

## Why Can't a First Mover Be Accidentally Moveable? Bolstering Aquinas's Case for Divine Immutability in the Face of Objections from Theistic Personalists

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### Introduction

In his book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Brian Davies coined the term “theistic personalism” in order to have a name for a kind of monotheism that is quite widespread, but that differs significantly from the “classical theism” of the Church Fathers, the great medieval theologians, and the Reformers.<sup>1</sup> Theistic personalists claim that the personal nature of the biblical God cannot be reconciled with some of the core tenets of classical theism, in particular the doctrines of divine immutability, timelessness, and simplicity. Although personalists typically agree with the classical tradition that God exists necessarily and is the ultimate explanatory principle, they also claim that he is changeable and metaphysically composed. God's attributes or properties are distinct from each other and from God himself, and God can be causally affected by events in the created world. Some of the most influential figures within contemporary analytic philosophy of religion—thinkers like Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, and William Lane Craig—defend personalism of various shades.

Within contemporary systematic theology, theistic personalism is also

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1–22. Thanks to Fr. Thomas Joseph White for the invitation to give this paper at the conference “Is Belief in God Reasonable?: Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* in a Contemporary Context” at the Angelicum in Rome, December 4–5, 2020. Thanks also to the participants in the Scandinavian Thomistic Seminar for fruitful discussions of an earlier draft.

dominant. The long-standing tendency to contrast (unfavorably) a “Hellenistic,” “static” conception of God with a “biblical,” “dynamic” conception is evidence of this, as is the common tendency to historicize God’s being along Hegelian lines. Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Jenson, Eberhart Jüngel, Jürgen Moltmann, and many other theologians have rejected core elements of classical theism, such as God’s immutability and impassibility. It is fair to say that most contemporary theologians regard the idea that God suffers alongside his creation as almost axiomatically true, and this view entails that God can change.<sup>2</sup>

In book I of the *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG], St. Thomas Aquinas attempts to build a philosophical case for classical theism. He starts with two Aristotelian arguments from motion, presented in chapter 13, whereby he claims to establish that there is an immutable First Mover. Taking himself to have proved this, Aquinas then systematically unfolds the other doctrines of classical theism, using divine immutability as a key premise. In chapter 14, St. Thomas describes his *modus operandi*: “In order to proceed by the way of remotion about knowledge of God, let us take as principle that which is already manifest by what we have said above, namely that God is altogether unchangeable [quod Deus sit omnino immobilis].”<sup>3</sup>

Prima facie, this seems to be a promising method. If divine changelessness can be proved at the outset from the mere fact that there is motion, then the road to classical theism lies open. Given divine immutability, it readily follows that God lacks beginning and end, and perhaps also that God is eternal in the sense of being altogether timeless, as Aquinas argues in chapter 15. At the very least it follows that God lacks passive potentiality, since change is the actualization of some potential (ch. 16). From the lack of potentiality, furthermore, it follows that God is pure act, and from this it follows that he lacks any kind of composition whatsoever, so he is altogether simple.

This is basically how Aquinas argues in SCG I. The success of Aquinas’s case for classical theism depends, however, on whether the crucial premise of divine immutability can be proved without reliance on any of the other divine attributes that I have just mentioned. Theistic personalists claim that

<sup>2</sup> James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, “Introduction: Divine Impassibility in Contemporary Theology,” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 1–25; Ronald Goetz, “The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *Christian Century* 103, no. 13 (1986): 385–89.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG], trans. Laurence Shapcote, vol. I (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2018).

this cannot be done, and that the controversial divine attributes of classical theism can be proved only in a circular way, relying on one attribute (such as divine simplicity) in order to prove another (such as divine immutability), and vice versa.

In this article, I will try to show that this accusation is false, and that God's changelessness can be demonstrated without assuming divine simplicity, eternity, or any other divine attribute that is at issue between classical theists and personalists. Immutability can, if this is true, function as the cornerstone in a case for classical theism, in the way that Aquinas suggests. In what follows, I will do two things. First, I will evaluate Aquinas's most promising argument from motion, taking into consideration the kind of critique and concerns that theistic personalists in the analytic tradition bring to the table. Second, I will suggest an alternative Thomistic way of arguing for divine changelessness—a way that might be persuasive in the eyes of theistic personalists.

### The Argument from Motion

In chapter 13 of *SCG* I, Aquinas presents five arguments for God's existence. Two of them are Aristotelian arguments from motion that conclude with an immutable or unchangeable First Mover. Norman Kretzmann, in his influential book about *SCG* I, calls these arguments G1 and G2, respectively.<sup>4</sup> G2 is somewhat enigmatic and generally considered to have significant weaknesses, while G1 is a more elaborate version of the First Way in the *Summa theologiae* [*ST*]. If there is a sound argument from motion in Aquinas's corpus, it is likely to be some version of the First Way/G1. My purpose here is not to analyze any of these arguments in detail. Instead, I will take a birds-eye view of their basic structure in order to highlight a problem that many commentators see with arguments from motion in general. I will then point to a couple of possible solutions to this problem.

This is the argument in a nutshell:

1. Something is in motion (in a process of change).
2. Whatever is in motion is moved by another.
3. An essentially ordered series of movers does not regress infinitely.

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ch. 2.

4. Therefore, there is a first immovable mover (*primum movens immobile*).<sup>5</sup>

Premise 1, if taken in its natural sense, is hard to deny. Premise 2 is equivalent to the claim that, strictly speaking, *nothing is moved by itself*. What we normally refer to as cases of self-movement—for example an animal that moves around—are in reality cases of one part of a thing moving another part. “Part” must here be understood in the broad sense of *metaphysical* part. Since a *potency* is a different metaphysical part of a thing compared to any of the thing’s “actualities” (its actual properties), premise 2 boils down to the claim that *no potency can actualize itself* (assuming that motion is the actualization of a potency). This claim seems eminently reasonable.<sup>6</sup>

Premise 3 says that a series of essentially moved movers<sup>7</sup>—movers that cannot move unless they are moved themselves by some logically prior mover—must have a first member that *can* move without being moved by a prior mover. Unless there is a first mover whose power to move is intrinsic to it (not derived from another mover), no member of the series would move.<sup>8</sup>

I believe that all the premises, if rightly understood, can be successfully defended. In the present context, however, I will not attempt to justify this claim.<sup>9</sup> Instead I will focus on what I take to be the most significant challenge against the argument from motion: the claim that the conclusion does not follow from the premises—that the argument is invalid. This claim seems, *prima facie*, to be very plausible, as we will now see.

Suppose that we grant that all three premises of the argument from

<sup>5</sup> The versions of this argument in *SCG* I, ch. 13, and in *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I, q. 2, a. 3, corp., have the same premises. (*Summa theologiae*, trans. Laurence Shapcote [Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2012]).

<sup>6</sup> For a strong defense, see David S. Oderberg, “‘Whatever is Changing is Being Changed by Something Else’: A Reappraisal of Premise One of the First Way,” in *Mind, Method, and Morality: Essays in Honour of Anthony Kenny*, ed. John Cottingham and Peter Hacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 140–64.

<sup>7</sup> In Aquinas’s term, movers that are moved *per se*.

<sup>8</sup> For a strong defense, see Gaven Kerr, “Essentially Ordered Series Reconsidered,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2012): 155–74.

<sup>9</sup> The literature on the First Way is extensive. For good overviews of the debate, see John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 444–58 (and 413–31 for the versions of the argument from motion in *SCG* I, ch. 13); Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways: St Thomas Aquinas’ Proofs of God’s Existence* (New York: Routledge, 2003), ch. 2.

motion are true. Then, for any series of essentially ordered movers, there must be a First Mover that is not dependent on anything else for its power to move. The First Mover, in other words, must be able to move without being moved. Furthermore, since we have granted that premise 2 is true, it follows that nothing can move itself, in the strict sense. So the First Mover cannot move itself, neither directly nor indirectly. This means that the First Mover cannot start a chain of movers that eventually circles back and moves the First Mover itself accidentally, since that would be a form of (indirect) self-movement, which violates premise 2. Since all power to move ultimately comes from the First Mover, it might seem that the First Mover cannot be moved at all—that it is wholly unchangeable. However, and this is the main problem: there seems to be nothing in the argument that excludes there being another mover that is first in a different chain of movers. The uniqueness of the First Mover has not been proved. This means that our First Mover could possibly be accidentally moved by another First Mover, or by a chain of dependent movers animated by another First Mover.

This possibility suggests that the argument is invalid. It does not seem to follow from the premises that a First Mover is immovable or unchangeable.<sup>10</sup> It does not even seem to follow that such a mover is *actually* unchanged. All that seems to follow is that there must be one or several things that can move other things in virtue of their own underived causal power.

Scott MacDonald responds to this problem by saying that the argument from motion is “parasitic” on some other theistic argument. Although the argument from motion cannot by itself yield an immovable mover, it can do so if it is combined with the Third Way or some other contingency argument, which proves the existence of a being that is necessary of itself.<sup>11</sup> I do not have space to discuss MacDonald’s view here, but it is not obvious that appeal to the Third Way solves the present problem. Perhaps a necessary being can also be mutable, as theistic personalists normally assume.

However, many Thomists claim that the argument from motion, if rightly understood, is more potent than MacDonald thinks, and certainly more potent than my brief presentation here has indicated. In order to see

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<sup>10</sup> Many commentators have reached this conclusion. See, for example, Kenny, *The Five Ways*, 33; Scott MacDonald, “Aquinas’s Parasitic Cosmological Argument,” *Medieval Philosophy & Theology* 1 (1991): 119–55, at 146–47; Timothy Pawl, “The Five Ways,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 115–34, at 118.

<sup>11</sup> MacDonald, “Aquinas’s Parasitic Cosmological Argument.”

the argument's true power, we must attend to the metaphysics of potency and act. There are many different schools of metaphysical or existential interpretations of the argument from motion, and in the present context, I will have to limit the discussion to what I take to be a very convincing recent example of this general approach.<sup>12</sup>

Edward Feser reminds us that motion or change, for Aquinas, involves the actualization of a potency. In order to fully explain the occurrence in the world of motion or change in a narrow sense—namely local motion, qualitative change, and quantitative change—it must also be explained why the substances that change exist, how their potential for existence gets actualized.<sup>13</sup> Since there cannot be an infinite regress of “actualized actualizers”—things that get their own existence actualized by something else—we must at some point arrive at an “unactualized actualizer,” something that is capable of actualizing the potential for existence of other things, without first having to have its own potential for existence actualized.<sup>14</sup> According to Feser, only a being that is *wholly actual* (*actus purus*) is capable of ending such a regress of actualized actualizers. Therefore, if the occurrence of change in the world—that is, the actualization of any potential—is to be explained, a purely actual being must exist.<sup>15</sup> Such a being, since it is pure actuality, is necessarily unique, and by definition has no potentiality. It is hence wholly immoveable—*omnino immobilis*.

There is one step in Feser's argumentation that needs critical attention, however, namely his move from the claim:

- (1) “An unactualized actualizer exists”  
to
- (2) “A purely actual actualizer exists.”

I agree with Feser that the First Way and argument G1 in *SCG* I demonstrate the existence of an unactualized actualizer (claim 1), since only

<sup>12</sup> Edward Feser, *Aquinas* (London: Oneworld, 2009), 65–81; Feser, “Existential Inertia and the Five Ways,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (2011): 237–67. For other examples of “existential” interpretations, see: Joseph Owens, “Actuality in the ‘Prima Via’ of St Thomas,” *Mediaeval Studies* 29 (1967): 26–46; Owens, “Aquinas and the Five Ways,” *The Monist* 58, no. 1 (1974): 16–35; Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), ch. 3, no. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Wippel interprets the argument in a similar way (*Metaphysical Thought*, 446).

<sup>14</sup> I have taken the term “unactualized actualizer” from Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. also Aquinas's very brief argument in *SCG* I, ch. 16.

such a being can end a regress of actualized actualizers. An unactualized actualizer, however, is simply a being that exists without a cause of its existence—what theistic personalists would call a necessary being, something that exists of its own power and hence cannot fail to exist. It is unclear, however, why such a being could not have some potentiality, and hence be accidentally moveable. In other words, it is unclear why the unactualized actualizer should be identified with a *purely actual* actualizer, which is something that lacks potentiality altogether.

Although Feser addresses this problem and reasons about it, he seems to view the step from claim 1 to claim 2 as relatively uncontroversial. An unactualized actualizer, he writes, “doesn’t have any potential for existence that needs to be actualized in the first place. It just *is* actual. . . . Indeed, you might say that it doesn’t merely have actuality, . . . but that it just *is pure actuality* itself.”<sup>16</sup>

In a similar vein, Joseph Owens, interpreting actuality as identical to existence, writes: “Can the actuality of the primary [mover], be anything other than existence itself? Will it not have to be existence that is not brought into actuality by anything else? Will it not be existence that is there of itself?”<sup>17</sup> For Owens, an unactualized actualizer or “primary mover” can easily be identified with “pure existential actuality.”<sup>18</sup>

Although I think that both Feser and Owens are right in their conclusions—namely, that an unactualized actualizer or first mover must *be* pure actuality—I think they underestimate the controversial status of this claim and the amount of argumentation that is required to demonstrate it. Theistic personalists usually accept that God is an “unactualized actualizer” in the sense of a being that does not need to have its potential for existence actualized, since it exists necessarily of itself. So they accept what I above referred to as claim 1. However, they nevertheless reject claim 2—that the unactualized actualizer is *pure* act. In order to justify the latter claim, some additional argumentation seems to be needed. I will now suggest what I take to be the most natural Thomistic way to bridge the gap between claims 1 and 2.

Let us hereafter call the unactualized actualizer “First Mover” (FM). Now, suppose that the FM has some potentiality. This entails that there is a distinction between FM and its actuality, since FM is (*ex hypothesi*) partly

<sup>16</sup> Feser, *Five Proofs*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Owens, “Actuality,” 27–28.

<sup>18</sup> Owens, “Actuality,” 36.

constituted by something that is not actuality—namely, potentiality. FM’s actuality, in other words, is not identical to its essence.

In order to demonstrate that this cannot be the case, and that FM’s actuality must be identical to its essence, we need the following Causal Principle, which we find in Aquinas:

(CP): “Things in themselves different cannot unite unless something causes them to unite.”<sup>19</sup>

Given this principle, we can reason as follows: If FM’s actuality is something distinct or different from FM itself or its essence, there must be a cause that unites them, according to our CP. In other words, there must be a cause that gives FM whatever actuality it has. But this cause cannot be FM itself, since it cannot possibly cause anything unless it already has some actuality. However, the cause of its actuality cannot be something external to FM either, since that would mean that FM is dependent for its actuality on something else, which means that FM is not, contrary to hypothesis, the First Mover or unactualized actualizer. Hence, the assumption that a First Mover is distinct from its own actuality contradicts CP. This means that FM cannot be distinct from its actuality. It must simply *be* actuality—pure act.

We can summarize this argument in the following way:

#### BRIDGE ARGUMENT 1

1. If the First Mover (FM) is not pure act, there is a distinction or difference between FM and its actuality.
2. “Things in themselves different cannot unite unless something causes them to unite” (CP).
3. But there can be no cause that unites FM and its actuality.
4. Hence, there can be no distinction or difference between FM and its actuality.
5. So FM is pure act.

This argument follows Aquinas’s reasoning in *De ente et essentia*, where he shows that there must be something whose essence is identical to existence itself.<sup>20</sup> Existence and actuality are closely related concepts, and if we

<sup>19</sup> ST I, q. 3, a. 7, corp. See also Louis De Raeymaeker, *The Philosophy of Being: A Synthesis of Metaphysics* (St. Louis: Herder, 1954), 255.

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent defense, see Gaven Kerr, *Aquinas’s Way to God: The Proof in De Ente et Essentia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

substitute existence for actuality in the above argument, what we have is a version of the so-called “existential argument” from *De ente et essentia*. Following Étienne Gilson and Owens, many Thomists see the argument from motion and, indeed, all the Five Ways as particular applications of Aquinas’s metaphysical reasoning about essence and existence in *De ente et essentia*.<sup>21</sup> If this view is correct, we might say that the argument I have suggested here—Bridge Argument 1—is an implicit part of the argument from motion. For clarity, however, I think it should be spelt out as a separate argumentative step that requires appeal to a specific causal principle, the one stated in premise 2.

Unfortunately, few if any theistic personalists would accept this causal principle. Since theistic personalists reject the doctrine of divine simplicity, they assume that God has some properties that are non-identical to God himself, but without which he would not exist, such as his omniscience and omnipotence. Analytic philosophers call properties of this kind “essential properties.” Now, personalists accept that God could not have caused his own essential properties, since he could not exist without them. They also accept that no external cause could be responsible for those properties, since that would mean that God’s existence, *per impossibile*, would depend on an external cause. What is the explanation, then, of the fact that God has the essential properties that he has, according to personalists? Most personalists would say that there need not *be* any explanation of this fact, since God possesses his essential properties by necessity, and necessary facts (they claim) do not require an explanation. Hence, personalists will reject Aquinas’s CP, the proposition that “things in themselves different cannot unite unless something causes them to unite.” Personalists can, with some plausibility, hold that this principle is true only of things or properties that are *contingently* united.<sup>22</sup> Since God’s essential properties necessarily belong to God, they can be united in God without a cause. This view allows personalists to claim that there need not be any cause of God’s actuality or existence, despite the fact that God, according to their view, is not identical to pure actuality or to existence itself.

This reasoning appeals to brute, inscrutable necessities, and Aquinas’s view of the matter is undoubtedly more intellectually satisfying. For Aquinas, God’s necessary existence is not an inscrutable necessity, but is

<sup>21</sup> Gilson, *Christian Philosophy*, 81–83; Owens, “Aquinas.”

<sup>22</sup> Even Alexander Pruss, perhaps the foremost contemporary defender of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), claims only that all *contingent* facts have an explanation (*The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006]).

explained by the fact that God and existence are identical. Nevertheless, in the context of the conversation between classical theists and theistic personalists, we cannot expect that personalists should accept a principle—Aquinas’s CP—that flatly contradicts their basic conception of God and requires them immediately to accept divine simplicity and the identity of essence and existence in God. For the purpose of convincing theistic personalists of divine immutability, we therefore need another argument that bridges the gap between an unactualized actualizer—or a necessary being—and a being that lacks all potentiality. In what follows, I will suggest such an argument.

### **A Bridge Argument Aimed at Theistic Personalists**

My argument can be seen as an explication of the following remarks by Aquinas:

That which of itself must necessarily exist can in no way have possible existence, since whatever of itself must necessarily exist has no cause, whereas whatever has possible existence has a cause. . . . Now God, in himself, must necessarily exist. Therefore, he can in no way have possible existence. Therefore, no potency is to be found in his substance.<sup>23</sup>

When Aquinas says that a necessary being of this kind “can in no way have possible existence,” I take him to mean that such a being cannot have any contingent features or properties. It must be necessary through and through. If the necessary being would have some contingent feature, then that feature must have a cause, and Aquinas claims that it cannot have a cause because the necessary being is, as such, uncaused. However, a theistic personalist might grant that any contingent property that the necessary being has requires a cause, but claim that the cause could be the necessary being itself. Remember that we cannot, in this context, presuppose the doctrine of divine simplicity, so we must grant the possibility that the necessary being is metaphysically composed, which means that one aspect of it could cause changes in another aspect. Suppose, for example, that the necessary being is some kind of mind and has free will. Then perhaps it could cause itself to have a contingent property in the form of a new, particular thought. Moreover, for all we know at this stage, there could be several

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<sup>23</sup> SCG I, ch. 16.

necessary beings that could cause changes in each other. Hence—argues the theistic personalist—we have no reason to believe that the necessary being must be immutable.

In what follows, I will attempt to show why the alleged possibilities pointed out by the theistic personalist do not, in fact, exist. Besides the premise that a necessary being exists—a claim theistic personalists accept—my argument also needs a causal principle that theistic personalists could accept. I will work with the following principle, which is perhaps better called a “Principle of Sufficient Reason” (PSR), and which is restricted to contingent properties:

(PSR): “For any object O and any contingent, positive features(s) F that O has or has had, the fact that O has or has had F has a causal explanation.”

I cannot defend this principle here, but I believe that Alexander Pruss has convincingly defended a considerably stronger principle in his book *The Principle of Sufficient Reason*: “Every contingent proposition has an explanation.”<sup>24</sup> In the present context, I will presume that Pruss’ case holds water, or that my weaker PSR can be defended by Pruss’ arguments even if these arguments are insufficient to establish his own, stronger principle. For the sake of simplicity, I will hereafter state my PSR in the following abbreviated way:

(PSR-abbr): “Every *contingent-feature-fact* has a causal explanation.”

A “contingent-feature-fact” is a fact to the effect that a thing has or at some point had a certain contingent feature or features. The abbreviated formulation is hence to be understood as meaning exactly the same thing as the more complicated formulation, that there is a causal explanation of why a thing has or has had the contingent features it has or has had.

I will now give an informal presentation of the argument, and afterwards a formal summary.

The starting point of the argument is the existence of a necessary being, in the sense of a being that cannot fail to exist—in Aquinas’s words, a being that is “necessary of itself” (*per seipsum necessarium*).<sup>25</sup> The exis-

<sup>24</sup> Pruss, *Principle of Sufficient Reason*.

<sup>25</sup> SCG I, ch. 15. It is often remarked that Aquinas’s concept of “necessary being” is

tence of such a being might be established either by some contingency argument—for example, Aquinas's Third Way, his neat contingency argument in *SCG* I, ch. 16, or some Leibnizian contingency argument—or it might be established by means of the argument from motion. As we have seen, the First Way, if successful, establishes at least the existence of an "unactualized actualizer," which is a being that exists necessarily of itself. As already mentioned, the existence of such a being is typically not an issue of contention between classical theists and theistic personalists. What is at issue in the present context is whether this being is immutable or not, and it is unclear whether the First Way or G1 can establish immutability.

Now, suppose—for *reductio*—that the necessary being (NB) is mutable (changeable). Then it follows that it has some potency. I will here talk about NB's potencies as *features* of NB. This might seem a bit strange, since potencies are not among the *actual* properties that a thing has. However, a potency is still a real feature of a thing. My table, for example, is such that it could be set on fire, while the lake across the road lacks this feature (unless it is covered with oil or something like that). Instead of "potencies," we could equally well speak of dispositions, and dispositions are, according to a common view, real features of things. Perhaps dispositions or potencies are (as some would claim) reducible to other, more basic features or states, but those more basic features or states must then, like dispositions or potencies, be contingent, as I will shortly argue.

Now, the purported fact that the necessary being (NB) has some potencies could be a necessary fact—perhaps everything that exists has some potency, and necessarily so. However, even though it may be a necessary

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radically different from Leibniz's corresponding concept (see for example Patterson Brown, "St. Thomas' Doctrine of Necessary Being," *The Philosophical Review* 73, no. 1 [1964]: 76–90). While this is certainly true, it is much less clear that Leibniz's concept of a necessary being is substantially different from Aquinas's concept of a *being that is necessary of itself* (*per seipsum necessarium*). Brown argues that, if Aquinas by a being that is *per seipsum necessarium* had meant the same thing as Leibniz means by a necessary being—a being that exists in all possible worlds—then Aquinas would have been committed to acknowledge that the existence of such a being can be known a priori (by the ontological argument). Since Aquinas denies a priori knowledge of God's existence and claims that God is *per seipsum necessarium*, Brown concludes that Aquinas's concept of a being that is *per seipsum necessarium* must be different from Leibniz's concept of a necessary being. However, this is an unwarranted conclusion. Aquinas can maintain that God exists in all possible worlds and still consistently deny that his existence can be known a priori. There are, as Saul Kripke pointed out, necessary a posteriori truths (*Naming and Necessity* [Oxford: Wiley, 1981]). See J. William Forgie, "The Cosmological and Ontological Arguments: How Saint Thomas Solved the Kantian Problem," *Religious Studies* 31, no. 1 (1995): 89–100.

fact that NB has some potencies or other, it cannot be a necessary fact that it has this or that *particular* potency, such as that NB is potentially F, where F is a property that NB lacks but could possibly have. To say that NB *necessarily is potentially F* is incoherent, since a potency by definition can be reduced to actuality. And when a (passive) potency is reduced to actuality, it no longer exists. So having some particular potency cannot be a necessary feature of NB—a feature that it could not fail to have. Hence, any potency that NB has is a *contingent* feature of NB.

Now, our PSR dictates that “every contingent-feature-fact has a causal explanation.” This principle, of course, also applies to features that are potencies. It is true that potencies are not caused directly, since a thing has the potencies it has by virtue of having certain *actual* properties—my table, for example, is burnable by virtue of being made of wood. This means that a thing is caused to have certain potencies *by* being caused to have certain actual properties. In the present context, this complication is irrelevant, and I will for simplicity's sake speak of *potencies* being caused, or having causal explanations.

As I said earlier, *prima facie* it seems possible for NB to cause itself to have some contingent feature, so let us assume that NB itself is the cause that explains why it has some particular potency. A cause, however, needs a preexisting potency to actualize—this is what causation is. Fire can cause my table to burn only given a preexisting potency for burning in the table. This means that a causal explanation of why NB has some particular potency at time T presupposes that NB already had some *other* potency at some earlier time, T minus 1. If NB was *not* in some state of potentiality at T minus 1, it could not have caused itself to be in a different state of potentiality at time T, since causation is the actualization of a potency. However, this means that any causal explanation of why NB has some particular potency presupposes that NB at an earlier time already had some other potency, which in turn must be causally explained, which explanation in turn presupposes an even earlier potency, and so on. Since the necessary being has always existed—this is in the nature of a necessary being—the regress of previous states of potentiality will be infinite, so we will never reach a first such state.

We can summarize this reasoning thus:

1. If NB is changeable, it has some particular potency.
2. A particular potency is a contingent feature.
3. Every *contingent-feature-fact* has a cause (PSR-abbr).
4. If something causes NB to have some particular potency P, then

NB must previously have been in some other state of potency P1 (since causation is the actualization of a potency).

5. If something causes NB to have potency P1, then NB must previously have been in some other state of potency P2, and so on, *ad infinitum*.
6. Hence, if NB is changeable (if it has potency), it is the subject of an infinite regress of previous states of potency.

Is an infinite regress of this kind a problem for those who believe in a changeable God, a God with potency? It could be argued, with David Hume, that it is not. Every member of the infinite-regress chain is explained in terms of a previous member, and so on to infinity, and since every member is explained, there is nothing more in need of explanation. However, *pace* Hume, there is at least one more fact in need of explanation: the fact that the infinite chain has the members it has rather than some other members (or kind of members).

An analogy can make this clear. Suppose we have an infinite chain of chickens and eggs that have caused each other since eternity. Hume would say that every chicken is explained by a previous egg, and every egg by a previous chicken, and there is nothing more to explain. Surely, however, there is at least one “Big Fact” left unexplained by this Humean explanation: Why does the chain consist of chickens and eggs, rather than, say, by humans begetting each other from eternity? Even though every chicken is explained by a previous egg and vice versa, we have no explanation of why we are confronted by an infinite chain of *chickens and eggs*, in particular. It seems, then, that something very important remains to be explained.<sup>26</sup>

I will now apply this insight to the problem at hand, and try to show that an infinite regress of contingent states of potency in NB violates our PSR. As we recall, the PSR says that “every *contingent-feature-fact* has a causal explanation.”

Now consider what I will call the “Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact,” which is *the fact that NB has or has had those very contingent features that it has or has ever had*. All the potencies that NB has or has had are, as we have seen, contingent features of NB, and they are therefore all included in the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact. This Big Fact, moreover, is itself a *contingent* fact, because, if NB had failed to have even one of the contingent features that it has or has had throughout its infinite history, then the

<sup>26</sup> See Joshua Rasmussen, “Cosmological Arguments from Contingency,” *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 9 (2010): 806–19, at 812; Pruss, *Principle of Sufficient Reason*, 42–44.

Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact would not have obtained. In other words, it would not have been true that NB has had all those contingent features that it has actually had.

Against this background, we can reason as follows:<sup>27</sup>

#### BRIDGE ARGUMENT 2

1. If NB is changeable, then it has some particular potency or potencies.
2. Any potency that NB has is a contingent feature of NB.
3. The Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact—the fact that NB has (or has had) those very contingent features that it has or has ever had—has a causal explanation (PSR).
4. A causal explanation of the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact cannot presuppose any of the features included in the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact itself, on pain of being viciously circular.<sup>28</sup>
5. Any causal explanation of NB's potencies presupposes some prior potency, which the explanation does not account for.
6. Every potency that NB has or has ever had is a contingent feature of NB, and therefore included in the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact.
7. Hence, any causal explanation of the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact is viciously circular (from 4, 5, and 6).
8. Hence, there is no causal explanation of the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact (since a circular explanation is no explanation at all).
9. However, 8 contradicts 3 (the PSR).
10. Hence, NB is not changeable.

This might seem a bit complicated. Basically, however, the argument merely applies my previous reasoning about chickens and eggs to the infinite regress of prior potencies in NB. What is the explanation of the “Big-Chickens-and Eggs-Fact” that chickens and eggs have generated each other since eternity? Just saying that each chicken was caused by a previous egg and vice versa from eternity does not explain why the infinite chain consists of chickens and eggs in particular. It is the same with the

<sup>27</sup> The following argument is inspired by Rasmussen, “Cosmological Arguments,” 811–12.

<sup>28</sup> This follows from the fact that all features included in the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact are contingent, and so none of them is self-explanatory. To assume the existence of any contingent part of the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact when trying to explain that fact, would be to assume something that must be explained, and hence to beg the question.

Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact about NB, the fact that NB has been in an infinite number of particular states of potentiality. Although the states of potentiality that make up the infinite regress in NB do not cause each other, like the chickens and eggs do, they still *condition* each other, since every new potency can come about only given a previous potency. However, the fact that every state of potency can be explained in terms of a previous state of potency (plus a cause that actualizes it) does not give us an answer to the following question: Why has NB been in *this* infinite set of states rather than some other infinite set?

Non-necessary or mundane beings have a cause of their existence, and the contingent features that they display throughout their finite histories—such as their potencies—can ultimately be explained by reference to the cause that brought them into being. However, a *necessary* being by definition has no cause of its existence.<sup>29</sup> If it has potencies or other contingent features, they must be explained by reference to some cause that *modifies* or changes a being that is always already there. God could of course create potencies and other contingent features *ex nihilo*, but if he is to make such features inhere *in himself*, he will have to modify himself, and this presupposes that he already is in potency. This means that it is impossible to causally account for all of God's potencies, if he has any. Yet, potencies are contingent and therefore *must* be causally accounted for. It follows that the idea that God or a necessary being has potency must be rejected as irrational. A necessary being is necessarily immutable, as Aquinas points out.

### Conclusion

I have, in conversation with theistic personalism, paid critical attention to a controversial step in Aquinas's arguments from motion: his identification of the First Mover with pure actuality or *actus purus*. I have suggested two bridge arguments that can potentially justify this identification and the divine immutability that it entails. The first one was this:

#### BRIDGE ARGUMENT 1

1. If the First Mover (FM) is not pure act, there is a distinction or difference between FM and its actuality.
2. Causal Principle (CP): "Things in themselves different cannot unite unless something causes them to unite."

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<sup>29</sup> By a "necessary being" I here mean a being that is necessary of itself (*per se ipsum necessarium*).

3. But there can be no cause that unites FM and its actuality (since FM would then not be the First Mover).
4. Hence, there can be no distinction or difference between FM and its actuality.
5. So FM is pure act.

Perhaps this argument can be seen as an implicit part of the argument from motion. However, in the contemporary context, it should be made explicit as a separate argumentative step. The drawback with Bridge Argument 1 is that nobody who is suspicious of the doctrine of divine simplicity will accept premise 2, Aquinas's Causal Principle. This principle entails that everything that is not wholly simple must have a cause, but God by definition cannot have a cause, so accepting the premise means accepting that God either does not exist or is wholly simple. Bridge Argument 1, therefore, demonstrates divine immutability in a way that implicitly presupposes divine simplicity. In the interest of establishing divine immutability independently of divine simplicity, I therefore suggested another bridge argument:

#### BRIDGE ARGUMENT 2

1. If NB is changeable, then it has some particular potency or potencies.
2. Any potency that NB has is a contingent feature of NB.
3. The Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact—the fact that NB has (or has had) those very contingent features that it has or has ever had—has a causal explanation (PSR).
4. A causal explanation of the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact cannot presuppose any of the features included in the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact itself, on pain of being viciously circular.
5. Any causal explanation of NB's potencies presupposes some prior potency, which the explanation does not account for.
6. Every potency that NB has or has ever had is a contingent feature of NB, and therefore included in the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact.
7. Hence, any causal explanation of the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact is viciously circular (from 4, 5, and 6).
8. Hence, there is no causal explanation of the Big-Contingent-Feature-Fact (since a circular or question-begging explanation is no explanation at all).

9. However, 8 contradicts 3 (the PSR).
10. Hence, NB is not changeable.

This argument, which I see as an elaboration of the reasoning by Aquinas that I quoted earlier, argues from a necessary being to an immutable being. The existence of a necessary being is a premise that classical theists and (most) theistic personalists both accept, and this premise can be established either by some contingency argument or by an appropriate version of the argument from motion, interpreted along existentialist lines. The version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason that the bridge argument requires should be acceptable to theistic personalists, since this principle assumes only that *contingent* properties or features need an explanation. Bridge Argument 2 is therefore dialectically more helpful than Bridge Argument 1 when it comes to convincing theistic personalists of God's immutability.

N:V