A THOMISTIC ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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Some Definitions
Some Definitions

**SENSIBLE**
- A sensible object or thing is that which can be known by means of the senses.
- For all intents and purposes, a sensible object is a physical object.

**FORM & MATTER**
- Form is that metaphysical aspect of a thing by virtue of which the thing is the kind of thing it is
- In Aristotle, form is roughly equivalent to essence or nature.
- The form of a thing exists as a particular in the thing and as a universal in the intellect of the knower of the thing.
Some Definitions

FORM & MATTER

• Matter is that metaphysical aspect of a sensible thing that individuates the form, making a kind of thing an individual of that kind.

Some Definitions

HYLOMORPHISM

• Spelled ‘hylemorphism’ by some, hylomorphism is the necessary twofold composition, material and formal, of everything in the sensible world.
• The term is from the Greek:
  hyle (ὕλη) = matter
  morphe (μορφή) = form
Some Definitions

ACT & POTENCY

- Sometimes referred to as actuality and potentiality, act and potency are how Aristotle and Aquinas account for change in sensible objects.
- Potency = the power to be actual or real
- Act (or actuality) = to be real
- A potency is actualized by a cause.

A person who is actually sitting but not actually standing, nevertheless has the potential or power or capacity to stand.
Some Definitions

ACT & POTENCY

Upon standing, the person actualizes his potential to stand, his standing becomes actual and his sitting now becomes potential.

Some Definitions

ACT & POTENCY

While a man who is actually sitting has the potential to stand,
Some Definitions

ACT & POTENCY
While a man who is actually sitting has the potential to stand, or who is actually standing has the potential to sit.

ACT & POTENCY
While a man who is actually sitting has the potential to stand, or who is actually standing has the potential to sit, a rock lacks the potency to stand or sit.
Some Definitions

ACT & POTENCY

Note, therefore, the difference between the non-existence of the standing in a sitting man and the non-existence of the standing in the rock.

THE ESSENCE / EXISTENCE DISTINCTION
I. What Is the Essence/Existence Distinction?

A. The essence/existence distinction maintains that there is a real difference between the essence and the existence in a created thing.
B. The essence of something is *what* it is.
C. The existence of something is *that* it is.

II. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aristotle

A. For Aristotle, to be is to be a form or essence.
B. For the most part, Aristotle does not go on to discuss the existence of a thing in addition to its essence.
C. As such, there is no philosophical distinction in Aristotle's philosophy between essence and existence.
II. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aristotle

C. Indeed, there does not seem to be a distinctive philosophical discussion of existence as such in any Greek philosophy.

III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

A. The significance
   1. Aquinas’s doctrine of existence together with his doctrine of the distinction of essence and existence serve as the most radical break he has with Aristotle.
III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

A. The significance

2. The doctrines constitute a metaphysical innovation whose significance is virtually inestimable.

3. His doctrine of existence together with the essence/existence distinction are what enable Aquinas to turn the pagan philosophy of Aristotle into the Christian philosophy that Thomism is, particularly regarding the existence and attributes of God and the doctrine of creation.
III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

B. Aquinas lays out his understanding of the essence/existence distinction in his *On Being and Essence*.

Transcribed from Thomas Aquinas's *On Being and Essence*, translated by Armand Maurer.

"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 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. 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.


Some Definitions

• Have you noticed up to this point one definition that is conspicuously missing?
• We have mentioned form, essence, matter, act, potency, cause, hylomorphism, the essence/existence distinction.
III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

D. Comments about existence.

1. As stated earlier, Greek philosophy never had a deliberate discussion of existence as such.

2. Aquinas's contribution of a doctrine of existence as such is a dramatic philosophical innovation.
III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

D. Comments about existence.

3. The infinitive of the Latin verb sum (I am) is 'esse' and is often translated into English as 'being' or 'existence.'

5. In Aquinas's metaphysical schema, form and matter in sensible things together constitute an essence.

6. Essence and esse together constitute a being (ens, the participle of the Latin verb "to be").
III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

D. Comments about existence.

7. As matter is in potency to form, matter and form together (i.e., an essence) is in potency to existence (esse).

8. Form actualizes matter; existence (esse) actualizes essence.

E. Aquinas on existence.

1. For Aquinas, esse is an act.

2. Joseph Owens (An Interpretation of Existence) warns us not to scandalized by the fact that our minds always conceptualize existence, treating it like a noun or thing.

3. But existence itself is not a thing, but is an act; that which actualizes an essence, making the essence a real being.
III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

E. Aquinas on existence.

4. *Esse* (existence) as such is unlimited and contains all perfections.

5. *Esse* is limited, if you will, only when conjoined with form or with form and matter.

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The Balloon Illustration

- The air expands to fill the balloon up to the extent of and according to the shape of the balloon.
COMMENTS ABOUT EXISTENCE

The Balloon Illustration
✓ By parallel, the esse (the act of existing) of a creature "fills up" to the extent of and according to the "shape" of the form or essence of that creature.

COMMENTS ABOUT EXISTENCE

✓ A horse contains all the perfections of existence up to the extent of and according to the limitations of the essence of horse.
✓ A human contains all the perfections of existence and up to the extent of and according to the limitations of the essence of human.
III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

F. God as the Pure Act of Existence

1. Since in God there is no essence/existence distinction, then all the perfections of being exist in God because God's being is not conjoined with (and, thus, limited by) form.

"God is absolute form, or rather absolute being"

(Deus sit ipsa forma, vel potius ipsum esse). *Summa Theologiae*, I, 3, 2 and I, 3, 7.
III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

F. God as the Pure Act of Existence

1. Since in God there is no essence/existence distinction, then the perfections of being as such exist in God because God's being is not conjoined with (and, thus, limited by) form.

2. An infinite being (i.e., a being whose essence is esse) is that which possesses all perfections in superabundance.

"All perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied, pre-exist in God unitedly."

Summa Theologiae, I, 13, 5.
III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

F. God as the Pure Act of Existence

3. This is the philosophical grounding for all the classical attributes of God.

4. Marrying the metaphysics of Aristotle with the innovations of esse and the essence/existence distinction, Aquinas was able to demonstrate the existence and attributes of a God that Aristotle's philosophy could never foresee.

"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.

Gilson, History of Christian Philosophy, 365.
III. The Essence/Existence Distinction in Aquinas

G. The Existence of God

1. As stated, for Aquinas, esse is an act.
2. Further, for Aquinas, in God there is no essence/existence distinction.
3. This means that God is pure act, pure actuality, being itself (ipsum esse subsistens), uncaused, infinite, and eternal perfection.

5. With these notions in mind, one can build an argument for the existence of God from the existence of sensible (physical) things.
THE THOMISTIC ARGUMENT

THE ESSENCE / EXISTENCE DISTINCTION

Remember ...

- Essence - WHAT something is
- Existence - THAT something is
Consider yourself as a human being:

Your essence is what makes you a human.
Your existence is what makes you a being.

THE ESSENCE / EXISTENCE DISTINCTION

"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 ... ."
Whatever is true of you, is true of you either because of your essence or not.

The reason you have rationality is because you are a human.

It is part of your essence as a human to have rationality.
You have rationality by virtue of being human.

Rationality is caused by your essence.

The reason you have risibility is because you are a human.

It is part of your essence as a human to have risibility.
You have risibility by virtue of being human.

Risibility is caused by your essence.

Is the reason you are here because you are a human? Is it part of your essence as a human to be here?
Are you here by virtue of being a human? Is being here caused by your essence?

Why, then, are you able to be here even though it is not part of your essence to be here? You are here because you caused yourself to be here.
Now, instead of your rationality, risibility, or being here, consider your very act of existing.

Is the reason you exist because you are a human?
Is it part of your essence to exist?
Do you exist by virtue of being human?
Is your existence caused by your essence?
"Now being itself cannot be caused by the form ... 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 have being from another."

On Being and Essence, IV, §7, trans. Maurer, 56-57
But if you are not the cause of your own existence, then your existence must be caused by something else.

But what about that thing's existence?
It either exists by virtue of its essence or it is caused to exist by something else.

Can this go on to infinity?
"... There must be a reality that is the cause of being for all other things, because it is pure being. 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."

*On Being and Essence, IV, §7, trans. Maurer, 56-57*

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**First Way**

"If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. *But this cannot go on to infinity*, because then there would be no first mover ..."
First Way
"If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover ..."

Second Way
"Now in efficient causes, it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause."
Second Way

"Now in efficient causes, it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause."

Third Way

"But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes."
"But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes."

The Universe began to exist. Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its existence. Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.
The Universe began to exist.
Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its existence.
Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.

Not: If (since) there cannot be an infinite regress, there must be a first cause.
There cannot be an infinite regress.
Therefore, there is a first cause.

1. ~IR ⊃ F
2. ~IR / ∴ F
THE THOMISTIC ARGUMENT

Rather: If (since) there is a first cause, there cannot be an infinite regress. There is a first cause. Therefore, there cannot be an infinite regress.

1. IR ⊃ ~F
2. F / :: ~IR

Some Definitions

A word about current causality

• If you saw a giant glass ball, you might ask how did it come to be.
Some Definitions

A word about current causality

• But if you were hearing music, you would not ask how it came to be, but rather you would ask what is causing it to be right now.

THE THOMISTIC ARGUMENT

A word about current causality

This is how Aquinas understands existence.
THE THOMISTIC ARGUMENT

Infinite *per se*

vs.

Infinite *per accidens*

"In efficient causes it is impossible to proceed to infinity *per se*—thus, there cannot be an infinite number of causes that are *per se* required for a certain effect. ... But it is not impossible to proceed to infinity *accidentally* as regards efficient causes ..."

*ST 1, Q. 46, ii, ad 7*
"It is accidental to this particular man as generator to be generated by another man; for he generates as a man, and not as the son of another man."

ST 1, Q, 46, ii,iad 7
"The proof in no way considers movement as a present reality the existence of which requires an efficient cause in the past, which is God. It aims simply at establishing that in the universe as actually given, movement, as actually given, would be unintelligible without a first Mover communicating it to all things. In other words the impossibility of an infinite regress must not be taken as an infinite regress in time, but as applying to the present consideration of the universe."

Therefore, it must be the case that the existence of the universe is caused by something whose essence it is to exist.
"It is evident, then, ... that it holds its being from the first being, which is being in all its purity; and this is the first cause, God.


"All men know this to be God."

Summa Theologiae I, 2, 3
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.'" Exodus 3:13-14