotle is the power or capacity to be actual. For example, a builder of a house, who is not actually building the house, nevertheless has the power to build the house. Again, a man who is asleep or in a coma is not actually thinking, but nevertheless has the potential to think. In contrast, a stone that is not thinking does not have the potential to think. Thus, potency is a power to effect change both in one's self as well as in another or the power to be affected.

Utilizing these categories allowed Aristotle to solve a particular metaphysical dilemma from Parmenides. Potentiality (or potency) filled a midpoint between being and non-being.²⁹ Though it is in some sense real, it lacks being. However, it is not exactly non-being. Parmenides argued that change is impossible because being cannot come out of non-being (which is to say, out of nothing, nothing comes). Further, being cannot come out of being, for being already is (fire cannot come out of air, since air is air and not fire). Thus, change is impossible. Aristotle could respond that fire does not come out of air *qua* air but out of air which can be fire and is not yet fire (i.e., the air has the potentiality to become fire.) While Parmenides might respond that this is would amount

possible for one to believe what one knows nor possible for one to know what one believes. But this simply means that knowledge taken in one sense finds its origin either in demonstration or authority but not both. As my chart has it, the realm of reason is larger than that body of knowledge referred to as natural theology. That body of demonstrable truths about reality in as much as it is living is called biology. That body of demonstrable truths about reality in as much as it is quantifiable is mathematics; and so on. That body of demonstrable truths about reality in as much as it is God is natural theology.

²⁹ The following summary is from Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1985) Vol. I, 311.

to saying that a being comes into being from non-being, Aristotle would maintain that it does not come into being from its privation *simpliciter* but from its privation in a subject.

Again, while Parmenides might say that this would amount to saying that a thing comes into being from being, which is a contradiction (because a being already is, and thus cannot come into being) Aristotle would insist that it does not come into being from being precisely as such, but from being which is also non-being, viz., not the thing which comes to be. This being which is also non-being is the distinction of actuality and potentiality or act and potency. Aristotle comments, "So it is possible that a thing may be capable of being and not be, and capable of not being and yet be.... For of non-existent things some exist potentially; but they do not exist because they do not exist in complete reality."³⁰

Act and Potency in Thomas

Thomas employs the act/potency categories of Aristotle. Thomas comments, "Observe that some things can exist though they do not exist, while other things do exist. That which can be is said to exist in potency; that which already exists is said to be in act."³¹ Further, in his discussion of the nature of created intellectual substances Thomas argues:

Now, from the foregoing it is evident that in created intellectual substances there is composition of act and potentiality. For in whatever thing we find two, one of which is the complement of the other, the proportion of one of them to the other is

³⁰ *Metaphysics*, IX, 3 1047^a20, 35, 1047^b1, trans. W. D. Ross, in Richard McKeon, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), 823. "Ὡστε ἐνδέχεται δυνατόν μὲν τι εἶναι μὴ εἶναι δέ, καὶ δυνατόν μὴ εἶναι εἶναι δέ... τῶν γὰρ μὴ ὄντων ἓνια δυνάμει ἐστὶν οὐκ ἔστι δέ, ὅτι οὐκ ἐντελεχεία ἐστίν."

³¹ *On the Principles of Nature*, trans. Bourke in *The Pocket Aquinas*, 61. Nota quod quoddam potest esse licet non sit, quoddam vero est. Illud quod potest esse dicitur esse potentia; illud quod iam est, dicitur esse actu.

as the proportion of potentiality to act; for nothing is completed except by its proper act.³²

The significance of the notions of act and potency also is twofold. First, with respect to sensible things, because they are understood in terms of act and potency, they will not be able to ultimately account for the actualization of their own potentialities. The most straightforward argument along these lines is the *First Way* having to do with motion. But in a more extended sense, Thomas will argue that the essences of sensible things—'essence' here being the term to describe the form and matter together—are in potency to *esse*, which is the act of existence. This is the key to the *Second Way*.

Second, with respect to Thomas' understanding of the metaphysical nature of God, the act/potency characteristic of sensible things will stand in stark contrast to God's nature of being pure actuality. Since for Thomas potency is a principle of limitation then a being of pure actuality with no potentiality is *de facto* an infinite being. Having said this one may wonder, then, why there is seemingly no notion in Aristotle of infinite being. The answer to that question must wait for the discussion below of the essence/existence distinction and Thomas' contribution of *esse*.

Form/Matter Metaphysics

Form and Matter in Aristotle

The philosophy of the *Five Ways* assumes the form/matter categories of Aristotelian metaphysics.³³ In Aristotle, a thing in reality is constituted by the

³² *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 53, §1-2, trans. Maurer, vol. 2, p. 155. Ex hoc autem evidenter apparet quod in substantiis intellectualibus creatis est compositio actus et potentiae. In quocumque enim inveniuntur aliqua duo quorum unum est complementum alterius, proportio unius eorum ad alterum est sicut proportio potentiae ad actum: nihil enim completur nisi per proprium actum.

³³ For a thorough discussion of Aristotle's views here and their implications for Medieval thinking see Joseph Owens, *The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978).

combination of form and matter. The model is known as hylomorphism, from ὕλη (matter) and μορφή (form). This scheme marks a significant qualification, if not departure from Aristotle's teacher Plato. Where Plato understood the full reality of things to be the transcendent Forms in which individual sensory things "participate," Aristotle, if you will, "pulled" the Forms out of the transcendent realm and put them into the things themselves.

He did this for several reasons. First, Aristotle alleged that Plato's Forms were not able to account for how they made sensible things what they are since the Forms are not "in" the sensible things. Not being in the thing, but rather existing apart from the thing, the Form could not be the substance of the thing. He asks, "Again, it would seem impossible that the substance and that of which it is the substance should exist apart; how, therefore, could the Ideas, being the substances of things, exist apart?"³⁴

Second, Aristotle argued that Plato's Forms cannot be the causes of the being of things. He states:

In the *Phaedo* the case is stated in this way-that the Forms are causes both of being and of becoming; yet when the Forms exist, still the things that share in them do not come into being, unless there is something to originate movement; and many other things come into being (e.g. a house or a ring) of which we say there are no Forms.³⁵

³⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 9, 991^b1-3, trans. Ross, in McKeon, 708. ἔτι δόξειεν ἂν ἀδύνατον εἶναι χωρὶς τὴν οὐσίαν καὶ οὐ ἢ οὐσίᾳ ὥστε πῶς ἂν αἱ ἰδέαι οὐσίαι τῶν πραγμάτων οὔσαι χωρὶς εἶεν

³⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 9, 991^b3-7, trans. Ross, in McKeon, 708. ἐν δὲ τῷ Φαίδωνι οὕτω λέγεται, ὡς καὶ τοῦ εἶναι καὶ τοῦ γίνεσθαι αἴτια τὰ εἶδη ἐστίν. καίτοι τῶν εἰδῶν ὄντων ὅμως οὐ γίγνεται τὰ μετέχοντα ἂν μὴ ἢ τὸ κινήσον καὶ πολλὰ γίγνεται ἕτερα, οἷον οἰκία καὶ δακτύλιος, ὧν οὐ φάμεν εἶναι.

Further he argues, "But, further, all other things cannot come from the Forms in any of the usual senses of 'from.' And to say that they are patterns and the other things share in them is to use empty words and poetical metaphors."³⁶

Third, Aristotle argued that Plato's Forms not only are unable to account for the coming into being of things (the most significant change that can occur) but they cannot account for any other changes in things. He says, "Above all one might discuss the question what on earth the Forms contribute to sensible things, either to those that are eternal or to those that come into being and cease to be. For they cause neither movement nor any change in them."³⁷

Fourth, since in Aristotle's estimation sensible things not only are real but also change then, he argues, Plato's Forms cannot account for how such things are known.

After the systems we have named came the philosophy of Plato, which in most respects followed these thinkers, but had peculiarities that distinguished it from the philosophy of the Italians. For, having in his youth first become familiar with Cratylus and with the Heraclitean doctrines (that all sensible things are ever in a state of flux and there is no knowledge about them), these views he held even in later years. Socrates, however, was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these ethical matters, and fixed thought for the first time on definitions; Plato accepted his teaching, but held that the problem applied not to sensible things but to entities of another kind—for this reason, that the common definition could not be a definition of any sensible thing, as they were always changing.³⁸

³⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 9, 991^a19-22, trans. Ross, in McKeon, 708. ἀλλὰ μὴν οὐδ' ἐκ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐστὶ τᾶλλα κατ' οὐθέννα τρόπον τῶν εἰωθότων λέγεσθαι. τὸ δὲ λέγειν παραδείγματα αὐτὰ εἶναι καὶ μετέχειν αὐτῶν τᾶλλα κενολογεῖν ἐστὶ καὶ μεταφορᾶς λέγειν ποιητικᾶς.

³⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 9, 991^a9-11, trans. Ross, in McKeon, 707. Πάντων δὲ μάλιστα διαφορήσειεν ἂν τις, τί ποτε συμβάλλεται τὰ εἶδη τοῖς αἰδίοις τῶν αἰσθητῶν ἢ τοῖς γιγνομένοις καὶ φθειρομένοις. οὔτε γὰρ κινήσεως οὔτε μεταβολῆς οὐδεμιᾶς ἐστὶν αἴτια αὐτοῖς.

³⁸ *Metaphysics*, I, 5, 987^a29 - I, 6, 987^b7 trans. Ross, in McKeon, 700-701. Μετὰ δὲ τὰς εἰρημένους φιλοσοφίας ἡ Πλάτωνος ἐπεγένετο πραγματεία, τὰ μὲν πολλὰ τούτοις ἀκολουθοῦσα, τὰ δὲ καὶ ἴδια παρὰ τὴν τῶν Ἰταλικῶν ἔχουσα φιλοσοφίαν. ἐκ νέου τε γὰρ συνήθης γενόμενος πρῶτον Κρατύλῳ καὶ ταῖς Ἠρακλειτείοις δόξαις, ὡς ἀπάντων τῶν αἰσθητῶν αἰεὶ ῥεόντων καὶ ἐπιστήμης περὶ αὐτῶν οὐκ οὔσης, ταῦτα μὲν καὶ ὕστερον οὕτως ὑπέλαβεν. Σωκράτους δὲ περὶ μὲν

Again he says, "But again they help in no wise either towards the knowledge of the other things (for they are not even the substance of these, else they would have been in them), or towards their being, if they are not in the particulars which share in them ..."³⁹

Last, Aristotle maintained that the relationship that Plato's Forms held to sensible things was unexplained by Plato's term 'participation.' He observed:

Things of this other sort, then, he called Ideas, and sensible things, he said, were all named after these, and in virtue of a relation to these; for the many existed by participation in the Ideas that have the same name as they. Only the name 'participation' was new; for the Pythagoreans say that things exist by 'imitation' of numbers, and Plato says they exist by participation, changing the name. But what the participation or the imitation of the Forms could be they left an open question.⁴⁰

Having rejected Plato's theory of Forms (while not rejecting the notion of form altogether) Aristotle brings an innovation to the understanding of reality. Permanence and change are true of real things. Permanence is accounted for by form, which is that which makes a thing *what* it is. Change, no less real, is accounted for by matter, which is the principle of individuation and that which makes a thing to be *this* thing.

τὰ ἠθικὰ πραγματευομένου, περὶ δὲ τῆς ὅλης φύσεως οὐθέν, ἐν μέντοι τούτοις τὸ καθόλου ζητοῦντος καὶ περὶ ὀρισμῶν ἐπιστήσαντος πρώτου τὴν διάνοιαν, ἐκείνον ἀποδεξάμενος διὰ τὸ τοιοῦτον ὑπέλαβεν ὡς περὶ ἐτέρων τοῦτο γινόμενον καὶ οὐ τῶν αἰσθητῶν. ἀδύνατον γὰρ εἶναι τὸν κοινὸν ὅρον τῶν αἰσθητῶν τινός, αἰεὶ γε νεταβαλλόντων.

³⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 9, 991^a12-15, trans. Ross, in McKeon, 707-708. ἀλλὰ μὴν οὔτε πρὸς τὴν ἐπιστήμην οὐθέν βοηθεῖ τὴν τῶν ἄλλων [οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐσία ἐκείνα τούτων ἐν τούτοις γὰρ ἂν ἦν], οὔτε εἰς τὸ εἶναι, μὴ ἐνυπαρχοντά γε τοῖς μετέχουσιν.

⁴⁰ *Metaphysics*, I, 6, 987^b8-13, trans. Ross, in McKeon, 701. οὗτος οὖν τὰ μὲν τοιαῦτα τῶν ὄντων ἰδέας προσηγόρευσε, τὰ δ' αἰσθητὰ παρὰ ταῦτα καὶ κατὰ ταῦτα λέγεσθαι πάντᾳ κατὰ μέθεξιν γὰρ εἶναι τὰ πολλὰ τῶν συνωνύμων τοῖς εἶδεσι. [τὴν δὲ μέθεξιν τούνομα μόνον μετέβαλεν οἱ μὲν γὰρ Πυθαγόρειοι μίμησι τὰ ὄντα φασὶν τῶν ἀριθμῶν, Πλάτων δὲ μέθεξει, τούνομα μεταβαλὼν τὴν μέντοι γε μέθεξιν ἢ τὴν μίμησιν ἥτις ἂν εἴη τῶν εἰδῶν, ἀφείσαν ἐν κοινῷ ζητεῖν.]

Form and Matter in Thomas

Thomas' model is the same as Aristotle's. His most definitive comments about form and matter are in his *On Being and Essence*. He says:

Because the definition telling what a thing is signifies that by which a thing is located in its genus or species, philosophers have substituted the term 'quiddity' for the term 'essence.' The Philosopher frequently calls this 'what something was to be; that is to say, that which makes a thing to be what it is. It is also called 'form' ...⁴¹

Further Thomas comments that "form and matter are found in composite substances, as for example the soul and body in man."⁴² While neither of them alone is sufficient to constitute the essence of a thing, form and matter together are. "It is evident, therefore, that essence embraces both matter and form."⁴³ His ensuing discussion follows Aristotle's notions. The matter is not a principle of knowing but is a principle of individuation. The form is that which is grasped by the intellect.

Therefore, the manner of knowing a thing conforms to the state of the knower, which receives the form in its own way. It is not necessary that the thing known exist in the manner of the knower or in the manner in which the form which is the principle of knowing exists in the knower. From this it follows that nothing prevents us from knowing material things through forms which exist immaterially in our minds.⁴⁴

⁴¹ *On Being and Essence*, I, §4, trans. Maurer, 31. Et quia illud, per quod res constituitur in proprio genere vel specie, est hoc quod significatur per diffinitionem indicantem quid est res, inde est quod nomen essentiae a philosophis in nomen quidditatis mutatur. Et hoc est quod philosophus frequenter nominat *quod quid erat esse*, id est hoc per quod aliquid habet esse quid. Dicitur etiam forma ...

⁴² *On Being and Essence*, II, §1, trans. Maurer, 34. In substantiis igitur compositis forma et materia nota est, ut in homine anima et corpus.

⁴³ *On Being and Essence*, II, §1, trans. Maurer, 35. Patet ergo quod essentia comprehendit materiam et formam.

⁴⁴ *Truth*, X, IV, Reply, trans. James V. McGlynn, vol. 2, p.19. Et ideo modus cognoscendi rem aliquam, est secundum conditionem cognoscentis, in quo forma recipitur secundum modum eius. Non autem oportet quod res cognita sit secundum modum cognoscentis, vel secundum illum modum quo forma, quae est cognoscendi principium, esse habet in cognoscente.

While this quote shows how the notion of form and matter figure into Thomas' theory of knowing rather than directly into his argument for the existence of God, it nevertheless shows that his understanding of form and matter is that of Aristotle. The significance of these categories will have to do with two issues. First, Thomas will argue that sensible things, being composed of form and matter, are not ultimately able to account for their own existence and thus will need a First Cause as their grounding. Second, vis-à-vis his philosophical theology, after Thomas argues for the existence of God he will seek to unpack the metaphysical attributes of God. The particular aspects of the nature of God will stand in stark contrast to the form and matter aspects of sensible things.

Causality

To understand efficient causality in the *Second Way*, we must understand the notion of causality in general in Thomas. To this end, it is important to understand the Aristotelian notion of causality that Thomas inherits as well as the significant qualifications that Thomas makes of Aristotle's views. Later, we will need to consider more modern and contemporary discussions of causality to see how well Thomas' notions can be contrasted.

Causality in Aristotle

Aristotle is famous for his four causes. These four causes are: material, formal, efficient, and final. The trouble contemporary readers might have in appreciating exactly what Aristotle was doing with his four causes is perhaps due to the fact of how foreign the metaphysical categories appear to us with which Aristotle explains natural things. These four causes correspond to four ways that a cause relates to its effect vis-à-vis the

metaphysical makeup of a thing. This metaphysical makeup of a thing is described by Aristotle in terms of the categories of form and matter.

The material cause is *that out of which* the effect is. Using the example of a bronze statue, the material cause of the statue is the bronze. The bronze as such is said to be in potentiality to the statue, which is to say that that bronze is capable of being made into a statue. The formal cause is *that which* the effect is. The formal cause of the statue is the form or shape into which the material is fashioned to be a statue. The most familiar of the four Aristotelian causes is undoubtedly the efficient cause. This is so because it is the predominant way in which we understand the notion of causality today. The efficient cause is *that by which* the effect is. The efficient cause would be the sculptor who fashions the matter of the bronze into the form of the statue. The final cause is *that for which* an effect is. It is the reason that the sculptor fashions the statue, for example, to put on display for all to enjoy. As Aristotle explains:

In one sense then, (1) that out of which a thing comes to be and which persists, is called 'cause,' e.g. the bronze of the statue, the silver of the bowl, and the genera of which the bronze and the silver are species. In another sense (2) the form or the archetype, i.e. the statement of the essence, and its genera, are called 'causes' ... Again (3) the primary source of the change or coming to rest; e.g., the man who gave advice is a cause, the father is cause of the child, and generally what makes of what is made and what causes change of what is changed. Again (4) in the sense of end or 'that for the sake of which' a thing is done, e.g. health is the cause of walking about. ('Why is he walking about?' we say. 'To be healthy,' and, having said that, we think we have assigned the cause.)⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Physics*, II, 3, 194^b24-33, trans. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, in McKeon, 240-241. ἓνα μὲν οὖν τρόπον αἴτιον λέγεται τὸ ἐξ οὗ γίγνεται τι ἐνυπάρχοντος, οἷον ὁ χαλκὸς τοῦ ἀνδριάντος καὶ ὁ ἄργυρος τῆς φιάλης καὶ τὰ τούτων γένη ἄλλον δὲ τὸ εἶδος καὶ τὸ παράδειγμα, τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶν ὁ λόγος ὁ τοῦ τί ἦν εἶναι καὶ τὰ τούτου γένη ... ἔτι ὅθεν ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς μεταβολῆς ἢ πρώτη ἢ τῆς ἡρεμίσσεως, οἷον ὁ βουλευσας αἴτιος, καὶ ὁ πατὴρ τοῦ τέκνου, καὶ ὅλως τὸ ποιοῦν τοῦ ποιουμένου καὶ τὸ μεταβάλλον τοῦ μεταβαλλομένου. ἔτι ὡς τὸ τέλος τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶν τὸ οὗ ἕνεκα, οἷον τοῦ περιπατεῖν ἢ ὑγίειά διὰ τί γὰρ περιπατεῖ φαμέν ζῆνα ὑγιαίνης, καὶ εἰπόντες οὕτως οἰόμεθα ἀποδεδωκέναι τὸ αἴτιον.

However, one must be careful here. Using an artifact as an illustration of the four causes can be misleading, particularly in describing the final cause. For the statue one would understand the final cause to be something in the sculptor in terms of intention. But for Aristotle intention is not necessary for final causality. While nature mirrors deliberation in that it works to an end, for Aristotle all things in nature tend toward the full actualization because of their forms. He says:

Further, where a series has a completion, all the preceding steps are for the sake of that. Now surely as in intelligent action, so in nature; and as in nature, so it is in each action, if nothing interferes. Now intelligent action is for the sake of an end; therefore the nature of things also is so.... And since 'nature' means two things, the matter and the form, of which the latter is the end, and since all the rest is for the sake of the end, the form must be the cause in the sense of 'that for the sake of which.'⁴⁶

Causality in Thomas

With the notions of causality, Thomas again tracks Aristotle.⁴⁷ As Francis Meehan observes, "St. Thomas accords with Aristotle in the latter's general causal theory, not only as to its broad outlines, but frequently in the detailed expression of the same."⁴⁸ Meehan remarks that Thomas goes beyond Aristotle in his attempt to be more precise in the definition of cause. Where some may claim that Aristotle never committed himself to a precise definition of cause—claiming that he sometimes confused 'cause' with

⁴⁶ *Physics*, II, 8, 199^a9-12; 31, trans. Hardie and Gaye, in McKeon, 249-250. ἔτι ἐν ὅσοις τέλος ἔστι τι, τούτου ἕνεκα πράττεται τὸ πρότερον καὶ τὸ ἐφεξῆς. οὐκοῦν ὡς πράττεται, οὗ πέφυκε, καὶ ὡς πέφυκεν, οὕτω πράττεται ἕκαστον, ἂν μὴ τι ἐμποδίζῃ. ... καὶ ἐπεὶ ἡ φύσις διττή, ἡ μὲν ὡς ὕλη ἢ δ' ὡς μορφή, τέλος δ' αὕτη, τοῦ τέλους δὲ ἕνεκα τᾶλλα, αὕτη ἂν εἴη ἡ αἰτία, ἡ οὐ ἕνεκα.

⁴⁷ For an examination of causality, specifically efficient causality, both in Aristotle and Thomas see Francis X. Meehan, *Efficient Causality in Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1940).

⁴⁸ Meehan, *Efficient Causality*, 167.

'principle'—Thomas seeks to set forth a more specific definition. By carefully distinguishing a cause from a principle, Thomas gives a hint to an important emphasis that will characterize his metaphysical system. In his commentary he says, "Now it should be noted that, although a principle and a cause are the same in subject, they nevertheless differ in meaning; for the term principle implies an order or sequence, whereas the term cause implies some influence on the *being* of the thing caused."⁴⁹

However when one considers an important qualification that Thomas will make to Aristotle's metaphysics, the implications of causality will be profound with respect to the existence and nature of the Christian God. Thus, though at one level Thomas' use of these notions of causality will sound exactly like Aristotle, because of this additional metaphysical consideration the end result of causal reasoning will take Thomas to a place that Aristotle could not have envisioned.

What I have in mind here is the difference between an agent being the cause of the existence of a thing and the agent being the cause of a change in a thing. Rosemary Lauer argues that Thomas' notion of efficient causality is somewhat more complex than the straightforward way which one might expect, given that Thomas has seemingly borrowed the notion of efficient causality from Aristotle.⁵⁰ She observes that Thomas does not work with a univocal notion of efficient causality but rather utilizes a more complex, if subtle, understanding. The distinctions with which Thomas works have

⁴⁹ *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, Book V, Lesson 1, §751, trans. John P. Rowan (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Press, 1961), 277, emphasis added. *Sciendum est autem, quod principium et causa licet sint idem subiecto, differunt tamen ratione. Nam hoc nomen principium ordinem quemdam importat; hoc vero nomen causa, importat influxum quemdam ad esse causati.*

⁵⁰ Rosemary Lauer, "The Notion of Efficient Causality in the *Secunda Via*," *The Thomist* 38 (1974): 754-767.

implications for an understanding of his *Second Way*. Her argument that Thomas has this complex notion of efficient causality is based on Thomas' *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Lauer comments that Thomas notes

with apparent approval,¹ that Avicenna distinguished four modes of efficient causality... To these four modes of causality, Thomas continues, one can reduce everything which makes something *to be* in some way ... Any or all of these four modes, then, may enter into our definition of efficient cause.

¹That he does approve Avicenna's analysis is evident from the fact that he uses it in his *Commentary on the Physics*, Book II, lect. 5, without qualifying it as being the interpretation of another.⁵¹

While I believe that Lauer is correct in her analysis, I hesitate to try to make much of these distinctions in my own arguments about the *Second Way* since our knowledge of Thomas' views about these four modes comes from a source posterior to the writing of this part of the *Summa Theologiae*. I am not suggesting that it is altogether inappropriate to extrapolate backwards from later writings to earlier ones when one is attempting to exegete a particular passage. However, I have chosen, for better or worse, to confine myself to making explicit those views that can be demonstrated to have been held by Thomas at or prior to the writing of the *Second Way*.⁵²

There is one notion that Lauer highlights that bears mentioning at this point regarding one of the modes of efficient causality in Thomas that does occur in his writing prior to the *Second Way*. We can already see prior to the *Summa Theologiae* that Thomas

⁵¹ Lauer, p. 754.

⁵² Even with this one would have to consider the possibility that a writer's views have changed such that the earlier view is irrelevant to an interpretation of a later view. I believe that Thomas' views changed up to his writing of the *Second Way* only in that they developed and matured. I am not aware of any relevant doctrine that Thomas maintained in earlier writings which he repudiated prior to the writing of the *Second Way*.

distinguished between that which causes something to *be* and that which causes something to be *this particular way*. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Thomas argues:

Furthermore, effects correspond proportionally to their causes, so that we attribute actual effects to actual causes, potential effects to potential causes, and, similarly, particular effects to particular causes and universal effects to universal causes, as Aristotle teaches in Physics II. Now, the act of being is the first effect, and this is evident by reason of the universal presence of this act. It follows that the proper cause of the act of being is the first and universal agent, namely, God. Other agents, indeed, are not the cause of the act of being as such, but of being *this*—of being a man or being white, for example.⁵³

One might be able to anticipate the significance of this distinction for the *Second Way* especially when one factors in Thomas innovative philosophical move of the relation of existence (*esse*) and essence. While causes as such account for the existence of things being *what* they are, Thomas will maintain there is only one cause that can account for *that* they are. With this in mind, it might be helpful to look more closely at this distinction.

The Essence/Existence Distinction

In his earliest work, Thomas lays out for us the essence/existence distinction. In his discussion of separate substances he explains:

Whatever belongs to a thing is either caused by the principles of its nature (as the capacity for laughter in man) or comes to it from an extrinsic principle (as light in the air from the influence of the sun). Now being itself cannot be caused by the form or quiddity of a thing (by 'caused' I mean by an efficient cause), because that thing would then be its own cause and it would bring itself into being, which is impossible. It follows that everything whose being is distinct from its nature must

⁵³ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, 21, trans. Maurer, Vol. 2, p. 61, emphasis in Maurer. Adhuc effectus suis causis proportionaliter respondent: ut scilicet effectus in actu causis actualibus attribuamus, et effectus in potentia causis quae sunt in potentia; et similiter effectus particulares causis particularibus, universalibus vero universales; ut docet philosophus, in II physicorum. Esse autem est causatum primum: quod ex ratione suae communitatis apparet. Causa igitur propria essendi est agens primum et universale, quod Deus est. Alia vero agentia non sunt causa essendi simpliciter, sed causa essendi hoc, ut hominem vel album.

have being from another. And because everything that exists through another is reduced to that which exists through itself as to its first cause, there must be a reality that is the cause of being for all other things, because it is pure being.¹⁷ If this were not so, we would go on to infinity in causes, for everything that is not pure being has a cause of its being, as has been said. It is evident, then, that an intelligence is form and being, and that it holds its being from the first being, which is being in all its purity; and this is the first cause, God.

¹⁷ God is pure being (*esse tantum*), being itself (*ipsum esse*), subsistent being (*esse subsistens*). He is not a being (*ens*), that is to say, a thing that participates in being in a finite way. ...⁵⁴

For the most part, for all of the philosophical doctrines covered so far, Thomas follows Aristotle closely enough that perhaps no significant difference can be highlighted. With respect to Thomas' view of the relationship between essence and existence the departure from Aristotle is profound. Many Thomists have argued that the key to understanding Thomas' metaphysics is a proper understanding of the distinction between essence and existence, as well as a commitment to the primacy of existence (*esse*).⁵⁵

History of the Essence/Existence Distinction

The distinction between essence and existence together with Thomas' particular notion of *esse* will prove to be the most significant aspect of a proper understanding to his argument for the existence and nature of God if not a proper understanding of his entire

⁵⁴ *On Being and Essence*, IV, §7, trans. Maurer, 56-57. The annotation is Maurer's. Omne autem quod convenit alicui vel est causatum ex principiis naturae suae, sicut risibile in homine, vel advenit ab aliquo principio extrinseco, sicut lumen in aere ex influenza solis. Non autem potest esse quod ipsum esse sit causatum ab ipsa forma vel quidditate rei (dico sicut a causa efficiente) quia sic aliqua res esset sui ipsius causa et aliqua res seipsam in esse produceret, quod est impossibile. Ergo oportet quod omnis talis res, cuius esse est aliud quam natura sua habeat esse ab alio. Et quia omne, quod est per aliud, reducitur ad illud quod est per se sicut ad causam primam, oportet quod sit aliqua res, quae sit causa essendi omnibus rebus, eo quod ipsa est esse tantum. Alias iretur in infinitum in causis, cum omnis res, quae non est esse tantum, habeat causam sui esse, ut dictum est. Patet ergo quod intelligentia est forma et esse et quod esse habet a primo ente, quod est esse tantum. Et hoc est causa prima, quae Deus est.

⁵⁵ Controversy over the place of *esse* in Thomas' philosophy had erupted as early as the sixteenth century. For an early defense of the primacy of *esse* in the metaphysics of Thomas see Dominic Báñez, *The Primacy of Existence in Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Benjamin S. Llamzon (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1966).

metaphysic. While such notions warrant a separate treatment of their own, I must say enough about them here to show just how such a philosophical context figures into interpreting Thomas' *Second Way*. It is my assertion that unless one properly sees the argument in light of the essence/existence distinction together with this notion of *esse*, one will never understand the crux of the argument proper nor will one be able to see the further philosophical doctrines that are nested with it. Much of my defense of the argument's cogency will appeal to how these philosophical doctrines inform it. Indeed, it is precisely because many commentators and detractors fail to interpret the argument in light of these doctrines that they have the view and criticisms they do.

The essence/existence distinction maintains that there is a real difference between the essence and the existence of a thing. The essence of something is *what* it is. The existence of something is *that* (or whether) it is. Thomas was certainly not the first philosopher to make a specific mention of the essence/existence distinction though he seems to be the first for whom the distinction will figure so prominently in his own philosophy.

Aristotle seemingly never makes much metaphysically of this distinction.⁵⁶ He says, "For 'one man' and 'man' are the same thing, and so are 'existing man' and 'man' and the doubling of the words in 'one man' and 'one existing man' does not express anything

⁵⁶ For an interesting discussion of the lack of the category of existence in Greek thought, see Charles H. Kahn "Why Existence Does Not Emerge as a Distinct Concept in Greek Philosophy," in *Philosophies of Existence: Ancient and Medieval*, ed. Parviz Morewedge, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 7-17. However, it should be noted that Kahn's observation is not that Greek philosophy failed to observe a notion of existence that bears any resemblance to Thomas' *esse*. Rather, Kahn observes that the more modern quantificational (Quinian) understanding of existence is nowhere to be found in Greek thought—an observation that might not come as a surprise to most. It is interesting, however, that, while we might not expect such a notion to be found there, it seems that no other discernable notion is found either.

different."⁵⁷ Further, he says, "It belongs to the same kind of thinking to show *what* it is and *that* it is."⁵⁸ Of course Aristotle recognized that there was a difference between what something was and whether it existed. In his *Posterior Analytics* he explicitly acknowledged the difference between asking whether a thing exists and what is the nature of the thing.⁵⁹ Further on in his *Posterior Analytics* he speculates about whether the existence of a thing could be of its essence.⁶⁰ But I submit that none of his points constitutes the robust metaphysical notions that one will find in Thomas. For Aristotle, to be is to be a form. For Thomas, however, existence is something added to form (or to both form and matter) to make a thing (*ens*). What is latent in this metaphysical distinction for Thomas will take his philosophy far beyond the philosophy of Aristotle.

After Aristotle, the tenth century Arabic philosopher Alfarabi is the next to make mention of it.⁶¹ An extended quote will show how Alfarabi recognized this metaphysical subtlety.

⁵⁷ *Metaphysics* IV, 2, 1003^b26-27, trans. Ross, in McKeon, 733. ταὐτὸ γὰρ εἰς ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἄνθρωπος καὶ ὢν ἄνθρωπος, καὶ οὐχ ἕτερόν τι δηλοῖ κατὰ τὴν λέξιν ἐπαναδιπλούμενον τὸ εἰς ἄνθρωπος καὶ εἰς ὢν ἄνθρωπος.

⁵⁸ *Metaphysics* VI, 1, 1025^b15, trans. Ross, in McKeon, 778, emphasis added. διὰ τὸ τῆς αὐτῆς εἶναι διανοίας τὸ τε τί ἐστὶ δηλὸν ποιεῖν καὶ εἶ ἔστιν.

⁵⁹ *Posterior Analytics* II, 1, 89^b25.

⁶⁰ *Posterior Analytics* II, 7, 92^b13.

⁶¹ Some has suggested, however, that this distinction is embedded in some Neo-Platonist philosophy. See for example, Kevin Corrigan, "A Philosophical Precursor to the Theory of Essence and Existence in St. Thomas Aquinas," *The Thomist* 48 (1984): 219-240. Further, some might argue that Plotinus' argument for the simplicity of the first principle anticipates the Medieval doctrine of God's simplicity (which itself presupposes the discussion of the essence/existence distinction). See Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus* of the series *The Arguments of the Philosophers* edited by Ted Honderich (New York: Routledge, 1999). For a delightful summary and commentary on Gerson's work see Edward Feser, "Plotinus On Divine Simplicity, Part 1" [et al.] together with the links there to related articles by Feser available at <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2010/01/plotinus-on-divine-simplicity-part-i.html>, accessed 03/01/12.

We admit that essence and existence are distinct in existing things. The essence is not the existence, and it does not come under its comprehension. If the essence of man implied his existence, to conceive his essence would also be to conceive his existence, and it would be enough to know what a man is, in order to know that man exists, so that every representation would entail an affirmation. But the same token, existence is not included in the essence of things; otherwise it could become one of their constitutive characters, and the representation of what essence is would remain incomplete without the representation of its existence. And what is more, it would be impossible for us to separate them by the imagination. If man's existence coincided with his corporeal and animal nature, there would be nobody who, having an exact idea of what man is, and knowing is corporeal and animal nature, could question man's existence. But that is not the way it is, and we doubt the existence of things until we have direct perception of them through the senses, or mediate perception through a proof. Thus existence is not a constitutive character, it is only an accessory accident.⁶²

There are several things to note here. Even though Alfarabi acknowledges the distinction, even he did not put the distinction to any philosophical use in his own metaphysics. Avicenna will expand upon this distinction and it will figure somewhat into his own arguments for the existence of God.⁶³ However, philosophy will have to wait another three hundred years before the distinction plays the important role in metaphysics that it does in Thomas.

As I have suggested above, not only is Thomas Aquinas the first one in the history of philosophy to utilize the essence/existence distinction in this significant way in metaphysics, many would insist that a proper understanding of what this distinction

⁶² This is a tertiary quote. Djemil Saliba quotes Alfarabi in his *Etude sur la métaphysique*, pp. 84-85. Saliba is quoted by Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955, reprinted 1972), 186.

⁶³ For Avicenna's philosophy as such and his views on the essence/existence distinction see: Parviz Morewedge, *The Metaphysics of Avicenna (ibn Sīnā): A Critical Translation-commentary and Analysis of the Fundamental Arguments in Avicenna's Metaphysica in the Dānīsh Nāma-I 'alāī* (The Book of Scientific Knowledge) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973); Soheil M. Afnan, *Avicenna: His Life and Works* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958); Fazlur Rahman, "Essence and Existence in Avicenna," in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, Vol. IV, eds. Richard Hunt, Raymond Klibansky, and Lotte Labowsky (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1958), 1-16; Francis A. Cunningham, "Averroes vs. Avicenna on Being," *New Scholasticism* 48 (1974): 185-218; and Beatrice H. Zedler, "Another Look at Avicenna," *New Scholasticism* 50 (1976): 504-2521.

means is the key to the whole of Thomas' metaphysics.⁶⁴ Etienne Gilson, having quoted Alfarabi, is quick to point out that, though Alfarabi acknowledges this distinction, the metaphysics of Alfarabi in this regard is not the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas.

In order not to confuse this important metaphysical move with later ones, it should be noted that the primacy of essence dominates the whole argumentation. Not for an instant is there any doubt that existence is a predicate of essence, and because it is not essentially included in it, it is considered an 'accident.' We are still far away from the Thomistic position, which will deny both that existence is included in essence and that it is accidental to it. With Thomas Aquinas, existence will become the "act" of essence, and therefore the act of being; we are not there, but we are on the way to it.⁶⁵

Thomas' Contribution of Esse

The infinitive of the Latin verb *sum* (I am) is 'esse' and is often translated into English as 'being' or 'existence.' There can be problems however with the ambiguity of these English expressions. In English the term 'being' can serve either as a noun or as a verb while 'existence' is a noun. In the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, the term 'esse' more often serves as a technical expression to be distinguished from other metaphysical categories.⁶⁶ While it was not uncommon in the Middle Ages for philosophers to use the

⁶⁴ To be fair, not all philosophers who would name the name of Thomas Aquinas would concur that the essence/existence distinction—together with its attendant doctrine of the primacy of *esse*—is central to Thomas' philosophy. Within intramural debates, those Thomists who insist on the primacy of *esse* (which is only possible if existence is distinct from essence) are called existential Thomists. The philosopher who is probably most responsible for the contemporary revival of existential Thomism is the founder of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Etienne Gilson. For a look at the life, times, and works of Gilson see, Laurence K. Shook, *Etienne Gilson* (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984). For a critical study of Gilson's interpretation of Thomas see John M. Quinn, *The Thomism of Etienne Gilson: A Critical Study* (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1971). For a rejoinder to the responses to Quinn's work together with a defense of Quinn's position see John D. Beach, "Another Look at the Thomism of Etienne Gilson," *New Scholasticism* 50 (1976): 522-528.

⁶⁵ Gilson, *History*, 186.

⁶⁶ For a thorough analysis of Thomas' view of being and its comparisons and contrasts with other views see Etienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 2d ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952).

term 'esse' as a synonym for 'essence,' Thomas explicitly distinguished the two, describing the latter as that which receives *esse*. In his metaphysical schema, form and matter in sensible things together constitute an essence. Essence and *esse* together constitute a being (*ens*, the participle of the Latin verb "to be").⁶⁷ Thus, for Thomas, 'esse' is more of a verb than a noun as one might expect since it is an infinitive. It is sometimes—perhaps awkwardly—translated as the "act of existing." But what this phrase lacks in facility it makes up in clarity. Thomas regards existence as an act. It, in effect, is what essences *do* or *can do*.

Already one can perhaps see how this way of understanding existence serves his argument for the existence of God. If existence is an act that essences do, they cannot do it to themselves. This is so because they would have to exist before they exist. Thus several things seem to follow. First, if something has existence, then either that existence is of its essence or not. If it is of its essence to exist, this is God. If it is not of the essence of it to exist then its existing must be caused by something else. That something else which is doing the causing must itself exist (and must exist by virtue of its essence or not). There cannot be an infinite series of things being caused to exist as an explanation of their being caused to exist. Whatever is causing them to exist must itself be such that it is of its essence to exist. Such a being is uncaused existence.

⁶⁷ It must be said that the matter is somewhat more detailed than I have described. Just to unpack his understanding of the term 'essence' would almost require rewriting the first chapter of *On Being and Essence* since I could hardly state it more succinctly than Thomas has done. But to do so is not only beyond the scope of this work but is also unnecessary for my purposes. I only bring up enough about essence in order to make my point about *esse* which is more germane to my defense of the *Second Way*.

A few remaining remarks about *esse* are in order.⁶⁸ In the metaphysics of Thomas, *esse* is a primary notion. This means that existence as such is the most fundamental object of consideration in all of philosophy. Since existence is that which makes all real things real and is that which all real things share, a study of reality as such invariably takes one to a study of existence.⁶⁹ The crucial nature of such a consideration is summarized by Gilson:

The failures of the metaphysicians flow from their unguarded use of a principle of unity present in the human mind. This new conclusion brings us face to face with the last and truly crucial problem: what is it which the mind is bound to conceive both as belonging to all things and as not belonging to any two things in the same way? Such is the riddle which every man is asked to read on the threshold of metaphysics. It is an easy one, as, after all, was that of the Sphinx; yet many a good man has failed to say the word, and the path to the metaphysical Sphinx is strewn with the corpses of philosophers. The word is—Being.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ For an extremely helpful (short but dense) look at Thomas' notion of existence see, Joseph Owens, *An Interpretation of Existence* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1968). Reprint, (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, The University of St. Thomas, 1985). Owen's chapter titled "The Grasp of Existence" is one of the most important observations I have ever read regarding why it is that many philosophers are scandalized by their own way of thinking (and thus philosophizing) about existence. He points out that since we can never think about anything without thinking of it conceptually, this necessarily "converts" every object of thought into a grammatical noun. This, then, creates the danger of mistakingly assuming that the concept is referring to an actual thing in reality. Since existence is not itself a thing but, instead, is an act, treating it as a thing collapses into Platonism. See, for example the discussion of existence in J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 188-191. Note especially the comment "A theory of existence must allow for the fact that existence itself exists. ... If existence itself does not exist, then nothing else could exist in virtue of having existence." (188-189)

⁶⁹ For one of the best analyses of how overlooking this fundamental consideration has affected the history of philosophy, see the Harvard lectures by Etienne Gilson published as *The Unity of Philosophical Experience: A Survey Showing the Unity of Medieval, Cartesian, and Modern Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1937) reprinted (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1982).

⁷⁰ Gilson, *Unity*, 312. The how and why of this saga concerning the philosophers' groping and missing being is summed up in his *Being and Some Philosophers*: "The principle of principles is that a philosopher should always put first in his mind what is actually first in reality. What is first in reality need not be what is the most easily accessible to human understanding; it is that whose presence or absence entails the presence or absence of all the rest in reality. The present book is not an attempt to show what comes first in reality, for all philosophers know it inasmuch as they are, not philosophers, but men. Our only problem will be to know how it is that what men so infallibly know *qua* men, they so often overlook *qua* philosophers." (p. ix)

For Thomas, not only is being the most important fundamental consideration in doing metaphysics if not philosophy itself, but a proper consideration of being will invariably lead one to the God who *is* Being.⁷¹ This, I have no doubt, was in the back of Thomas' mind when he penned his *Five Ways*.

Further, for Thomas, existence as such was unlimited and contained all perfections. Here we see an inverse of Aristotle. For Aristotle, the infinite was largely a negative concept, being that which is most indefinite. The negation that characterizes the infinite is given positive content by the introduction of form, since for Aristotle form is the highest metaphysical category. To be is to be a form.

John D. Caputo sums it up thus:

By transposing the language of potency and act to the order of Being, and thus extending them beyond the order of changing, sensible substance, Thomas has shattered the Greek predilection for limit, definition, structure, form. In Aristotle μορφή [morphē, form] is the principle which gives structure and determination. The infinite, the indefinite, is a negative principle for the Greeks, and as such it must be brought into subordination to a higher principle of order. Form must rule over chaos; ὕλη [hylē, matter] must take on μορφή.⁷²

For Thomas the reverse is true. Infinite being is that which possesses all perfections in superabundance. *Esse* as such is infinite in all perfections. It is limited, if you will, only when conjoined with form or with form and matter. It is as if any given creature contains the fullness and perfections of existence only up to the extent that its

⁷¹ In *Summa Contra Gentiles* I, 22, Thomas connects this understanding of God to the passage of Scripture in Exodus 3:13-14: "Then Moses said to God, 'Indeed, *when* I come to the children of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they say to me, "What *is* His name?" what shall I say to them?' And God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And He said, 'Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you.'"

⁷² John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 125-126.

essence or nature or form allows. Like a balloon that limits and shapes the air that infuses it, the essence of the creature bounds the otherwise limitless fullness of the perfections of existence.⁷³ Again, Caputo sums it up thus:

Now, for St. Thomas *esse*, which is beyond form, is beyond the finitude of form. Hence, St. Thomas teaches an infinite being itself, being infinitely, without limit or restriction. In the order of *esse* as opposed to form, it is the actual principle which is infinite while the potential principle gives limit or determination.⁷⁴

This is why, after Thomas sets forth his arguments for the existence of God, the classical attributes of God cascade one after another. For Thomas, God does not *have* form but *is His own* form.⁷⁵ If He is that being whose essence *is* His existence, then He contains all the perfections that there can be. As Thomas goes on to say very soon after the *Five Ways*, "All perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied, pre-exist in God unitedly."⁷⁶ Given that *esse* is the essence of God Himself, Thomas will argue that every creature who possesses existence yet whose essence does not entail its existence, will be seen to have its own existence caused by that whose essence is its own existence and thus is uncaused.

Last, I should like to comment on an issue that might arise in this context. It perhaps would strike one as odd that Thomas could utilize the philosophy and arguments

⁷³ I am grateful to philosopher Max Herrera for this metaphor.

⁷⁴ Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas*, 126.

⁷⁵ See *Summa Theologiae*, I, 3, 2 and I, 3, 7. Thomas says that "God is absolute form, or rather absolute being" (*Deus sit ipsa forma, vel potius ipsum esse*). This means the same thing as saying that God is His own essence, or His own substance, or His own being. This being so, strictly speaking God does not have form that is *conjoined* with His being as if to say that God's form and God's being were really distinct as they are in creatures.

⁷⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 13, 5. *Omnes rerum perfectiones, quae sunt in rebus creatis divisim et multipliciter, in Deo praeexistunt unite.*

of Aristotle and yet come to a significantly different conclusion regarding God. The reason this is so, as I have argued, has everything to do with this innovation of Thomas of the notion of *esse*. As Gilson deftly observes:

Thomism was not the upshot of a better understanding of Aristotle. It did not come out of Aristotelianism by way of evolution, but of revolution. Thomas uses the language of Aristotle everywhere to make the Philosopher say that there is only one God, the pure Act of Being, Creator of the world, infinite and omnipotent, a providence for all that which is, intimately present to every one of his creatures, especially to men, every one of whom is endowed with a personally immortal soul naturally able to survive the death of its body. The best way to make Aristotle say so many things he never said was not to show that, had he understood himself better than he did, he would have said them. For indeed Aristotle seems to have understood himself pretty well. He has said what he had to say, given the meaning which he himself attributed to the principles of his own philosophy. Even the dialectical acumen of Saint Thomas Aquinas could not have extracted from the principles of Aristotle more than what they could possibly yield. The true reason why his conclusions were different from those of Aristotle was that his own principles themselves were different. . . . In order to metamorphose the doctrine of Aristotle, Thomas has ascribed a new meaning to the principles of Aristotle. As a philosophy, Thomism is essentially a metaphysics. It is a revolution in the history of the metaphysical interpretation of the first principle, which is "being."⁷⁷

Conclusion

In this paper I have taken a look at writings and philosophical doctrines antecedent Thomas Aquinas's *Five Ways* with particular attention on the *Second Way*. My contention was that these notions are essential to an understanding of Thomas' arguments of God's existence. I have suggested that Thomas' thoughts track closely the rich metaphysical scheme of Aristotle, including his notions of form and matter, act and potency, and causality. But I have also argued that Thomas utilizes an important philosophical innovation—the essence/existence distinction and the notion of *esse* as the

⁷⁷ Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy*, 365.

act of existing—that makes all the difference. This difference is what enables Thomas to employ the arguments of Aristotle and yet come to a radically different conclusion.

Whether this conclusion is itself warranted even given these metaphysical workings or whether the argument can withstand other objections are questions for a separate inquiry.