

Ways Two and Three: Thomas Aquinas on the Intelligibility of Being

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In Q2, article 3 of the first part of the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argues that we can in fact demonstrate God's existence, using only our natural reason (without resort to faith). His main argument in favor of this conclusion is an appeal to the authority of St. Paul's letter to the Romans 1:20. Aquinas considers three objections to his position:

1. The existence of God is an article of faith, revealed by the Scriptures, not a matter of rational proof.
2. We cannot know God's essence or nature (as Aquinas himself concedes). How can we prove the existence of an utterly unknown thing?
3. Since we cannot see God directly in this life (as, again, Aquinas would concede), we can know God only on the basis of His effects (i.e., creation). However, creation is finite, and God is infinite, and we cannot infer an infinite cause from a finite effect.

Aquinas responds to objection 1 by arguing that the existence of God is not an article of faith but a "preamble" of faith, a necessary presupposition of faith. Faith involves believing things because we are convinced that God has revealed them to us. Thus, faith presupposes that there exists a God who could be the source of such revelation.

In response to objection 2, Aquinas points out that we can infer the existence of something as the cause of things we do understand. We cannot prove that a being with nature G exists (where G = God's essence), since we do not know what G is, but we can prove that something exists that is the cause of everything else, and we can from this infer certain things about what the unknown G must be like (more about this later).

Aquinas agrees with objection 3 to this extent: perfect knowledge of God is not possible through the knowledge of his effects. Such perfect knowledge is available only to the blessed (angels and saints in heaven) who enjoy a direct vision of God. However, an imperfect but nonetheless valid knowledge of God is possible here and now.

Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of proofs or “demonstrations”: a demonstration of the bare fact (*quia*), and a demonstration of the fact according to its reason (*propter quid*). The first kind of demonstration does not provide us with an explanation or scientific understanding of the fact that it is demonstrated, while the second kind does. A *quia* demonstration moves from known effects to a hypothesized cause, while a *propter quid* demonstration moves from known cause to known effect. The purpose of the *propter quid* demonstration is not to prove that something exists, but to explain why something exists, to lay bare the explanatory structure of the world. For example, if I explain how the build-up of electrical charge in clouds causes lightning, what I've accomplished is not a proof that lightning exists (we already knew that), but an explanation of why lightning exists.

The *quia* demonstrations are not like this. When a crime scene investigator infers the existence of a murderer from telltale signs at the scene, he is not explaining why the murder occurred. The crime scene may tell him nothing about the murderer's motives or relationship to the victim. Instead, he is inferring that a cause of the visible signs (i.e., a murderer) must exist. Similarly, Aquinas's demonstrations of God's existence are all *quia* demonstrations, inferences leading from effects to a hypothetical cause.

A *quia* demonstration is not undeniable in the way that a mathematical proof or a logically impeccable scientific explanation are. If one proves a theorem in geometry, it is impossible to accept the axioms and definitions and deny the theorem without contradicting oneself. The conclusions of a *quia* demonstration are not inescapable in this same way. One can always simply refuse to posit a cause for the phenomena in question.

However, Aquinas is claiming that the *quia* demonstrations of God's existence are good enough and strong enough to convince any perfectly reasonable inquirer. To refuse to accept the conclusion that God exists, given the demonstration, is to betray (Aquinas would say) an intellectual flaw, a regrettable insensitivity to good and sufficient reasons. When talking about Aquinas's "proofs" of God's existence, we should think of proof in a legal setting: proven beyond a *reasonable* doubt (not beyond all doubt).

So, in evaluating the proofs, we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that Aquinas is aiming too high (by pointing out, for example, that Aquinas's proofs aren't proofs in a

deductive or mathematical sense), or that he is aiming too low (by assuming that all that he is trying to establish is that one can, if one chooses, believe in God without being unreasonable).

One more thing to bear in mind when reading the five ways in the *Summa Theologica* (Q2, article 3): the *Summa* was intended as an *introductory* textbook in *sacred doctrine*. It would be a mistake to expect that we would find here the most complete and rigorous versions of the proofs that Aquinas was capable of producing. These are instead very brief, even cursory, abstracts of the actual proofs. For the details, we need to refer to other texts of Aquinas (especially the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *On Being and Essence*), and to the texts upon which Aquinas is relying (especially those of Avicenna and Maimonides). For example, the first and third ways are clearly drawn from Maimonides, and the second from Avicenna.

A. The Second Way (from Efficient Causation).

In moving from the First Way to the Second, the focus of the argument shifts from the explanation of change to the explanation of the existence of things. Like the first way, Aquinas is concerned with the present explanation of the present existence of things. Aquinas thinks that it is possible that I was caused to exist by my father, and he by his father, and so on ad infinitum. Aquinas would call such a series a chain of “accidental” causes, since my father caused me to exist by virtue of being a man, and not by virtue of being the son of his father or the grandson of his grandfather, or anything of the kind.

What Aquinas and Avicenna are interested in explaining is why I exist (as a man) here and now.

Here are the bare bones of the argument:

1. Something exists (whose nature is not identical to its own act of existence).
2. Unless a thing's nature is identical to its act of existence, its existence must have a cause (an "efficient cause").
3. So, there is a cause of the existence of the thing mentioned in 1.
4. Nothing causes itself to exist.
5. Therefore, the thing mentioned in 1 is caused to exist by something else.
6. If this cause does not have a nature identical to its own act of existence, then it too must have a cause (from 2).
7. The chain of causes implied by 1-6 cannot extend to infinity.
8. Therefore, there must exist a thing whose nature is identical to its own act of existence, which is the ultimate cause of the thing mentioned in 1.

This argument implicitly assumes the real distinction between essence and existence, which I will discuss a little later. Something is contingent if its nature is not identical to its own act of existence. In the case of contingent things, we can distinguish between the thing's nature (what it is) and the fact of its existence (that it is). There is in this case a real composition of essence and existence: existence is something that happens to the essence (thought of as a bare possibility of a being of a certain kind), and the essence

shapes or modifies the act of existence, making the thing's existence the existence of a thing of a particular nature. A non-contingent or necessary being is one whose very nature is identical to its existence. Nothing modifies or limits the existence of the thing: its existence is a "pure" existence, unmodified or qualified. There is no way of specifying the abstract nature of such a thing so as to consider its existence merely possible: no mere possibility is actualized by the thing's existence. Its possibility consists in the fact that it actually exists.

Aquinas does not assume that a necessary being exists. He does not even assume that it is possible that such a being exists (if he did, he would have had recourse to the modal version of Anselm's ontological argument), nor even that we can conceive of what such a necessary being would be like. He admits that the nature of such a necessary being is incomprehensible to us. Nonetheless, all five ways in the end are designed to establish (on the basis of the principles of causation) that such a necessary being must exist.

There are two points in the argument that invite the attack of the skeptic: steps 2 and 7. As I mentioned above, the skeptic can always deny the necessity of postulating a cause of the existence of something (by denying premise 2). Aquinas cannot show that there is anything illogical or self-contradictory about such a denial. Nonetheless, Aquinas would claim (plausibly, I think) that such a denial is not perfectly rational. A perfectly rational person always expects to find a cause in such cases. Even the atheist operates this way when the existence of God is not at stake. The Thomist can accuse the atheist or agnostic

here of “special pleading”: denying a principle in this context that he or she would never deny in other contexts.

What about premise 7? Why couldn't there be an infinite regress of causes? Again, we must remember that Aquinas is denying the existence of an infinite chain of *essential* causes, not of merely *accidental* ones. Aquinas would argue that a chain of causes going backward in time could be infinite, since it would be a chain of merely accidental causes. The real cause of the existence of each thing in the chain would be the timeless God: the previous members of the chain would be merely instruments used by God. Aquinas clarifies what he means here by means of his hammer illustration. Consider a shoemaker who has made a pair of shoes. The shoemaker and his craft is the essential efficient cause of the existence of the pair of shoes. Let's suppose that the use of a hammer is an indispensable part of the shoemaker's craft. Then the involvement of at least one hammer would be part of the essential cause. However, the number of hammers would not be. Suppose that the shoemaker used several hammers in making this pair, because the first hammer wore out, the second was lost, the third borrowed by a neighbor, and so on. The number of hammers involved makes no difference to the origin of the shoes. Similarly, the number of ancestors that a person has is only an accidental feature of his cause, since human parents are only instruments God uses in causing the existence of particular men. God could have created an infinitely old universe, using infinitely many ancestors as instruments in the creation of each human being without violating the principle in premise 7, since the chain of essential causation would in each case terminate in God.

Suppose the skeptic believes that my present existence is *essentially* caused by my own past existence, and, more remotely, by the past existence of my ancestors. In this case, Aquinas would deny that the causal chain could be infinite, even if it does go back in time. Thus, the important distinction is between essential causation and accidental causation, not between simultaneous causation and causation through time. Aquinas assumes that causation through time is always accidental causation, since he can't accept that a past event could be the essential cause of a present event (like my present existence). However, if a skeptic denies this and argues that we do receive our present existence from the past (by a kind of "inertia of existence" principle: whatever exists tends to go on existing), then Aquinas will deny that this chain of existence-receptions can go back to infinity, again because such a chain would fail to explain why anything in the chain (and the chain as a whole) has come to exist.

B. The Third Way.

This is almost word-for-word a translation of an argument of Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Here is my reconstruction of the argument:

1. If everything that exists is potentially non-existent, then it is possible for everything to cease to exist simultaneously (= an event of cosmic annihilation).
2. Whatever is possible will, given an infinite amount of time, inevitably happen at least once.

3. So, if there has been an infinite amount of time, and if everything that exists is potentially non-existent, then an event of cosmic annihilation has already happened at least once.
4. Once an event of cosmic annihilation has occurred, nothing whatsoever will ever afterward come into existence, since nothing comes from nothing.
5. So, if there has been an infinite amount of time, and if everything that exists is potentially non-existent, then nothing whatsoever now exists.
6. But, obviously, there are things that do now exist.
7. So, if there has been an infinite amount of time, then there is at least one thing that exists that is not potentially non-existent (i.e., something that exists necessarily and eternally).

The argument implicitly proposes a dilemma for the agnostic: either there has been an infinite amount of time, or not. If there has, the argument establishes the existence of a necessary being. If there hasn't been an infinite amount of time, then there must exist a necessary and timeless being that can causally explain the beginning of time. So, either way, a necessary being must exist.

Aquinas adds a second stage to Maimonides's argument. He wants to establish not only the existence of a necessary being, but of a necessary being that has existence "in and of itself", that doesn't derive its necessary existence from something else. Here again Aquinas has recourse to his no-infinite-regress assumption: the chain of causation explaining why derivatively necessary beings are necessary must terminate in a thing that

is non-derivatively necessary, and this being will be God (a being whose essence is its existence).

C. Infinitely complex essences

Aristotelians assume that no essence can be infinitely complex. We might try to gloss this as ‘no essence contains infinitely many parts.’ That, however, would be a mistake: an essence can be infinitely broad (with infinitely many, distinct, non-overlapping parts), but it can’t be infinitely deep, in the following sense. The essence cannot have a proper part p_1 that contains a proper part p_2 that contains..., ad infinitum. If it did, it would be unintelligible in itself. No one could ever understand the essence, even if they had infinitely many moments in which to learn and an infinite memory in which to store all the facts, since even a partial understanding of the essence would be impossible. In order to understand an essence *partially*, the partial understanding must be part of a potentially infinite series of states of partial understanding that approaches complete understanding in the limit. However, if the essence is infinitely deep, then one never approaches complete understanding, even as a limit, since there is always some part the understanding of which is infinitely remote. This distinction between infinite depth and breadth, and its importance for the cosmological argument, was first noted by Barry Miller (1992).

1. The Second Way Revisited

The Second Way argues that there must be a first cause whose essence is existence, on the grounds that every finite thing (thing whose essence is not identical to existence itself) has a *per se* cause, and no *per se* causal regress can be infinite. A *per se* causal series cannot be infinite, since this would entail that the essence of each member of the series is infinitely deep and so unintelligible.

This raises two challenges: (a) why think that all finite things have a cause at all (*per se* or *per accidens*)? and (b) why think that all finite things have *per se* causes (i.e., why couldn't there be a *per accidens* infinite regress, with no *per se* causes at all)?

a. Why must finite things have a cause at all?

The Aristotelian answer to question (i) turns on the usual axiom of intelligibility: everything in reality is intelligible in itself (although not necessarily intelligible to us). In addition, we would need the following assumptions:

- (1) If a finite being is contingent (it might not have existed), and it has no cause whatsoever (not even *per accidens*), then it is unintelligible in itself.
- (2) If a finite being is necessary, then it must either be necessary in itself, or else it has a cause from which it derives its necessity.
- (3) No finite being is necessary in itself.

You may recognize assumption (2) from the second part of the Third Way. This is one way in which the Third Way patches a hole in the second way.

b. Why must there be *per se* causes for all finite things?

Now, let's turn to question (b). Why couldn't there be causes in every case but not *per se* causes? In other words, why couldn't there be an infinite *per accidens* regress with no *per se* cause at all? Why do we need *per se* causes? The Aristotelian has two possible responses. One might simply assert that a contingent thing is not intelligible in itself unless it has a *per se* cause, that is, if the very essence of the thing includes its being caused by something in some way. However, there is a second, more interesting response, one involving the Third Way.

2. Bringing in the Third Way

Suppose there is an infinite *per accidens* regress, and each thing in the series has no *per se* cause. Now, just as there can be no *per se* infinite causal regress, there also cannot be a *per se* infinite causal progress. That is, it cannot be the case that each thing is such that it essentially has a certain effect, and that effect essentially has a further effect, and so on ad infinitum. Such an infinite progress would also require each thing to have an essence that's infinitely deep and so unintelligible. Thus, in the world we're imagining, no effect has any cause essentially, and no cause has any effect essentially. All of the causal connections are accidental in both directions. (Let's call this a doubly accidental series.)

This is where the Third Way comes in again. There are two cases to consider:

(A) at some point in the causal regress, we reach a cause that exists necessarily, or

(B) every cause in the regress is contingent.

a. Why must there be a necessary being? (Why not case B?)

The first part of the Third Way is designed to rule out case (B). Everything that exists, we're now assuming, is both contingent and dependent on a thoroughly accidental infinite causal series. There is, by hypothesis, no explanation of why all of the causes in that series were successful in the actual world in producing their effects. It is, therefore, an infinitely large coincidence that each series has reached its current position.

Maimonides and Aquinas make this point by means of a very vivid picture: they suggest that at some point in the infinite past it is very likely that all causal lines would have 'petered out' simultaneously, resulting in an empty world from which there could be no recovery. As many critics have pointed out, this seems to commit the fallacy of composition: if it's possible for each thing to cease to exist, then it's also possible for all of them to cease to exist simultaneously. However, argument doesn't depend on this extreme hypothesis. All that Aquinas needed to point out was the infinitely large coincidence involved in the eternal, accidental perpetuation of *each* doubly accidental causal series, taken individually.

When we reconstruct the Maimonides/Aquinas argument in terms of modern probability theory, the argument does require two additional assumptions: (i) that there have been (throughout history) only finitely many causal chains, and (ii) that there be a finite, nonzero probability for each chain to expire at each link, with the probability of expiration of any link being independent of the probabilities of expiration for any of the later links. If there had been an infinite number of chains, then there might be a finite, non-zero probability that a finite number of causal chains survive an infinite series of opportunities to expire. This would also be the case of all but finitely many of the links in the chain had either a zero or infinitesimal chance of not occurring. Formally, here is the argument:

1. Necessarily, any infinite causal chain is contingent in both directions (from cause to effect and effect to cause).
2. Necessarily, if an infinite causal chain is contingent in the cause-to-effect direction, then there is, for each link in the chain a finite, nonzero probability of the cause's failing to produce the effect, and these probabilities are mutually independent.
3. The set of all infinite causal chains that have ever existed in the history of the world is finite in number.

Therefore, the probability of the existence at any time of any infinite causal chain that is contingent in either direction is either zero or infinitely close to zero.

It might be thought that Aristotelians like Maimonides and Aquinas would have an argument for premise 3, given their rejection of the possibility of actual infinities. However, the falsity of premise 3 would not require that infinitely many chains should exist at any one time. Imagine, for example, a world in which the number of chains increases exponentially as time recedes into the past. In such a world, the number of chains that exist at some time or other is infinite, even though there are never more than a finite number in existence. Moreover, even if we assume that the universe has a finite bound on its size, this would not entail a finite bound on the number of simultaneous causal chains unless there was also a finite bound on the smallest possible size for a causal agent. We could, for example, imagine a world of fixed and finite size, in which the causal agents get smaller and smaller the farther back in time one goes. So, premise 3 will have to stand as an independent assumption of the proof, and a potential weak point.

b. Why must there be a being that is necessary in itself?

So, in order to avoid such coincidences, we must conclude that each causal regress reaches, in a finite number of steps, some necessary being. As I said above, necessary beings are of two kinds: those that are necessary in themselves, and those that derive their necessity from their causes (the accidentally necessary). Aquinas assumes that the only thing that could be necessary in itself is something that is identical to its own existence (i.e., God). So, to reach the conclusion that God exists, Aquinas must rule out the possibility of an infinite regress of accidentally necessary things. This is what he attempts to do in the second part of the Third Way.

Suppose for contradiction that there were such an infinite regress of accidentally necessary beings. To be accidentally necessary, it must be the case that, *per impossibile*, if the being's cause had been absent, it would not have been necessary itself (it, too, could have failed to exist). If so, it seems obvious that the existence of the whole regress must then be contingent, since we can conceive of each being as not existing because we are simultaneously conceiving of its cause as also not existing. But if the whole series is contingent, then each member of the series must be contingent. This contradicts our assumption that each was (accidentally) necessary. So, such an infinite regress of accidental necessity must be impossible.

If so, any accidentally necessary being must derive its necessity ultimately from some being that is necessary in itself.

D. A Formal Version of the Argument

1. The Distinction between *Per Se* and Accidental Infinite Regresses

a. Some assumptions

A1. If the essence of x includes x's being caused by some y qua F, then the essence of x includes the essence of y.

A2. If the essence of x includes y, and the essence of y includes z, then the essence of x includes z.

A3. If x is actual, and the essence of x includes y, then y is also actual.

A4. There are no cases of circular causation or self-causation.

A5. If x is caused by y qua F, then the essence of y is not infinitely deep (i.e., there are no infinitely long chains of parts of parts of the essence of y).

b. Definition of *per se* infinite regress

A bad (*per se*) infinite regress would result from the following two assumptions:

1. Some x is caused by some y qua F (where x and y are both actual).
2. For every x and y, if x is caused by y qua F, then the essence of y (or the essence of the accident of y's being F) includes its being caused by some z qua F.

c. *Per Se* Infinite Regresses are Impossible

Theorem 1. Assumptions 1 and 2 (the postulation of a *per se* infinite regress) are inconsistent with A1-A5. Proof:

3. Assume that x_1 is caused by x_2 qua F, and x_1 and x_2 are both actual (From 1)
4. The essence of x_2 includes x_2 's being caused by some x_3 qua F. (From 2, 3)
5. The essence of x_2 includes x_3 . (From 4, A1)
6. x_3 is actual. (From 3, 5, and A3)
7. x_2 's being caused by x_3 qua F is actual, i.e., x_2 is caused by x_3 qua F (From 1, 2, A3)
8. x_3 is not identical with x_1 or x_2 (From 7, A4).
9. By repeating lines 3-8, we can generate an infinite series of essences, each of which is part of its predecessor, of the form: x_n is caused by x_{n+1} qua F. (Using A2)
10. Thus, the essence of x_2 is infinitely complex (infinitely deep in its compositional structure).
11. However, no essence is infinitely complex. (From A5) Contradiction.
12. Therefore, per se infinite regresses (as expressed by 1 and 2) are impossible.

d. The Possibility of Accidental Infinite Regresses

One can have an accidental infinite regress. For example, the following is possible:

(x_1 is caused by x_2 qua F) & (x_2 is caused by x_3 qua F) &, so long as each succeeding step is not part of the essence of its predecessor.

In fact, it is even possible that an accidental infinite regress exist as a matter of necessity.

The following is possible:

(Necessary Accidental Regress) Necessarily, for all x and y , if (x is caused by y qua F), then there is some z such that (y is caused by z qua F).

In fact, Aristotle believes that NAR is true in cases where F is 'man'. It is a matter of physical necessity that man have begotten man in infinitely many past cycles (since men cannot be spontaneously generated from mud, as Aristotle thought certain maggots and worms could be). However, Aristotle would have denied that it was part of the essence of man that this should be so.

Wherever there is an accidental necessity of this kind, there must be some causal explanation of why the accidental fact (in this case, an infinite regress) is necessary. For Aristotle, this is where God comes in. God is responsible for the fact that the universe has successfully undergone infinitely many cycles in the past. Without that divine guarantee, there would be no reason for men to exist in the present, and hence no basis for the truth of NAR (since, for Aristotle, all necessities of this kind have to be anchored in some real, currently existing kind).

2. An Aristotelian First Cause Argument (A Synthesis of Ways Two and Three)

Some more axioms:

A6. If x is caused by y , then there is some property F such that x is caused by y qua F .

A7. If y is F accidentally and not essentially (i.e., it is not part of the essence of y to be F), then the accident of y 's *being* F exists, and there must be some z and some G such that the essence of the accident of y 's *being* F includes that it (the accident) be caused by z qua G .

A8. If (i) y is F , (ii) it *is* part of the essence of y to be F , and (iii) the essence of y is not Existence itself, then there must be some z and some G such that the essence of y includes y 's being caused by z qua G .

A9. If the essence of z is Existence itself, then z is uncaused.

Theorem 2: if there is some x and y such that x is caused by y , then there is some z such that the essence of z is Existence itself, and z is uncaused.

Proof.

1. Assume, for conditional proof, that x_1 is caused by x_2 .
2. So, x_1 is caused by x_2 qua F_2 . (By 1, A6)
3. There are three cases: (i) x_2 is F_2 accidentally, (ii) x_2 is F_2 essentially, but the essence of x_2 is not Existence and (iii) the essence of x_2 is Existence. In case (iii), the theorem is proved, so we need consider only cases (i) and (ii).

4. In both cases, there is some x_3 and F_3 such that the essence of the accident of x_2 's being F_2 (case ii) or the essence of x_2 itself (case iii) includes its being caused by x_3 qua F_3 .
5. If $F_2 = F_3$, and nothing that is F_2 has Existence as its essence, then lines 2-4 can be used to show that for any x and y such that x is caused by y qua F_2 , then the essence of y includes its being caused by some other F_2 .
6. Thus, if $F_2 = F_3$, and nothing has Existence as its essence, then lines 2-4 would lead to a *per se* infinite regress.
7. A *per se* infinite regress is impossible. So, either something has Existence as its essence (and the theorem is proved), or $F_2 \neq F_3$. (from 6, Theorem 1)
8. x_3 is F_3 (by 4, A1, A3)
9. Again, we have three cases, of which we need consider only two: x_3 is F_3 accidentally or x_3 is F_3 essentially.
10. In either case, there is some x_4 and F_4 such that..., etc.
11. Thus, 1-10 generates an infinite regress of conditions of the form: the essence of x_n includes x_n 's being caused by x_{n+1} qua F_{n+1} .
12. If $i \neq j$, then $F_i \neq F_j$, since if $F_i = F_j$, then, by the transitivity of essence inclusion (A2), the essence of x_i includes x_i 's being caused by x_j qua F_i , which would generate another *per se* infinite regress.
13. Thus, the essence of x_2 is infinitely deep, by including infinitely many distinct parts, each nested within the last (one corresponding to a different F_i , for every number i).
14. No essence can be infinitely deep. (A5) Contradiction (with 13).
15. Thus, we must at some point reach an instance of case (iii), an x such that x 's essence is Existence.

16. This x is uncaused. (by A9)

There is another reason that Aristotle could give for rejecting the infinite regress in line 12: Aristotle believes that nature contains only finitely many natures. At some point, the set of natures would be exhausted, forcing either a circle or an uncaused First Cause.

The crucial assumptions of this argument are the two essential causal principles, A7 and A8. A7 is pretty plausible, since we might take it as part of the very definition of an accidental property of a thing that that thing have been caused by something to have the accidental property. So, everything depends on A8, which I take to be the assumption that underlies Aquinas's Second Way (the way of efficient causation). Each thing other than God is such that its essence includes its being caused to exist. It is not enough for the Second Way that everything other than God be caused, or even that it be necessary that everything other than God be caused. (However, we could interpret the Third Way as Aquinas's attempt to deal with just this doubt: what if efficient causality was a necessary attribute of every finite thing, but not essential to each of them?)

The real distinction between essence and existence in everything except God is supposed to close the gap between principles A7 and A8. Al-Farabi, ibn Sina and Aquinas are arguing that, whenever a finite thing exists, there is something 'accidental' going on: the accidental combination of real existence with that thing's individual essence (nature or definition).

For material things, there is a precursor for this real distinction in Aristotle himself: the distinction between form and matter. Every material being consists in some matter to which a substantial form has “happened” accidentally. The matter by itself doesn’t guarantee that it would be formed into a single, coherent natural substance. The form has to be “added” to the matter, in something like the way accidents are “added” to natural substances. Thus, a principle like A8 would be pretty plausible for material substances (compounds of form and matter). We might think that it is part of the very essence of every kind of material substance that that substance’s existence (the appropriate informing of its matter) be caused by something.

Aristotle himself takes his first cause argument to establish the existence of at least one immaterial Intellect, an intellect that is pure form, without any constituent matter.

Aristotle would imagine that such an Intellect simply is, and thus has no need of any cause.

However, Aristotle cannot prove that there is just one such intellect (in fact, at some points he seems to take seriously that there might be as many as fifty of them, each corresponding to a different celestial sphere). In addition, Aristotle cannot prove that his Intellectual First Causes have all the characteristics Jews, Christians and Muslims would associate with being God: omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and so on. At best, the Aristotelian could argue that the simplest hypothesis would be one that posits a single, infinitely powerful God, and he could appeal to the orderliness of nature (as Plato did) to argue for God’s wisdom and goodness.

Al-Farabi, ibn Sina and Aquinas wanted to go farther. Aquinas in particular tried to prove that the First Cause is a being of absolute perfection. For this, he required the stronger assumption (A8) that anything other than absolute and simple Existence must have a cause.

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