

A Deeper Look at Aquinas's First Way

GAVEN KERR

*St. Patrick's Pontifical University
Maynooth, Ireland*

THE FIRST WAY is traditionally referred to as the argument from motion, and its general form comes from the arguments for a first mover put forth by Aristotle in books 7–8 of the *Physics*. Aquinas puts forth similar arguments in *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] IV, chapter 13, as well as in other places in his works.¹ Thomas states that this is the more manifest way, and accordingly he opens the five ways with it. This argument has been attacked and defended on numerous occasions, and recently it has come within the purview of criticisms of Edward Feser's defense of the argument from motion. In what follows I propose a reading of the first way that sets it up as a metaphysical argument for God's existence. I then situate that reading within the context of Aquinas's metaphysical thought. Having done that I address one particular recent objection.

The First Way

In this section I will consider the first way in itself. I shall begin with a statement of the argument and then proceed to an analysis of its reasoning.

¹ Joseph Owens presents a survey of the argument from motion in Aquinas's thought in "The Conclusion of the *Prima Via*," in *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God*, ed. John R. Catan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), no. 4; see also Owens's, "Aquinas and the Proof from the 'Physics,'" *Mediaeval Studies* 28: (1966): 119–50. The relevant passages in Aquinas are: *In I sent.*, d. 3, proem.; *Summa contra gentiles* I, ch. 13; *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 5; *Compendium theologiae*, ch. 3; *In VII phys.*, lec. 2; *In VIII phys.*, lec. 9.

The Argument

The text of the first way goes as follows in *Summa Theologiae* [ST] I, q. 2, a. 3:

The first and more manifest way is taken from the side of motion. It is certain and evident to sense that something is moved in the world. Now, whatever is moved is moved by another; for nothing moves unless it is potency to that to which it is moved and something moves insofar as it is in act. To move then is nothing more than to bring something from potency to act, and nothing can be reduced from potency to act unless by something that is in act, just as the hot in act, for example fire, makes the wood, that is hot in potency, to be actually hot, and in doing so moves and alters it. It is not possible that the same thing can at once be in act and in potency in the same respect, but only according to diverse respects. So what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot, but it is potentially cold. It is impossible then that in the same respect and mode something is mover and moved, or that it moves itself. Therefore, whatever is moved must be moved by another. If therefore that by which a thing is moved is itself moved, the latter must be moved by another, and that by another. This cannot proceed to infinity, for then there would be no primary mover, and consequently no other mover; for secondary movers do not move unless they are moved by a primary, just as the stick does not move unless moved by the hand. It is therefore necessary to come upon some primary mover that is moved by nothing, and this all understand to be God.²

² *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 2, a. 3: "Prima autem et manifestior via est, quae sumitur ex parte motus. Certum est enim, et sensu constat, aliqua moveri in hoc mundo. Omne autem quod movetur, ab alio movetur. Nihil enim movetur, nisi secundum quod est in potentia ad illud ad quod movetur, movet autem aliquid secundum quod est actu. Movere enim nihil aliud est quam educere aliquid de potentia in actum, de potentia autem non potest aliquid reduci in actum, nisi per aliquod ens in actu, sicut calidum in actu, ut ignis, facit lignum, quod est calidum in potentia, esse actu calidum, et per hoc movet et alterat ipsum. Non autem est possibile ut idem sit simul in actu et potentia secundum idem, sed solum secundum diversa, quod enim est calidum in actu, non potest simul esse calidum in potentia, sed est simul frigidum in potentia. Impossibile est ergo quod, secundum idem et eodem modo, aliquid sit movens et motum, vel quod moveat seipsum. Omne ergo quod movetur, oportet ab alio moveri. Si ergo id a quo movetur, moveatur, oportet et ipsum ab alio moveri et illud ab alio. Hic autem non est procedere in infinitum, quia sic non esset aliquod primum movens; et per consequens nec aliquod aliud movens, quia moventia secunda non movent nisi per hoc quod sunt

To begin with, Thomas makes an observation about motion in the world; he tells us that it is evident that there is motion. Having observed motion, Aquinas goes on to explore the nature of motion, and he begins by affirming that whatever is moved is moved by another. The justification for this principle represents a significant portion of the first way.³

Whatever is moved is moved only because it stands in potency to something, and in the process of being actualized it is in motion. Accordingly, what moves the thing potentially in motion must be actual and capable of moving the thing that is in potential to such actuality; in other words, the mover must have the ability to impart motion to the thing that is potentially moved. And this is what motion is: the actualization of that which exists in potency. And such can occur only if we have something that is capable, that is actual in the appropriate respect of actualizing the potency.⁴ Thomas gives the example of fire, which is actually hot, heating wood, which is potentially hot but actually cold. The first has the actuality of heat and can reduce the potentiality of the wood for being hot to actuality.

Now the same thing cannot be both in act and in potency in the same respect; for then it would be actualizing its own potency in that respect; for example, the wood cannot be both actually hot and potentially hot, for in that case it would be both actually hot and actually cold, which is impossible.

Moving on, the mover is actual with respect to the motion, in that it can bring about the motion, and the thing moved is in potency with respect to the motion, in that it undergoes the motion in question. The mover then actualizes the potentiality of the thing moved. But if the same thing cannot be in both act and potency in the same respects, then the

mota a primo movente, sicut baculus non movet nisi per hoc quod est motus a manu. Ergo necesse est devenire ad aliquod primum movens, quod a nullo movetur, et hoc omnes intelligunt Deum" (Marietti ed.). Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the works of Aquinas will be my own. A highly readable translation of the *Summa* is *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981).

³ See also *In VII phys.*, lec. 1, nos. 885–86. For a somewhat different justification of this principle. In the latter Thomas defends the principle by considering a significant counterexample: self-motion. He accordingly takes a mobile object AB and divides it into its parts; thence he argues that insofar as it comes to rest by the rest of its parts, it is therefore moved by one of its parts, in which case even in self-motion whatever is moved is moved by another. Here in the *Summa* however the defence of the principle is in terms of act and potency, and so significantly different; we will return to this point later.

⁴ *In III phys.*, lec. 2, no. 285.

thing moved, which is in potency in respect of the motion, and the mover, which is in actuality with respect to the motion, cannot be the same. Consequently, the thing moved must be moved by another.

Having established the principle that whatever is moved is moved by another, Thomas then goes on to set up a regress of movers. He conceives that if we have a mover and a thing moved which mover is itself moved, we can then ask about the mover of that, and then about the mover of that and so on. But, crucially, Aquinas argues this cannot proceed to infinity; for if it did there would be no primary mover, and if there were no primary mover, then there would be no secondary movers, since the latter depend on the former for their motion. Aquinas offers the example of a stick being moved by a hand; without some primary mover to move the stick, the stick remains immobile. So, without a primary mover to move the secondary movers—movers that are both movers and moved—there would be no motion in the series. Hence it is necessary that there must be some primary mover without which there would be no motion in the series, and this is what we understand God to be.

The Reasoning

So much for a statement of the argument. I have deliberately avoided any gloss that would stress one interpretation over the other. The standard objections to the first way and their standard responses are all still live options at this point. Let us now consider the reasoning and what it establishes.

Aquinas begins by stating that this is the first and more manifest way. One can evidently see how this way is more manifest because it focuses on a feature of reality evident to every philosopher from the beginning of philosophy, and that is the reality of motion. Since the pre-Socratics and their grappling with the problem of the one and the many, the reality of motion has been something of a self-evident fact to philosophers. Its self-evidence does not entail that motion is easily explainable, only that one cannot escape it, not even Parmenides. Given the inescapability of motion, it is natural to think of an argument from motion as one that is more manifest. But this raises an initial problem with the first way from the outset: is it a physical argument drawn from the philosophy of nature and tracing motion in the natural world to a point of origin in some originator of cosmic motion, much like some contemporaries would trace the motions of the universe to a point of origin in the big bang? Or is it a metaphysical argument which reasons to the need for some originative source of all actuality with the physical motion observed from the outset

being a springboard for the argument? Both readings of the first way have been offered, and so before even delving into the reasoning, we should investigate how to situate it in terms of metaphysics or natural philosophy.

The natural-philosophical reading of the first way has a lot to support it: it was the reasoning of Aristotle in several important places on which Aquinas comments and whose argumentative structure informs the first way; by remaining with physical motion the argument remains true to its designation as the more manifest way; and it is the natural way of reading the argument given the examples Thomas uses and the reasoning he employs. Not only that, the physical reading of the first way has the support of no less than Cajetan and Suarez, as well as more contemporary interpreters such as Anthony Kenny.⁵

In Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's *Physics* he defines motion generally in terms of change, and qua change motion is the act of that which exists in potency as potency.⁶ Later he applies this definition to generation, corruption, and motion proper; this motion proper is motion in the strict sense and is applicable to quality (alteration), quantity (increase and decrease), and place (locomotion).⁷ There is some scope then for interpreting the motion at work in the first way as being a kind of physical motion not unlike that deployed in Aristotle's *Physics*.

Despite these considerations, when we look at the actual argument of the *ST*, we notice that the pivotal steps in the argument are significantly metaphysical ones. Looking at the motion principle that whatever is moved is moved by another, we notice that in the *ST* text, Aquinas's

⁵ See Owens, "Conclusion," no. 5, for Cajetan and Suarez; see also William Wallace, "Newtonian Antinomies Against the *Prima Via*," *The Thomist* 19, no. 2 (1956): 151–92, for whom the first way was intended (by Thomas) to be understood by physical scientists. For Kenny, see *The Five Ways* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), ch. 2. Kenny sees all the ways as being embedded within medieval cosmology (3) and so sees them as depending on cosmological, and thus physical, reasoning. Indeed, in dealing with the first way's principle that whatever is moved is moved by another, Kenny focuses primarily on the physical arguments in favour of this principle offered elsewhere by Aquinas (e.g., *SCG* I, ch. 13, and *In VII phys.*, lec. 1), and he considers (and dismisses) the more metaphysical demonstration offered by Thomas in the actual text of the *ST*. More recently Heather Thornton McRae and James McRae have also considered the first way primarily as a physical argument, so much so that they seek to re-cast it in more contemporary cosmological terms so as to update it for the contemporary reader; see "A Motion to Reconsider: A Defense of Aquinas' Prime Mover Argument," in *Revisiting Aquinas' Proofs for the Existence of God*, ed. Robert Arp (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 29–47.

⁶ *In III phys.*, lect. 2, nn. 285–286.

⁷ *In V phys.*, lect. 2, no. 649.

reasoning for its truth is based on a consideration of act and potency and how they are the backbone of the analysis of the change under consideration. We contrast this with his considerations of the same elsewhere, such as the first lectio in the commentary on book 7 of the *Physics* and the thirteenth chapter of *SCG I*, where the same principle is considered and defended but primarily by means of physical considerations. In the *ST* text these physical considerations drop out and only the metaphysical demonstration of the principle remains; this indicates that Thomas is thinking metaphysically in the first way.⁸

Moreover, the more physical argument from motion advanced by Aristotle in the *Physics* need not conclude to anything more than a world soul which moves the outermost sphere.⁹ Indeed, Aquinas in his commentary on the *Physics* points out that Aristotle ends with a primary principle of all of nature, not of all that is. Thomas does claim that this is God, who is blessed forever; but the text itself of Aristotle does not justify this unless buttressed with more metaphysical considerations (and theological ones pertaining to God's blessedness).¹⁰ Not only that, in the *SCG I*, chapter 13, where Thomas is advancing several arguments from motion, he notes a problem with the physical argumentation insofar as it fails to get us to something absolute, and so it needs to be buttressed by more metaphysical considerations.

⁸ For discussion see John Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 446–47; David Twetten, “Clearing a ‘Way’ for Aquinas: How the Proof from Motion Concludes to God,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 70 (1996): 259–78. See also my article “The *Summa Contra Gentiles* and Aquinas’s Way to God,” forthcoming in *Nova et Vetera* [English].

⁹ See Owens, “Aquinas and the Proof from the ‘Physics’”; John Knasas makes the same general point that we must distinguish between a prime mover of the spheres demonstrable in natural philosophy and the prime mover which is God demonstrable only in metaphysics; see *Thomistic Existentialism and Cosmological Reasoning* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 176–77; see also Twetten, “Clearing a ‘Way,’” 262–63, in particular 263: “Aristotle’s *Physics* does not expressly arrive at God for Aquinas, but at best only indicates the manner of reasoning by which the Metaphysics alone properly and expressly concludes to a first mover that can only be the first being or God.” Twetten also notes that the autograph of the *SCG* gives some evidence in the redactions that the Aristotelian proof from the *Physics* leads only to a world soul (“Clearing a ‘Way,’” 269); the redactions of the autograph of the *SCG* text can be found in the Appendix to the Leonine edition.

¹⁰ *In VIII phys.*, lect. 23, no. 1172: “Thus the Philosopher ends the common consideration of natural things in [a consideration of] the primary principle of the whole of nature, who is God over all blessed forever [Benedictus in saecula].”

On the other hand, the primary mover of the first way at which Thomas arrives in the conclusion is simply the primary mover moved by nothing, which he claims all understand to be God. The *sed contra* of the article gives us an indication of Thomas's understanding of God, who is identified as the primary mover in the conclusion of the first way: He Who Is. But He Who Is is self-subsisting *esse*.¹¹ It follows then that the conclusion of the first way is not simply a primary principle of all of nature, per the *Physics*, but the first principle of all things simpliciter.¹² Hence the first way is not the same kind of argument as the physical argument of Aristotle's *Physics*.

We also must bear in mind what Thomas states about the demonstrability of God in the immediately preceding article of this question. In article 2, Thomas denies that we can have a *propter quid* demonstration of God, and this because we have no direct knowledge of the essence

¹¹ ST I, q. 4, a. 2 ("Since God is self-subsisting *esse*, he cannot be without any perfection of being"); q. 11, a. 4 ("He is maximally being insofar as he does not have *esse* determined by some nature adjoined to him"); q. 13, a. 11 ("This name, He Who Is, is most properly the name of God. First because of its signification; for it does not signify some form, but *esse* itself. Hence, since God's *esse* is his essence itself, and nothing else is adjoined to this it is clear that among other names this name [He Who Is] most properly names God"); note also in particular the response to the first objection in a. 11, wherein this name is even more proper than *Deus* ("This name, He Who Is, is even more properly the name of God than this name 'God' because of [quantum ad] that from which it is imposed, namely from *esse*"); SCG III, ch. 19 ("All things have *esse* insofar as they are assimilated to God, who is self-subsisting *esse*"); *De anima*, a. 6, ad 2: ("If there is something that is self-subsisting *esse*, as we speak concerning God, we say it participates in nothing" [Marietti ed.]); *De spiritualibus creaturis*, a. 1 ("Hence we say that God is his own *esse* itself" [Marietti ed.]); *De malo*, q. 16, a. 3 ("Deus enim per suam essentiam est ipsum esse subsistens" [Marietti ed.]); *Quodlibetales* III, q. 1, a. 1 ("Since God is self-subsisting *esse*, it is manifest that the nature of being belongs to God in an infinite way, without any limitation or contraction" [Marietti ed.]); *In de divinis nominibus*, ch. 5, lec. 1 ("But only God, who is self-subsisting *esse*, has *esse* according to the whole power [virtutem] of being" [Marietti ed.]); *In de causis*, lec. 7, no. 182 ("The primary cause is not a nature subsisting in its own participated *esse* but rather is self-subsisting *esse*").

¹² See James Weisheipl, "The Principle Omne quod movetur ab alio movetur in Medieval Physics," *Isis* 56, no. 1 (1965): 29, for a similar point. Weisheipl contends that in the first way we must take motion in the widest possible sense so as to signify every coming into being and thereby get us to God. Despite this, Weisheipl treats the motion principle as exclusively physical rather than as a metaphysical principle with an application in the philosophy of nature; though to be fair to Weisheipl, he is here dealing with the principle in the context of the history of science and certain problems with that principle as a scientific principle. He simply alludes to the principle in the first way as a particular presentation of it.

of God. Hence, we must have a *quia* demonstration the middle term of which does not involve a knowledge of God's essence, but a knowledge of his effects, creatures. Now, the only consideration of creatures that can generate a demonstration of God is a metaphysical consideration, and this is because such a consideration views creatures in terms of their being. As Thomas argues elsewhere, it was because previous philosophers did not consider creatures in terms of their being that they were unable to rise to the thought of a creator.¹³ Hence in order to reason our way to God, we need to construe God's effects in terms of their very being, otherwise we will stop short of arriving at God as the originating source of all being.¹⁴

Furthermore, when we look at Aquinas's denial of an infinite regress of moved movers in the first way, we see his appealing to the notions of primary and secondary movers and arguing that the secondary are moved only as instruments of the primary. He then calls to our attention the kind of motion involved in the series involving the hand and stick, an example that is elsewhere illuminative of what are called *per se* ordered series, whose nature we will be considering. The fact that Aquinas appeals to the instrumentality of secondary movers in relation to the primary and his use of the hand and stick example as illuminative of such instrumentality—which example is quite prominent in the metaphysics of the *per se* series—shows us that Aquinas is motivated to deny an infinite regress of moved movers not on the basis of physical considerations pertaining to motion as are found in the commentary on the *Physics* and in *SCG*; rather, it is clear that Aquinas here seeks to deny an infinite regress of moved movers on the basis of metaphysical considerations pertaining to the being of primary and secondary movers such that if there were no primary, then secondary movers would not have the actuality of the motion in question.

¹³ See *ST I*, q. 44, a. 2: "And finally there emerged others who considered being as being, and they considered the cause of things, not only as things are this or such, but insofar as they are beings. That which is the cause of things insofar as they are beings, must be the cause of the *esse* of things, not simply as they are such through accidental forms, nor as they are these through substantial forms, but according to all that pertains to the *esse* of things in whatever mode." See also *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 5: "Later philosophers indeed, such as Plato, Aristotle, and their followers, came to a consideration of universal *esse* itself; and therefore they alone posited some universal cause of things, from which all else is derived in *esse*, as is clear from Augustine, and with whose thought [Plato, Aristotle, and their followers] even the Catholic faith agrees."

¹⁴ See my article referred to in note 8 for a discussion of how Aquinas's thought on the demonstrability of God entails that our way to God must be metaphysical proceeding from a consideration of the being of things.

Finally, and following on from the previous point, I take the first way as a causal demonstration of God's existence. But in the *Physics* Aquinas argues that it does not belong to natural philosophy to treat the causes of things insofar as they are causes, but only insofar as they are causes of natural changes. By contrast, it is the task of the metaphysician to consider causes as causes.¹⁵ From this it follows that it is not the concern of the natural philosopher to consider the causality possessed by any number of secondary causes and reason to a primary cause thereof possessing that causality essentially; for this would not be to consider causes as causes of natural changes, but in terms of their very causality. The proof of the first way, however, does just this: it considers the actuality of causality (motion) in a series of causes and reasons that such causality would not be present were it not for some primary cause. Hence the causal reasoning employed by Thomas here is on his own account the kind of reasoning with which the metaphysician deals.

Hence, the first way must be read as a metaphysical argument.

Bearing in mind then the metaphysical caliber of the first way, we proceed to consider the steps of argumentation involved. We begin then with the motion principle: whatever is moved is moved by another. This principle quite evidently has a physical application insofar as things that are moved and thus in motion are moved by another. Despite physical readings of the motion principle, we have argued that Aquinas's first way is not a physical argument, but a metaphysical one, and so the motion principle ought to be read and defended in a metaphysical light even though it bears physical application. Elsewhere Aquinas establishes this principle with a number of arguments (alluded to above) which scrutinize the nature of physical motion, but in those same places he also offers a defense of this principle based on the roles that act and potency play in a process of change.

Act and potency exhaustively divide the common being that is the subject matter of metaphysics. So, by considering motion in terms of act and potency and defending the motion principle thereby, Aquinas will be offering a metaphysical consideration of motion in the first way.¹⁶ In

¹⁵ *In II phys.*, lec. 5, no. 176.

¹⁶ For the division of *ens commune* into act and potency see *SCG* II, ch. 54: "It is therefore clear that the composition of act and potency is in more than the composition of form and matter; accordingly, matter and form divide material substance, but potency and act divide common being [*ens commune*]." And for the metaphysical consideration of motion as pertaining to the common nature of being, see *Super de Trinitate*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 6: "The metaphysician considers singular things not according to their proper

adopting this approach whilst abandoning the more physical approach present in other texts, Thomas opts for a thoroughly metaphysical mode of argumentation in the first way.

Accordingly, holding that motion is the reduction of something in potency to act, Aquinas argues that the thing that is in potency is not self-actualizing in the same respect to which it is in potency. Hence, the wood is not both potentially hot and actually hot, yet it is potentially cold. So, in order to be moved from hot to cold or vice versa, there must be something that has sufficient actuality to bring the wood to the state to which it stands in potency, otherwise such potency will not be actualized. That which actualizes the potency of the thing for some actuality is the other by which the thing is moved when reduced from potency to act. Hence what is moved is moved by another.

Now it will be opportune at this point to dispel some common misconceptions of this argumentation. To begin with, Thomas's reasoning is not so elementary as to make the blunder that the actualizing principle of the thing in potency is in all cases itself identical to the actuality that it brings about. Whilst of course fire produces fire, it is not the case that a king-maker must be a king or that only dead men commit murders, as Kenny points out.¹⁷ The only way in which Thomas could be committed to such an absurdity is if he is committed to the principle that "only what is actually F will make something else become F."¹⁸ But Thomas of course is not committed to any such principle; rather he is committed to the principle that nothing can be reduced from potency to act, except by something in act ("de potentia autem non potest aliquid reduci in actum, nisi per aliquod ens in actu"). This principle is not to say that what actualizes the potency of the thing is itself actual in the respect of which the potency is actualized; it simply must be so actual that it is within its power to actualize the potency of the thing, and hence the thing that is actualized is so moved by another and not by itself.¹⁹ Indeed, just two questions later in the *ST*, Aquinas offers an account of how perfections present in effects can pre-exist in their cause in a non-univocal, but virtual, sense and

intelligibility by which they are such or such a being, but according as they participate in the common nature of being, and thus even matter and motion pertain to the consideration of the metaphysician."

¹⁷ Kenny, *Five Ways*, 21.

¹⁸ Kenny, *Five Ways*, 21.

¹⁹ For discussion see Aquinas, *In VIII phys.*, lec. 10, nos. 1052–53; Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 447; Scott MacDonald, "Aquinas's Parasitic Cosmological Argument," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 1 (1991): 133–35; Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 33–34.

so causes, whilst not in act in the same way as their effects, are sufficiently in act to produce their effects.²⁰

Furthermore, it is no objection to this principle that animals and in particular rational animals are self-movers and so appear to self-actualize. Aquinas is aware of this issue and addresses it later in the *Summa Theologiae* when discussing volitional activity. In *ST* I-II, q. 9, a. 3, Aquinas explains that whilst the will moves itself to will the means to some end, it does not reduce itself from potency to act in willing the end, since (a. 4) it is moved by an object, something external, to will that end. Now, in willing the means to the end to which the will is so moved, the will moves the intellect to take counsel as to the appropriate means. And so the picture we see emerging is that an object moves the will to will an end, the will in so being moved wills the intellect to take counsel as to the means, and with the means having been so understood the will in turn wills those means. At no point do we have anything that is potential in some respect being actual in that same respect, but at every point we have something being moved by something other than it.

Given the physical application of the motion principle, one might argue that it is undermined by Newtonian physics with the latter's commitment to the principle of inertia. According to this principle, things are in a constant and uniform motion unless acted upon by something else.²¹ Hence, it is not exactly the origination of motion that calls for explanation but the change of motion.

Yet even granting the principle of inertia, Aquinas's reasoning still follows, since even if things are subject to inertia, they are not self-actuating.²² Inertia is conceived to be a principle of motion of the

²⁰ *ST* I, q. 4, a. 2.

²¹ Isaac Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, ed. A. Koyré and I. B. Cohen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), definition III: "The *vis insita* or innate force of matter is a power of resisting, by which every body, as much as in it lies, continues in its present state, whether it be of rest, or of moving uniformly forward in a straight line." See also his first law of motion: "Every body continues in its state of rest, or of uniform motion in a right line, unless it is compelled to change that state by forces impressed upon it" (ibid.).

²² The laonic "if" here refers to the fact that it is not clear whether inertia is a demonstrable feature of physical things, as opposed to an inference concerning what motion would be like at the limit of resistive force, a situation which is never experienced and which it would appear cannot be tested. See Wallace, "Newtonian Antinomies," 178–80. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange reproduces a letter from Pierre Duhem in which he (Duhem) argues that when physicists speak of inertia, they do not do so as if it were some truth about reality of which they are certain, but because it is a useful tool to

thing, and as such a principle it can explain the motion that the thing is currently undergoing. But it says nothing as to the origin of such motion, nothing of how such inertial motion came to be applicable to the thing in the first place; and this would require appeal to some efficient cause of motion, the sort of causal appeal that generates Aquinas's reasoning in the first way. Indeed, Newton was well aware of the fact that inertia cannot be the most fundamental explanation of a thing's motion, since he explicitly states in the *Opticks* that there is needed some principle by which things are put into motion and conserved in motion.²³ Consequently, Newtonian inertia, if indeed it is true of physical things, does not explain the origin of motion in things, nor does it even explain the current state of motion, since Newton himself holds that the conservation of motion requires some other principle. All in all, inertia does not account for the actuality of motion in a thing, in which case that actuality requires some cause independent of the thing, something other by which the thing is moved, and this is what Aquinas's motion principle maintains.²⁴

So much for the motion principle, now let us consider the infinite regress.

Aquinas sets up the regress argument in a familiar fashion. If we have something moved and we know that it is moved by another, we ask whether that mover is itself moved. If it is not, then we have reached a mover that is unmoved; if it is, then we infer a mover for it and consider whether that mover is moved and if so what about its mover and so on.

make sense of motion and that no successful physical theory can do without it. Hence, as Duhem presents it in his correspondence to Garrigou-Lagrange, inertia is a principle by which we can make sense of things the truth of which we are certain, i.e. the motion of physical bodies, but it itself is not a truth of which we are certain. Thus, Duhem takes the principle to be almost like a regulative ideal by means of which we can make sense of motion. For Duhem's letter see Garrigou-Lagrange, *Dieu: son existence et sa nature* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1914), 761–63.

²³ Newton, *Optics or A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light* (New York: Dover, 1952), bk. 3, query 32: "The *vis inertiae* is a passive principle by which bodies persist in their motion or rest, receive motion in proportion to the force impressing it, and resist as much as they are resisted. By this principle alone there never could be any motion in the world. Some other principle was necessary for putting bodies into motion; and now they are in motion, some other principle is necessary for conserving the motion."

²⁴ For discussion of the Newtonian principle see Ernan McMullin, *Newton on Matter and Activity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), ch. 2; for the Thomistic reaction to the challenge of inertia see Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 454–56; Jacques Maritain, *Approaches to God*, trans. Peter O'Reilly (London: Allen and Unwin, 1955), 24–5; Wallace, "Newtonian Antinomies," 173–86.

Now Thomas denies that such a series of moved movers can go on to infinity because in that case there would be no primary mover and so nothing else would be moved, since secondary movers are moved by a primary mover, like the stick is moved by the hand. Given that there are secondary movers as the preceding reasoning of the first way makes clear, we must then arrive at some primary mover whence such secondary movers derive their ability to move others.

I interpret this denial of an infinite regress in terms of *per se* ordered causal series, but before going on to spell out what this entails, it is important to note that here Thomas does not make use of the more physical argumentation he utilizes in *SCG* I, chapter 13, and lectio 2 of the commentary on *Physics* 8 to deny an infinite regress. Rather his reasoning here focuses more on the interaction of primary and secondary movers such that the latter would not have motive power (causal actuality) unless for the former. This fact ties in with the more general metaphysical outlook of the first way to the effect that it was the metaphysics of act and potency that establishes the motion principle, and so the same metaphysics can be applied to the denial of an infinite regress of moved movers. This then takes us into a consideration of *per se* ordered series.

A *per se* ordered series, or essentially ordered series, is a series of causes the members of which do not possess the causality of the series in virtue of what they are. The typical example is the mental agent who moves his hands to move the stick to move the stone. The hands, stick, and stone do not possess the causality of motion in virtue of being what they are, since hands, sticks, and stones are themselves immobile unless something move them. Hence the causal actuality that they have in this case—motion—is derived from the mental agent. Were there no such cause for the causality that these secondary causes wield, there would be no such causal series. Hence, *per se* ordered series cannot be without a primary cause for the causality of the series; and such a primary cause is primary precisely because it has the causality of the series *per se*.²⁵

²⁵ For further details on the metaphysics of *per se* ordered series see my articles "Essentially Ordered Series Reconsidered," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2012): 541–55, and "Essentially Ordered Series Reconsidered Once Again," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2017): 155–74; see also Caleb Cohoe, "There must be a First: Why Thomas Aquinas Rejects Infinite, Essentially Ordered, Causal Series," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 5 (2013): 838–56. More recently, a consideration of *per se* ordered series as figuring in one of Avicenna's proofs of God can be found in Celia Byrne, "The Role of Essentially Ordered Causal Series in Avicenna's Proof for the Necessary Existent in the Metaphysics of the Salvation," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2019): 121–38.

Given the latter, if we have a series of moved movers, all such movers are in themselves lacking in the actuality of the motion that they have and they depend on something other than themselves for such actuality. If there were an infinite series and hence no primary mover from which all such motive actuality were derived, everything would be a moved mover and so essentially lacking in actuality; and insofar as an infinite series has no primary cause for such actuality, without a prime mover there is nothing to bring about the actuality in the things which essentially lack it. Consequently, an infinite series of moved movers would be essentially immobile, and this contradicts the manifest fact that there is motion, in which case a series of moved movers cannot be infinite.

This reasoning against an infinite series of moved movers does not equivocate between a primary mover that is simply an earlier mover imparting motion and a primary mover which is the source of all motion, as Kenny states it does.²⁶ Given the metaphysical reading of the first way that I have been advocating, the primary mover is taken to be a mover which brings about the actuality that all secondary movers have, and not just something that is earlier in the series and gets it going. Hence throughout the argumentation, Thomas is thinking of the primary mover as the source of actuality.

Furthermore, this argument does not suffer from the problem proposed for it by Christopher Williams, who argues that employing the notions of “primary” and “secondary” mover in the reasoning presupposes that there is a primary mover, since one cannot have a sufficient notion of a secondary mover unless one has already arrived at a notion of primary mover from which to differentiate it. But one does not arrive at a primary mover until one has denied an infinite series of moved movers, in which case considerations pertaining to primary and secondary movers cannot be used to establish that there is a primary mover.²⁷

Williams’s objection is misguided because Thomas has a clear notion of secondary mover in place when he sets up the regress, and this is to the effect that secondary movers are those movers that depend on another for their actuality, so that when we look for that by which a thing is moved we can ask whether it is dependent for its actuality and so on. Given this

²⁶ Kenny, *The Five Ways*, 26.

²⁷ C. J. F. Williams, “*Hic autem non est procedure in infinitum...*,” *Mind* 69 (1960): 403–5, in particular, 403: “For not until we know that such a series is impossible can we know that all movers are properly described either as ‘a first mover’ or as ‘second movers.’ This, however, is precisely what the argument assumes. It equates ‘movers other than the first mover’ and ‘second movers.’” Kenny makes a similar objection in *Five Ways*, 26–27.

notion of secondary mover, we know that something is a primary mover if it is not like that; but this does not entail at this point that any such primary mover exists, only that this is what a primary mover would be. It is a further step to deny an infinite regress and affirm a primary mover; yet given the independent intelligibility of the notions of primary and secondary movers prior to the denial of such a regress, these notions can be put to use in considering whether or not the series of moved movers can be infinite.

Having arrived at a primary mover put in motion by no other and the source of motion for all, Aquinas maintains that we have arrived at what we understand to be God. This may cause some concern for physical readings of the argument insofar as some natural phenomenon, or singularity, or world soul could be the source of all motion; and indeed, on a physical reading of motion, it is not necessarily the case that the absolute source be He Who Is as conceived in the *sed contra* of the article. But if we give the argument a more metaphysical reading there is some plausibility in holding that the primary mover is God, and this precisely because as a primary mover God is the source of actuality for all things that are in motion, but whatever is in motion is in potency, in which case God is the source of actuality for all things that are in potency. As source of actuality for all things that are in potency, God himself can be in potency in no respect; for then he would not be the source of actuality for all things that are in potency. Hence, God must be pure actuality. If God as primary mover is pure act, then all things are subject to him and he is subject to nothing. This reading certainly takes us beyond some first source of all physical motion and closer to the classical conception of God as the source of all things.

Interpretation and Objection

So much for the first way; we have considered it in depth and related it to some of Aquinas's wider philosophical commitments. In what follows I wish to interpret the first way as a form of Aquinas's more general way to God. Having done that, I shall consider one recent objection.

Aquinas's Way to God

The first way pertains to motion, but not just to the observation of physical motion and the discernment of some sort of first source of that. Rather, what is under investigation is the metaphysics of motion, that is to say, what metaphysical structures need to be in place for motion to

occur. This is evident in Aquinas's defense of the motion principle in terms of act and potency. As we have seen, Aquinas defends this principle by considering how act and potency are at work in motion itself. Thus, we have moved away from any one instance of physical motion and are considering the causality of motion in itself. As such, while it may spring-board from a consideration of motion, Aquinas is not concerned with this or that motion and drawing a line from that to a first; rather Aquinas is concerned with any motion, and as such the reduction of any kind of potentiality to actuality. This then entails that what Thomas is striving after is not a first cause of some particular species of motion, but a primary cause without which there would be no motion.

Now, as is clear, to move something is to bring it from potency to act: "Movere enim nihil aliud est quam educere aliquid de potentia in actum." The actuality of the motion whilst the motion is ongoing is not yet complete; its actuality participates in that of the efficient cause and anticipates as an end some completion of its actuality. Motion then is an imperfect actuality originated by some motive cause, awaiting to be perfected.²⁸ So for example (the *prima via* example), the stick participates in the motion granted to it by the hand, and whilst in motion it anticipates the completion of its activity in moving the stone. If the first way is after a primary mover responsible for all motion, the first way is after a principle without which there would be no reduction of *any* potentiality to act. In other words, the first way seeks to demonstrate that the primary mover is what actualizes any potentiality. The metaphysical reading of the first way justifies the further conclusion, manifest in the following questions of *ST I*, that the primary mover of the first way is pure act, since as the primary mover metaphysically conceived, he is that without which there would be no actuality in any process of change. Hence, nothing is in act unless by the primary mover.

This metaphysical analysis in turn brings in the context of Aquinas's metaphysics of *esse*. The primary mover of the first way is that without which there would be no actuality; it is pure actuality. But *esse* is the act of all acts. Hence, the kind of reasoning offered here for a primary mover conceived of as responsible for all actuality is the same as that offered

²⁸ *In XI metaphys.*, lec. 9, no. 2291: "Motion does not have any nature separate from other things; but insofar as it is in becoming, some form is an imperfect act which is called motion." See also no. 2310: "Something is said to be able to cause motion from its power to move; it is a mover then in its activity, that is, insofar as it actually exists; and thus, since a mover is called such on account of motion, motion will be the act of the thing capable of causing motion."

elsewhere by Aquinas for a primary source of *esse*. The argumentative strategy is the same on both accounts: isolate some causal feature of things which exhibits metaphysical dependency for actuality, such as motion/distinction of essence and *esse*, then locate that causal feature within the context of the metaphysics of *per se* ordered series, and then reason to a primary cause for such actuality without which there would be no actuality in question. The first way is a manifestation of the more existential way to God but springboards from a different starting point.

Not only that, this reading of the first way accords with what Aquinas says elsewhere about the demonstrability of God and the raising of philosophical minds to a consideration of a primary cause as a creator. As we observed in the previous section, Aquinas holds that we reason to God by considering some feature of creatures and thence inferring that God is the cause of such a feature. We also noted that when it comes to the history of philosophical reflection on creation, Aquinas noted that it was only when philosophers had considered beings in terms of their very being that they were able to raise their minds to the notion of a creator, since a primary cause of the very being of things is thus a creator. Considering these points, the first way isolates some dependent feature of creatures, such as dependency for actuality disclosed in motion, and in turn arrives at a primary cause without which there would be no actuality in question. Such a cause can only be the cause of the being of things, since the primary and most fundamental form of actuality is that of the being or *esse* that things have.

It is not the case then that here we have several ways to God in Aquinas: the first way from motion and the more existential way(s) manifest in other places. Rather, what we have is Aquinas's way to God which moves from the observation of some dependence for actuality and reasons to a primary source of actuality without which there would be nothing. Aquinas's way to God remains the same, but it is manifested as different *viae* given the different contexts from which he wants to springboard the argument.²⁹

Given this reading of the first way, one might charge that on my reading

²⁹ This is the same approach to the first way adopted by Owens and Knasas. See the articles by Owens, "Immobility and Existence for Aquinas," "Actuality in the *Prima Via*," and "The Conclusion of the *Prima Via*" in *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God*; Knasas, *Thomistic Existentialism*, 251–56. One difference I have with those is that they see the first way as based on an underlying concern for *esse* and proceeding to affirm a primary cause of *esse*. Whilst sympathetic to that approach, I maintain that Thomas's concern is for dependent actuality and so reasons to a primary source of all actuality. It may be however that the difference between us is merely one of emphasis.

Thomas begins with natural philosophy and then moves to metaphysics. This is because I grant that Aquinas begins with an observation of physical things but quickly proceeds to consider them metaphysically, and so seeks an account for the actuality that anything has in a dependent fashion.³⁰ Someone might insist that either the argument is a physical argument and we remain with physical demonstrations or it is a metaphysical argument and we remain with metaphysics throughout. But I do not think that this charge can be levelled at my reading. The advertence to some physical feature of the world to springboard an argument does not entail that the feature thereby considered is drawn from a domain exclusive to natural philosophy; rather, all it shows is that the phenomenon under question is drawn from the natural world. And both the metaphysician and the natural philosopher consider the natural world, though what differentiates them is the formality under which they consider it. In the case of the metaphysician, he considers the world in terms of its very being. Hence, it is the explanation of the phenomenon taken as a starting point that will designate the argument as metaphysical or otherwise. But we have seen that the explanation of motion is in terms of act and potency and so is metaphysical. Hence, the argument, whilst observing physical realities, is metaphysical from start to finish.³¹

Existential Inertia

In our presentation, we have gone into some depth on the argumentative moves that Aquinas makes in the first way, and we have defended those moves against some traditional misunderstandings, such as understanding the argument as a metaphysical rather than physical argument, clarifying

³⁰ I share my reading with Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 457: "My view is that the first way as it appears in *ST* I, q. 2, a. 3 starts from a physical fact, but that if it is to reach the absolutely unmoved mover or God, it must pass beyond this and beyond a limited and physical application of the principle of motion to a wider application that will apply to any reduction of a being from not acting to acting. In other words, the argument becomes metaphysical in its justification and application of the motion principle, and only then can it succeed in arriving at God. This means that, in its refutation of an infinite regress of moved movers as an alternative explanation, the argument concludes to a source of motion that is not itself moved in any way whatsoever and, therefore, is not reduced from potency to act in any way." Knasas criticizes Wippel for this reading in *Thomistic Existentialism*, 254–55.

³¹ On this score I am in substantial agreement with Twetten, who holds that the first way is thoroughly metaphysical from start to finish, taking as its starting point the fact of motion but explaining that in metaphysical terms of act and potency ("Clearing a 'Way,'" 67–71).

the nature of motion and *per se* ordered series, and noting that the causality at stake in the first way is that of actuality and so the reduction of any potentiality to actuality. These involve traditional misunderstandings of the first way, and their treatment has appeared in several notable publications since the renewal of interest in Aquinas's thought in the twentieth century, and the renewed interest in the philosophy of religion in general in the second half of the twentieth century. In dealing with these objections in the text, we have not broken a lot of new ground; we have simply clarified what Thomas said or what his exponents have already pointed out. However, there are some objections of recent vintage which whilst sharing some things in common with older objections do present themselves as new objections. This is no doubt because of the renewed interest in the argument from motion brought about because of Feser's defense thereof and the reaction it has provoked. Whilst Thomists will continue to defend the first way against various objections, I would like to focus on one particular objection here, and that is existential inertia.

The reason why I focus on this objection is not simply because it has recently emerged in the discussion of Aquinas's argumentation, but also because the very proposal of this as an objection requires a commitment to an underlying metaphysics alien to Aquinas's metaphysics. Hence, existential inertia as an objection can be pushed only from within the context of a non-Thomistic metaphysics. And this highlights that what is at stake in the argument is not an interpretation of some physical reality at the physical level, such as motion, but the metaphysical framework within which that physical reality is to be understood, which is that of act and potency.

Graham Oppy and after him Joseph Schmid have recently published papers in which they target Feser's argument from motion.³² In Feser's argument, he argues that the principle of actuality which actualizes something currently in act must be concurrent with it, and from there he reasons to some primary cause without which even now there would be no actuality. Oppy and Schmid object that there is an alternative account of actuality and actualization, that in the absence of some competing causal influence, the object simply remains in existence.

This is an old objection because at its core it is a reiteration of one made by Mortimer Adler. He maintained that objects do not need some cause

³² Graham Oppy, "On Stage One of Feser's Aristotelian Proof," *Religious Studies* 57, no. 3 (2019): 1–12; Joseph Schmid, "Existential Inertia and the Aristotelian Proof," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 89, no. 3 (2021): 201–20. For Feser, see *Five Proofs*, ch. 1.

of their current existence given that they do exist; rather unless there is a cause which stops a thing from existing, objects simply continue to exist. Accordingly, objects enjoy what has come to be called existential inertia.³³ Despite this objection being a somewhat older objection, it has received very little presentation in the literature, and next to no systematic articulation of what existential inertia involves.³⁴

If this objection is correct, then we have a problem; for it would entail that the actuality objects have is not dependent on some cause whenever they have it. Thus, whilst the objects have actuality non-essentially and so appear to be candidates for members of a *per se* causal series, there is no need for a primary cause within which such objects participate for their causal actuality, since once gifted to them that causal actuality remains. So at most we could say there is a first cause for actuality, but not a primary cause that is *per se* actual.

Let's begin by focussing on the nature of objects as Aquinas conceives them, especially objects as they are conceived in the first way. What is being considered in the first way is the reduction of potentiality to actuality. As the argument goes, no potency is reduced to actuality unless for some principle of actuality which so reduces it. Objects then are composites of potency and act. Now the act which reduces the potency must be concurrent with the object in the reduction to act precisely because, unless the object participates in the actuality by which its potency is reduced, its potency would not be reduced. We can illustrate this by considering Thomas's thinking on essence and existence.

For Aquinas, unless something participates in its act of existence, its *esse*, it would be nothing. It is not the case that a thing can have *esse* and that the *esse* conjoin with it and remain with it once conjoined. This is because the thing is precisely nothing without the *esse*. Hence *esse* is not like a color

³³ See Mortimer Adler, *How to Think about God: A Guide for the 20th Century Pagan* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), ch. 13.

³⁴ See: Jonathan Kvanvig and Hugh McCann, "Divine Conservation and the Persistence of the World," in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas Morris (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); Alfred Freddoso, "Medieval Aristotelianism and the Case against Secondary Causation in Nature," in *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism*; Freddoso, "God's Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Why Conservation Is Not Enough," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 553–85; John Beaudoin, "The World's Continuance: Divine Conservation or Existential Inertia?," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 61 (2007): 83–98; Feser, *Five Proofs*, 232–38, and "Existential Inertia and the Five Ways," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2011): 237–67; Paul Audi, "Existential Inertia," *Philosophical Exchange* 48, no. 1 (2019): 1–26.

property of a substance which remains with the substance so long as no other cause comes along to change things (Oppy's example). Rather, *esse* is that actuality without which there would be nothing in the first place, in which case the actuality in question (*esse*) does not reside in an object already existing; rather the *esse* is the actuality without which there is nothing, so that unless the object participates in its *esse* for any moment in which it exists, the *esse* would be precisely nothing. With regard to existential act, existential inertia then is a non-starter for Thomas.³⁵

But let us just consider actuality *per se*, and not focus on existential actuality. Whilst the purveyors of the existential inertia objection are concerned only with the actual existence of the thing, one might wish to argue that the objection applies to any kind of actuality, and this because Thomas takes the motion in the first way to be any reduction of potency to act, not just the act of existence. There are two things to say about this.

First, *esse* is the act of all acts, so that any actuality in the thing presupposes *esse* and thereby participates in *esse*. Hence, if the existential inertia objection does not work against *esse*, then we have a fundamental principle of actuality without which there would be nothing and on which any actualized potency in the thing fundamentally depends for any moment of its existence. Hence, the reasoning in the first way is safeguarded.

Second, even when it comes to just any actuality, a thing in question must participate in that actuality for as long as it is actual in that respect. Take Oppy's example of a color persisting in a substance. Oppy takes this as an illustration that things remain as they are unless something comes along to change them, in which case we need not a concurrent cause for the state of things; rather we need only a cause for the change in state. But if we consider Thomas's understanding of the color of a substance, Oppy is wrong in this respect. A substance is colored because it is formed in some way, that is, a configuration of its matter has occurred such that it is colored that way. This configuration of the thing's matter is the actuality that it enjoys, and so long as the matter participates in that actuality—in that form, the form remains. Hence, the matter of the thing must continually be present to the form to be so formed.

Now of course, this does not mean that the thing must be continually present to the efficient cause of the form in order to be so formed, only that it be continually present to the formal cause, the form. One cannot generalize from the fact that an object does not continually depend on an

³⁵ For more details on this issue with specific consideration of *esse*, see my article "Existential Inertia and the Thomistic Way to God," *Divinitas* 62 (2019): 157–77.

efficient cause for some actuality to the conclusion that actuality *per se* does not require some concurrent cause. In the color case, the actuality is that of form, and the form needs to be concurrently in the matter for the matter to be so informed.

In the case of existence, we have a different kind of actuality, not a formal actuality which resides in the matter of the thing, since essence and existence are distinct. Nevertheless, unless the thing participated in its *esse*, it would not have *esse*. Hence the principle of actuality by which the thing is in act must be concurrent with the thing; and that being the case, a thing cannot have some actuality non-essentially and yet persist in that actuality independently of the primary cause of that actuality. In the color case the primary cause of that actuality is the form; in the existential case, it is that whose essence is its *esse*.

Given what we have said above, we can engage with Schmid's recent account of existential inertia. He offers two models by which to understand it. The first is that the current existence of an object is explained by its previous state and existence along with the absence of any causally destructive factors.³⁶ This offers a precise account of existential inertia, but it gives us no reason to accept it, especially not in light of Aquinas's metaphysics.

On the Thomistic account, given that an object would not be were it not to participate in *esse*, at any point at which it is, it is dependent on *esse*; for not only presently, but at any point in its past and future history, an object exists because it depends on its *esse*. Hence, unless the object is caused in its existence at any point at which it exists, it simply would not exist. Just as something is illuminated at any moment because it participates in some source of illumination and is in darkness otherwise, so too an object exists because it participates in *esse* and is nothing otherwise.

Schmid believes that if a thing persists through time, then it is something about that thing itself by which it persists through time, so that if the thing were not itself able to persist through time, not even God could cause it to persist. So, if God causes a thing to persist through time, that thing itself must be able to persist through time, in which case God's causality presupposes the persistence of a thing and does not establish it.³⁷

The problem here is that Schmid is deploying a metaphysics of his own with which a Thomist need not agree, especially when it comes to existence. A thing simply cannot exist by itself, since essence and existence are

³⁶ Schmid, "Existential Inertia," 5.

³⁷ Schmid, "Existential Inertia," 5.

distinct in the thing, and were the thing not to participate in its existence it simply would not be. Hence, God's causality with regard to existence does not presuppose the existence of the thing, but establishes it. In that case, then, a thing persists through time precisely because it participates in its existence, which it would not have were it not for God's granting it. We can illuminate this point further by considering an example that Aquinas often uses in the context of the causality of existence.

The atmosphere is illuminated for as long as it participates in the source of illumination; it is not caused to be luminous independently of that source. Similarly, a thing exists at whatever moment it exists because it participates in *esse*; it is not caused to possess *esse* independently of the cause of *esse*. Thus, a thing exists for as long as it does exist precisely because it is present to the source of existence receiving existence from it. On Thomas's account of existence and actuality, then, existential inertia or a modification thereof makes no sense.

Schmid's second model of existential inertia is not so much a model but a claim that it is simply basic.³⁸ As such it is non-threatening to Aquinas's position insofar as Aquinas draws upon a metaphysics, defended elsewhere, which guides the steps of the first way. This does however present us with the opportunity to make an observation about Schmid's engagement here which will round off this article by exposing once again Aquinas's approach to demonstrating God's existence. The observation is this: Schmid presumes that the dialectical context of argumentation for God's existence is metaphysically neutral, such that we can enter the argumentation free from metaphysical baggage. Accordingly, when it comes to deciding over existential inertia and what he calls the existential elimination thesis, we must have an attitude of neutrality.³⁹ Indeed, Schmid characterizes things in terms of entertaining two competing theses from the outset. Regardless of whether this is how Feser (Schmid's target) thinks about things, it is certainly not how Aquinas thought. Thomas took the demonstration of God's existence as something that occurs in metaphysics. That being the case, the argumentation is guided within the metaphysics that Thomas endorses, a metaphysics we have seen at use in our presentation of the first way. Given that existential inertia is an impossibility on the Thomistic metaphysics, we need to see some justification for why we should accept it as basic. Schmid offers none other than certain theoretical virtues; but a defender of Aquinas can simply point out

³⁸ Schmid, "Existential Inertia," 9.

³⁹ Schmid, "Existential Inertia," 9; see the introductory section.

that the same theoretical virtues are met with his metaphysics, and on the latter existential inertia remains an impossibility. So, unless Schmid can justify the alternative metaphysical backdrop that would make existential inertia plausible, it is not threatening to Aquinas's first way.⁴⁰ N.V

⁴⁰ I would also observe, but not pursue the matter here, that in his discussion of the explanatory primitive nature of existential inertia, Schmid confuses something's being explanatorily basic, and so not explained by anything further, and having a justification for accepting that something is the case. The Thomist is no stranger to something's being explanatorily basic, and indeed I myself have argued that *esse* is explanatorily basic in Aquinas's thinking; see "Thomist *esse* and Analytical Philosophy," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2015): 25–48. However, that does not mean that one is absolved from offering reasons for holding that something explanatorily basic like existential inertia (or Thomist *esse*) signifies how things are in reality. For the latter we need to offer reasons, a metaphysics; this is something that Thomas and Thomists in general do, but it is something that Schmid has not as yet undertaken. Having said that, I want to thank Schmid for his engagement with me on these issues and for raising the issue of existential inertia once again in the literature.