

A TRIPTYCH ARTICLE

Ontological Vertigo

On Being Held in Being

The Creature Before God — Part I

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1 The Song and the House

A house outlives its builder. Once the last nail is driven, the carpenter can put down his hammer, walk away, retire, die; the house stands. Whatever it now needs—sound joists, dry rot kept at bay, a planet that continues to hold it down—it does not need *him*. His causing was spent in the making, and the made thing keeps the effect after the cause has gone.

A song is otherwise. It exists only while someone is singing it. The singer is not a manufacturer who could hand the finished product its independence; she is more like a spring than a mason, and the song stands to her the way the fountain's arc stands to the pressure beneath it. Stop the singing and there is no song-shaped thing left over to persist on its own. There is just silence, immediately.

These are both dependencies, but they are not the same dependency. The house depends on its builder for *coming to be*; the song depends on its singer for *being at all, now*. Philosophers mark the difference as one between a cause of becoming and a cause of being. Everyday life supplies endless examples of the first kind: parents and children, cooks and dinners, legislatures and laws. Examples of the second kind are rarer and easy to overlook, because the cause and the effect are simultaneous and the dependence shows itself only negatively—in what happens the instant the cause stops. Light in a room is the classic case. The lamp is not a builder that once installed brightness in the air and may now be switched off with no loss; the air is bright only while the lamp is shining into it. Brightness is not a possession the air acquired. It is a loan called in the moment the lending stops.¹

Now take the question one level down. A thing's shape, temperature, motion, color, and position all admit of both sorts of dependence, and we sort them case by case without much difficulty. But underneath all of these sits the fact that is so familiar it is hard to hold in focus: the thing *exists*. Not “exists” as shorthand for its features, but the blunt fact that there is something there to have features. And about existence itself the two models pose a question that ordinary experience does not settle. Is existing like the house—something a thing was given once, at the start, and now simply carries on with, no sustaining cause required? Or is it like the song and the lit air—something exercised now, and therefore either self-supplied now or received now?

Notice what the question is not. It is not a question about the past. Nothing in it asks whether the world had a beginning, how long ago, or what banged. A house built from eternity would still be house-like in its independence; a song sung from eternity would still be song-like in its dependence. The question is about the present tense of existence: tonight, at this hour, does anything stand under the fact that things *are*?

1.1 The alternative at full strength

There is a perfectly serious answer available on the house side, and it deserves to be named before anything is argued, because much of what follows is an argument against it. On this view, existence needs a cause, if at all, only for its arrival. Once a thing exists, existing is simply what it does; persistence is the default, requiring no more explanation than a moving body's continued motion requires a continuous pusher. Contemporary philosophers call this *existential inertia*, and it is not a foolish position. Physics itself was born partly from the discovery that motion, which Aristotle thought needed a sustaining mover, keeps itself going quite well. Why should being be different?

The position has a second form, blunter and in some ways harder to answer. Perhaps existence needs no cause at all, at any point—not for its arrival and not for its continuance. Things simply are; the demand for a reason has to stop somewhere, and it may as well stop at the world itself, which is then not explained but accepted. Call this the brute-fact reply. It concedes nothing and asks nothing. This essay does not pretend to dispose of either form. It states them at their strongest here, engages the picture underneath them where the argument bears on it, and records in its appendix that a complete refutation is not attempted.²

A third answer can be set aside more quickly, because it collapses when stated. Perhaps a thing supplies its own existence—is its own reason for being here. But to supply anything one must first be in a position to supply it, and a thing not yet there is in no position to do anything, least of all the favor of installing itself in reality. Self-causation is not a bold hypothesis; it is a malformed sentence, and no serious party to the dispute defends it. The live options are two: existence is uncaused, or it is caused by another—and if by another, then either in the past only, or now.

Whether being is different from motion is therefore the whole matter. The inertia picture quietly treats existence as a state a thing can be in and then remain in, the way a body remains in uniform motion—as if *that a thing is* were one more of its features, the steadiest one. The alternative picture treats existence as more verb than state: something a

thing is *doing*, or better, something being done in it, all the way down and all the time. Between these two pictures common sense has no vote to cast, because both are compatible with everything a day's experience contains. Houses stand, songs end, lamps switch off, and nothing in the furniture of the world wears a label announcing which model applies to the furniture itself.

The point is worth pressing, because it explains why the argument to come is metaphysical rather than experimental. Suppose the world were being held in being at every instant. What would be different? Nothing observable: in the held world everything proceeds exactly as it would if it proceeded on its own, since what is being supplied is not an extra force among the forces but the being of the things the forces act on. Now suppose the world were self-standing. Again nothing observable would differ, for the same reason in reverse. A dispute no measurement can settle is either empty or it concerns the structure that measurement presupposes; the burden of what follows is that this one is the second kind, and that it is decided, if at all, by asking what sort of thing a nature is and what sort of thing existing is.

Deciding between them requires instruments of an older kind: distinctions. The sharpest ones available were ground over about two thousand years, beginning in Greece, and the honest way to the question is through them—not because antiquity confers authority, but because the Greeks got there first with the fewest assumptions, and what they saw, and what they failed to see, marks the trail for everyone after.

2 What the Greeks Reached

2.1 Potency and act

Aristotle's contribution begins with an observation about change so plain that its power is easy to miss. Whatever changes acquires something it did not have: the cold water becomes hot, the seed becomes an oak, the unlit lamp lights. Before the change, the thing possessed the new state only as a capacity—Aristotle says *potentially*; after, it possesses the state in fact—*actually*. And nothing confers on itself what it does not have. The water cannot heat itself; something already hot, or already in act in the relevant way, must do it. Potency does not lift itself into act, any more than an empty pocket funds a purchase.

Aristotle states the rule in a sentence that governs everything downstream, and states it about ordinary cases: “from the potential the actual is always produced by an actual thing, e.g. man by man, musician by musician; there is always a first mover, and the mover already exists actually.”³ The examples are deliberately unglamorous—a man, a harpist—because the claim is not yet about first causes but about causing as such. Give the principle its widest form and it says: no capacity ever cashes itself; every actualization traces to something already actual.

From this Aristotle draws his ranking, and the ranking is more careful than admirers of the phrase usually notice. Actuality is prior to potency, he says, “both in formula and in substance; and in time it is prior in one sense, and in another not.”⁴ In definition, because one cannot say what a capacity is without naming what it is a capacity *for*: sight is explained by seeing, not seeing by sight. In time, only with the qualification he insists on—this seed precedes this oak, but an oak preceded the seed. And in substance, decisively: “matter exists in a potential state, just because it may attain to its form,” so that the capable exists for the sake of the achieved and never the reverse.⁵ The chapter closes by drawing the line all the way out: actuality “is prior in substantial being to potency; and as we have said, one actuality always precedes another in time right back to the actuality of the eternal prime mover.”

2.2 The series that must have a first

Follow that pointing finger through a series. The water is heated by the fire, the fire sustained by its fuel and air, and so on. Where the members of such a series act *simultaneously*—each moving only because something is now moving it—the series cannot do without a first member whose actuality is not on loan. Deferral is not explanation; a chain of borrowers, however long, never adds up to an owner.

Aristotle argues the point in its own right, early, before any theology is in view. “Evidently there is a first principle,” he writes, “and the causes of things are neither an infinite series nor infinitely various in kind”—and he runs the case through each of his four causes in turn, refusing an endless regress in matter, in efficient causing, in ends, and in definition.⁶ His remark about the endless series of ends carries the whole temperament of the argument: “those who maintain the infinite series destroy the Good without knowing it. Yet no one would try to do anything if he were

not going to come to a limit.” An explanation that never lands is not a long explanation. It is a promise repeatedly renewed and never kept.

In the twelfth book he applies the rule to the cosmos. Eternal substances are not enough, he notes, and neither is a substance that merely *could* act: “if it does not act, there will be no movement. Further, even if it acts, this will not be enough, if its essence is potency. . . . There must, then, be such a principle, whose very essence is actuality.”⁷ Then, in the following chapter, the terminus is named: “there is a mover which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance, and actuality.” And then, in a sentence whose reach exceeds its grammar: “On such a principle, then, depend the heavens and the world of nature.”⁸ *Depend* is his word. The world of nature, for Aristotle, is not a house standing after its builder; it hangs, now, from pure actuality.

2.3 Plato: what is had, and what is

Plato had already reached a structurally similar result from a different side. What strikes him is not change but multiplicity: many beautiful things, no one of which is beauty. Each is beautiful in some respect, for a while, from an angle; each has beauty the way a borrower has money. In the *Phaedo* Socrates offers what he calls the safest answer to the question why anything is beautiful: “nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence and participation of beauty,” so that “by beauty all beautiful things become beautiful.”⁹ Strip the example and keep the structure: whatever possesses a perfection partially, derivatively, and in company with many others that possess it too, points beyond itself to something that does not *have* that perfection but simply *is* it.

In the *Republic* Plato pushes the same structure one step further, and the step is worth quoting for where it lands. Explaining the Good by comparison with the sun—the sun which is “not only the author of visibility in all visible things, but of generation and nourishment and growth”—he says that “the good may be said to be not only the author of knowledge to all things known, but of their being and essence, and yet the good is not essence, but far exceeds essence in dignity and power.”¹⁰ Notice which picture is doing the work at that precise joint: the sun, the source that gives what the lit things do not own. The lamp and the lit air of the first pages are not a modern convenience. They were the Greek picture, waiting.

2.4 What the Greeks did not reach

It matters, for honesty and for everything that follows, to state precisely what the Greeks did *not* conclude.

Aristotle’s unmoved mover is an explanation of motion, not of being, and he says exactly how it moves: “The final cause, then, produces motion by being loved, and by that which it moves, it moves all other things.”¹¹ It moves the heavens as the beloved moves the lover: by being desirable, not by supplying anything. There is no suggestion that it chose the world, knows the world’s particulars, or gave the world existence. The cosmos alongside it is eternal, underived, and simply there.

Plato’s forms are patterns, not makers, and where a maker does appear in his writing, in the *Timaeus*, the limits sit on the surface of the text. The craftsman god finds the visible sphere “not at rest, but moving in an irregular and disorderly fashion,” and “out of disorder he brought order”—he arranges, that is, materials already there. He works by looking at a model he did not invent, “the pattern of the unchangeable.” And the reason given for his working at all is a moral one, in a sentence of great beauty: “He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be.”¹² Grant the passage everything it asks and it still yields a shaper, not a source: no origin of the matter, no origin of the pattern, no account of why there is anything at all to be shaped.

Neither philosopher, in short, has any notion of a cause that supplies *that things exist*. Creation from nothing is not a Greek idea; it was not rejected by the Greeks, merely never conceived. And it is worth adding that the tradition which later held it did not pretend otherwise. Aquinas, narrating the history of philosophy in the middle of his own treatment of creation, describes the ancients as advancing “gradually, and as it were step by step”: assigning causes first to accidental change, then to substantial change, and only at the end reaching the question of being itself. “Then others there were who arose to the consideration of ‘being,’ as being, and who assigned a cause to things, not as ‘these,’ or as ‘such,’ but as ‘beings.’”¹³ That sentence marks the seam exactly. The Greek arguments answer “why is there motion?” and “why are there many so-and-sos?” The question “why is there anything?” had to be posed before it could be answered, and posing it was not, in the first place, a philosophical achievement.

And yet the instruments were now on the table. A distinction between potency and act, sharp enough to show that nothing actualizes itself. A logic of ordered series, strong enough to show that simultaneous dependence must terminate in something that depends on nothing. A grammar of participation, supple enough to describe having-by-borrowing and to posit, at the source, one that is what the others merely have. What remained was to aim all three at the fact the Greeks never isolated: existence. That took a different intellectual world—one which had reasons of its own, not derived from philosophy, for suspecting that to exist is to be given.

3 What a Thing Is, and That It Is

The world that inherited the Greek instruments professed, on entirely non-philosophical grounds, that the whole of things had been called out of nothing. Whether that profession is true is not the present question, and nothing in this section will assume it. But it explains a change of focus. Thinkers who confessed creation had a standing reason to ask the question Athens never isolated—what accounts for there being anything to move?—and to ask it with Greek rigor. The thirteenth century, and Thomas Aquinas in particular, brought the two inheritances into one argument.

3.1 A distinction quiet enough to miss

Aquinas's decisive move is a distinction so quiet it can be missed. Consider any definable thing—a horse, a hexagon, a helium atom. Everything that belongs to *what it is* can be laid out in the definition, and the definition will be complete without ever mentioning *that it is*. You can know exhaustively what a thing would be while its existence remains an open question; naturalists have written precise descriptions of animals that turned out not to exist, and physicists of particles that turned out to exist after all. In no case did learning the answer add a new clause to the definition. Therefore what a thing is and that it is are really distinct in every such thing: essence does not include existence, any more than the blueprint of the house includes the house's standing there. A thing's nature is related to its existing as a capacity to what fills it—which is to say, in Aristotle's currency, as potency to act.

The distinction can be stated so briskly that it sounds like a verbal point, so it is worth watching what it is not. It is not the claim that existence is one more feature a thing might have or lack, alongside mass and color—a claim that would be false and that the tradition denies. Existence is not an item in the inventory; it is the condition of there being an inventory. Nor is it a claim about the order of discovery, as though we first meet natures and then check them against reality. It is a claim about the structure of any finite thing: the nature does not account for the being, and the being is not contained in the nature.

3.2 *De ente et essentia*: the argument at its source

The fullest early statement is a short treatise Aquinas wrote as a young man, *On Being and Essence*, and it is worth following in its own steps, because the compressed versions in the *Summa* presuppose it. The argument begins from what the mind can do: “every essence or quiddity can be understood without anything being understood about its existing; for I can understand what a man is, or what a phoenix is, and still not know whether it has being in the nature of things.”¹⁴ The pairing of examples is exact. A man is something we know to exist; a phoenix, in Aquinas's day as in ours, is something about which the question stands open or has been closed in the negative. The definition is the same document in every case. Whatever the answer about existence turns out to be, nothing is added to or struck from the account of what the thing is—and that invariance is the whole evidence.

From there Aquinas moves in three steps. First: since existence is not included in what a thing is, existence must be *added* to the nature—“therefore it is clear that existence is other than essence or quiddity, unless perhaps there is some thing whose quiddity is its own existence,” and such a thing, he argues immediately, “can only be one, and first.”¹⁵ Second: whatever belongs to a thing without being part of its nature comes either from the thing's own principles or from outside—and here Aquinas reaches, in the very sentence that carries the argument, for an illustration this essay has been using since its first page: “as risibility in man, or as the light in the air from the influence of the sun.”¹⁶ Third, the exclusion: existence cannot be caused by the thing's own nature, “for then some thing would be its own cause and would produce itself in being, which is impossible.”¹⁷

The conclusion follows in one move, and it is the move the rest of this essay depends on: “therefore every such thing, whose existence is other than its nature, must have existence from another. And since everything that is through

another is traced back to what is through itself as to a first cause, there must be some thing which is the cause of existing for all things, in that it is existence alone.”¹⁸ A borrower of existence traces to an owner of existence, or the account never closes. And what the owner is, on this analysis, is not a very large thing that happens to exist without help. It is *esse tantum*—existence, and nothing else besides.

3.3 The schools that differ

Honesty requires saying that the thirteenth century did not receive this argument as an obvious truth, and that the disagreement was internal to the tradition rather than an assault from outside it. Within a generation the question “how are essence and existence distinguished in creatures?” had become one of the most contested in the schools. Giles of Rome defended a real distinction in a stronger form, at times speaking of essence and existence as distinct *things*—language that invited critics to picture existence as an entity rather than a principle. Henry of Ghent denied a real distinction while insisting on more than a merely conceptual one, proposing a third, “intentional” distinction between them. Godfrey of Fontaines rejected both and held essence and existence to be really identical, differing only in the way they signify.¹⁹ The point of naming them is not to adjudicate. It is that a reader who finds the distinction less than self-evident is in respectable medieval company, and that this essay’s adoption of the Thomistic position is an adoption, not a report of consensus.

A second and quite different objection belongs here too, because it is the one a contemporary reader is more likely to have met. Since Hume and Kant, and with new precision since Frege and Russell, a long line of philosophers has denied that existence is a property of individuals at all: to say that dinosaurs do not exist, on this account, is not to say something about certain individuals but to say that a certain concept is not instantiated.²⁰ That tradition and this one are not simply colliding, and it is worth seeing why. The scholastic claim was never that existing is one of a thing’s attributes—the previous subsection denied exactly that—but that a finite nature does not account for its own being in act. A reader persuaded by Frege about the logic of “exists” may still ask why this particular nature is in act rather than not, and that question, not a question of predicate logic, is the one the argument answers. The essay records the collision without pretending to settle it, and states plainly what it needs: that no finite nature accounts for its own existing.

3.4 Participation, and the terminus

Once the distinction is in hand, the Greek machinery engages it with a click. Nothing confers on itself what it does not have; a nature that does not include existence cannot be the source of its own existing. Existence must then be received—and received the way the song is received from the singer, not the way the house was received from the builder, because the receiving is not an event in the thing’s past but the present condition of there being a thing. Aquinas says it in the vocabulary Plato minted: “all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation,” and whatever has a perfection by participation is caused in it by what has that perfection essentially, “as iron becomes ignited by fire.”²¹

The same article’s sequel closes the last door a reader might leave open. Perhaps existence is conferred on *forms*, one might think, while the raw stuff underneath is simply given—the eternal, underived matter of the Greek picture. Aquinas denies it, and denies it precisely on the ground that a cause of being as being leaves nothing outside its effect: what causes things as beings must cause them “not only according as they are ‘such’ by accidental forms, nor according as they are ‘these’ by substantial forms, but also according to all that belongs to their being at all in any way,” and therefore “it is necessary to say that also primary matter is created by the universal cause of things.”²² Nothing gets to stand outside. There is no floor beneath the floor.

At the head of the series of borrowers—and only there—stands something whose essence *is* its existence: not one more thing that happens to exist, but subsistent existence itself, having nothing in it of the unfilled capacity that would need, in turn, to be filled. Aquinas’s argument for the identification is threefold and each strand is short. Whatever a thing has besides its essence is caused either by its own principles or by an external agent; but nothing can cause its own existence; “therefore that thing, whose existence differs from its essence, must have its existence caused by another”—which cannot be true of the first cause. Again, “existence is that which makes every form or nature actual,” so existence stands to essence as act to potency, and in the first there is no potency. And again, “that which has existence but is not existence, is a being by participation”—and a participated being is not first.²³ Aquinas’s name

for the terminus is blunt: in God alone essence and existence are identical; God is “not only His own essence... but also His own existence.”

3.5 A name in the present tense

One further passage deserves its place here, because it shows the tradition drawing from this analysis a consequence about language rather than about metaphysics. Asked which of the divine names is most proper, Aquinas answers: not “God,” and not “the good,” but “He Who Is”—and he gives three reasons, of which the third is the one that concerns this essay. The name is most fitting “from its consignification, for it signifies present existence; and this above all properly applies to God, whose existence knows not past or future.”²⁴ Present existence: the tense of the argument all the way down. The question of the first pages was never about a distant beginning, and the tradition’s most careful sentence about the divine name says why the question could not have been about that. What subsistent existence has is not a long history of existing. It is existing, now, without the qualification “still.”

4 The First Way, and What It Does Not Prove

The most famous statement of a presently operating dependence is not the argument just given but the first of Aquinas’s five ways—an argument from motion rather than from existence, and the more instructive here for that, since it is the version everyone has met and the version everyone misreads. It is short enough to quote nearly whole, and it is worth seeing in full both for what it says and for what it refuses to say, because almost every popular objection to it is an objection to a claim it does not make.

4.1 The argument as Aquinas gives it

It begins not in speculation but in the street: “It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion.” The first premise follows immediately, with its reason attached: “whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act”—and Aristotle’s rule from section 2 is then given its scholastic form, “for motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality.” Because nothing can be actual and potential in the same respect at once, “it is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e. that it should move itself.”²⁵

Then the regress, with the image that decides its meaning: “If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand.” And the conclusion: “Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.”²⁶ The staff is not a decoration. It carries the argument’s entire logic: a staff pushes because a hand is pushing it, now; take away the hand and the pushing does not continue with a diminished force, it is simply not there.

4.2 Which regress is denied

Everything therefore depends on what kind of series is at issue, and here Aquinas is explicit elsewhere in a way that the compressed article is not. Answering an objection about the world’s eternity, he distinguishes two ways causes can be ordered. “In efficient causes it is impossible to proceed to infinity *per se*—thus, there cannot be an infinite number of causes that are *per se* required for a certain effect; for instance, that a stone be moved by a stick, the stick by the hand, and so on to infinity.” But an endless series of causes ordered only *accidentally* is a different matter: “as an artificer acts by means of many hammers accidentally, because one after the other may be broken... and likewise it is accidental to this particular man as generator to be generated by another man; for he generates as a man, and not as the son of another man.”²⁷ A father is a cause of his son’s coming to be; he is not, twenty years later, holding his son in existence, and his own father’s death did not interrupt the arrangement. Fathers can in principle run back

forever without embarrassment. Hands holding staffs cannot, because there the causing is happening now and is borrowed at every link.

This is the pressure point of the whole classical tradition, and the reader should know it is under active pressure. The claim that an essentially ordered series cannot regress without end is defended and contested in contemporary philosophy on both sides, with a technical literature that has grown substantially in the last two decades.²⁸ This essay does not adjudicate that literature and does not need to: its own argument runs through essence and existence rather than through motion, and the First Way is presented here as the tradition's most compressed statement of a structure already established, not as the load-bearing member.

4.3 What “everyone understands to be God” does not claim

Now read the closing clause carefully, because more objections have been aimed at it than at anything else in the article. “This everyone understands to be God” does not claim that the argument has proved everything the word “God” carries. It reports that what the argument reaches—a first actuality on which the rest presently depends—occupies the place common usage assigns to God, and it defers the justification of that identification to the analysis that follows.

And the analysis does follow, at length. The next nine questions of the *Summa* are precisely the work of showing that the terminus reached must be what religion means: that it is altogether simple, having no composition of any kind (I, q. 3, a. 7); that its essence is its existence (q. 3, a. 4); that it is infinite (q. 7, a. 1); that it is present innermost to everything that is (q. 8, a. 1); and that it is one (q. 11, a. 3).²⁹ A reader who accepts the First Way has therefore not yet been given divine freedom, knowledge, or love. Those are separate arguments, some of which this essay reaches and most of which it does not. What the First Way delivers, taken alone, is austere: something first, actual, and not itself dependent. Whether that something is worth adoring is a question the argument opens and does not close.

4.4 No proof of a beginning, and the argument this is not

One door must now be closed firmly, because leaving it ajar corrupts everything downstream. None of this reasoning concerns the age of the world. Aquinas himself held—against friends, against apologetic convenience, and at some cost to his reputation among contemporaries—that philosophy cannot demonstrate that the world began: “By faith alone do we hold, and by no demonstration can it be proved, that the world did not always exist.”³⁰ His reason is exact and is not a concession: what can be demonstrated of a thing is drawn from its essence, and no essence carries a date.

This is also the place to distinguish the argument of these pages from a different and better-known one, since readers who have met the subject in contemporary form are likely to assume they are the same. Modern surveys standardly divide deductive cosmological arguments into three families: one turning on the impossibility of an infinite essentially ordered regress, associated with Aquinas; a second, the *kalām* argument, holding that an infinite *temporal* regress is impossible and inferring a beginning and so a cause of the beginning; and a third resting on the principle of sufficient reason, associated with Leibniz and Clarke.³¹ This essay's argument belongs to the first family and takes no position whatever on the second. It makes no claim that the past is finite, none that an actual infinite is impossible, and none that the world had a first moment—and it would be unaffected if the universe turned out to be beginningless.

An everlasting world would still be a borrowing world. The dependence at issue is vertical, not horizontal: not a chain of yesterdays reaching back to a first yesterday, but the present suspension of every existing thing from what exists of itself. The Greek sentence was right and only needed its full weight: on such a principle *depend*—present tense—the heavens and the world of nature.

5 The Present Tense of Creation

If existence is received the way the song is received, then the receiving has no expiration. That consequence is not a flourish added to the argument; it is the argument, stated in the tense that matters. And it is the point at which the tradition speaks most plainly, because it is the point at which the tradition was asked the question directly.

5.1 The question put directly

Aquinas devotes an article to whether creatures need to be kept in being, and his answer is the song, not the house. He begins by distinguishing two ways one thing preserves another. Indirectly, “by removing the cause of its corruption, as a man may be said to preserve a child, whom he guards from falling into the fire”—and in this way God preserves some things but not all. Directly, “when what is preserved depends on the preserver in such a way that it cannot exist without it.” In this second manner, he says, all creatures need to be preserved by God: “the being of every creature depends on God, so that not for a moment could it subsist, but would fall into nothingness were it not kept in being by the operation of the Divine power.”³²

Then comes the demonstration, and its examples are the ones this essay opened with—not by coincidence, since this article is where they come from. “An agent may be the cause of the ‘becoming’ of its effect, but not directly of its ‘being.’ This may be seen both in artificial and in natural beings: for the builder causes the house in its ‘becoming,’ but he is not the direct cause of its ‘being.’” Why not? Because the house’s standing depends on the nature of its materials, not on the man: “the ‘being’ of a house depends on the nature of these materials, just as its ‘becoming’ depends on the action of the builder.” The builder made an arrangement; the arrangement holds by properties he did not make and does not maintain.³³

The whole question then narrows to one point. Is there an agent whose proper effect is not this or that arrangement but *being*? If there is, the relation of that agent to its effect cannot be the builder’s relation, because there is no further nature underneath to carry the effect once the causing stops. And there is such an agent, on the argument of the preceding sections: what is subsistent existence gives existence, and gives it as fire gives heat. Aquinas’s own illustration is the one already met twice: “the light in the air is by the continual influence of the sun,” and every creature stands to God “as the air is to the sun which enlightens it.” The sun has light by nature; the air is bright by sharing something not its own. So God alone is being by essence, “whereas every creature has being by participation.”³⁴

5.2 Conservation is not a second act

A misunderstanding waits here that would wreck the doctrine if admitted, and the tradition blocks it. Conservation is not a series of fresh creations, God re-issuing the world instant by instant like frames of film, nor a succession of divine decisions to let things carry on. It is the non-interruption of the single act of giving being. The difference between creating and conserving is a difference in the effect’s history—beginning to be, or continuing to be—not a difference in the giving.

That the difference lies on the creature’s side and not on God’s is a claim the tradition makes with unusual technical care. Creation, Aquinas argues, “places something in the thing created according to relation only; because what is created, is not made by movement, or by change,” since movement and change require something pre-existing to be changed.³⁵ What creation puts into the creature is not an event but a relation—the standing ordination of a receiver to its source. Read that alongside the conservation article and the picture is coherent: there is one act of giving, eternal on the giving side; on the receiving side there is a world with a history, and the history is nothing but the continuous being-given.

5.3 Could a creature be made independent?

Two consequences follow, and both matter later.

First, this dependence is not a defect that better engineering could remove. Aquinas presses the thought to its limit: God could not make a creature that would keep existing after the divine sustaining ceased, “as neither can He make it not to have received its being from Himself.”³⁶ A self-sufficient creature is not a rarity; it is a contradiction, like a borrowed loan that belongs to the borrower. To be a creature *is* to be the receiving. The word names a relation, not a species: there is no further property, “creaturehood,” added to horses and men on top of their existing; what makes a thing a creature is that its existing is had from another.

Second, the sustaining cause is not far away, watching its effect from outside—and the argument for that is worth having in full, because the intuition of distance is the single most persistent obstacle to seeing what is being claimed.

5.4 Innermost

Aquinas's article on God's presence in things begins from a rule about causes: "an agent must be joined to that wherein it acts immediately and touch it by its power." Then the identification of the effect: "since God is very being by His own essence, created being must be His proper effect; as to ignite is the proper effect of fire." Then the temporal reach: "God causes this effect in things not only when they first begin to be, but as long as they are preserved in being; as light is caused in the air by the sun as long as the air remains illuminated. Therefore as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it, according to its mode of being."³⁷

And then the sentence that decides where the giver stands. What is most one's own in any thing is its existence—"being is innermost in each thing and most fundamentally inherent in all things," since it is what makes actual everything else found there—and since existence is precisely what is being given, the giver is present at the very point of the gift: "Hence it must be that God is in all things, and innermost."³⁸

Distance would make the picture easier—a deist clockmaker is a comfortable landlord—but the argument will not permit it. The nearer you go to the core of any creature, the nearer you are to the act by which God is holding it. And the two halves of the claim rise together rather than competing: it is because the creature is other than God, receiving its being rather than being it, that God must be present to it at the point where being is received. Pantheism and deism fail in opposite directions from the same mistake, each supposing that intimacy and distinction are quantities to be traded against one another.

5.5 The ancient witnesses

None of this was invented in the thirteenth century. Long before the scholastic vocabulary existed, Christian writers had said the same thing in their own registers, and it is worth hearing two of them at some length, because they show that present-tense conservation is not a Thomistic refinement but the common ancient conviction.

Irenaeus of Lyons, in the second century, is arguing against people who thought souls were natively immortal, and his answer refuses the premise at its root. The heavens and everything made "continue throughout a long course of time according to the will of God"—duration itself is a grant, not a possession—and "life does not arise from us, nor from our own nature; but it is bestowed according to the grace of God." The soul, accordingly, "partakes in that life bestowed upon her by God," and does so as long as God pleases.³⁹ Two books later he puts the asymmetry in a clause no scholastic improved on: "you did not make God, but God you." And he draws the conclusion in the form of a rule about the two parties: "creation is an attribute of the goodness of God, but to be created is that of human nature."⁴⁰

Athanasius, in the fourth century, states the ground rule of all created natures and then draws the consequence for the universe as a whole. "The nature of created things, inasmuch as it is brought into being out of nothing, is of a fleeting sort, and weak and mortal, if composed of itself only." Left to what it is in itself, in other words, the world does not merely decay; it fails. And so, "seeing then all created nature, as far as its own laws were concerned, to be fleeting and subject to dissolution, lest it should come to this and lest the Universe should be broken up again into nothingness," God "did not leave it to be tossed in a tempest in the course of its own nature" but holds it by his Word, "quickening and sustaining all things everywhere, each severally and all collectively."⁴¹ That is the position of these pages, stated eight centuries before the *Summa* and with no technical vocabulary at all: creatures are not the sort of thing that keeps itself.

One sentence in the same passage deserves separate notice, because of where the reader last met its phrasing. Athanasius gives a reason for the sustaining, and the reason is generosity: God is good, "and one that is good can grudge nothing: for which reason he does not grudge even existence, but desires all to exist, as objects for His loving-kindness."⁴² Plato's craftsman, free from jealousy, gave order to material already lying there. Athanasius says the same word about a different gift—the gift of being at all. The vocabulary is Greek; the thing said with it is not.

5.6 The received teaching

The Catholic Church has fixed this conviction in her most deliberate registers, and honesty about method requires saying plainly what kind of claim that is. The First Vatican Council teaches that the one true God, who is "in himself and of himself most blessed" (*in se et ex se beatissimus*), created both orders of creatures out of nothing "by an absolutely free plan" (*liberrimo consilio*)—and created not from need: "not for increasing his own beatitude,

nor for acquiring it, but to manifest his perfection through the goods he imparts to creatures.” The same chapter continues with what the previous subsections argued: “all things that he founded, God protects and governs by his providence.”⁴³

The Catechism condenses conservation into one sentence and then adds a second that the argument of these pages could not have predicted: “With creation, God does not abandon his creatures to themselves. He not only gives them being and existence, but also, and at every moment, upholds and sustains them in being, enables them to act and brings them to their final end. Recognizing this utter dependence with respect to the Creator is a source of wisdom and freedom, of joy and confidence.”⁴⁴

Notice that the dogmatic sentences say *more* than the philosophy proved, in two directions. That the sustaining source is *free*—that the world is chosen, not exuded—and that the sustaining is aimed at an end, are teachings the Church holds from revelation. And that recognizing utter dependence is a source of “joy and confidence” rather than of horror is a claim about how the truth is to be received, which no metaphysics establishes by itself. The philosophical argument delivered present dependence on subsistent being. It did not, by itself, deliver a giver who could have refrained, and it certainly did not deliver joy. Keeping that seam visible is not pedantry. It is the difference between an ascent and a sermon.

So the picture stands complete on its two supports, argued and attested: existence is not a possession but a present reception; the receiving has no intermission; the giver is nearer to each thing than its own innermost parts, and gains nothing by the transaction. Stated so, in the third person, about horses and hexagons and helium, it is a tidy piece of metaphysics—interesting, orderly, cold to the touch. It stops being cold at the moment of a small grammatical substitution that the whole argument has been quietly licensing all along. Every premise that applied to *things* applies to the one reading this sentence.

6 This Is True of Me

Make the substitution slowly, because speed is the usual way of escaping it.

I exist. Not as a premise borrowed from Descartes—nothing here turns on proving it—but as the plain condition of my asking anything. My nature, like the horse’s and the hexagon’s, does not include existence: what I am could be exhaustively described by someone who did not know whether I had ever been born, as my grandparents in 1930 could have been described, completely, without a word about me. So my existing is not mine the way my triangularity would belong to a triangle. It is exercised in me now, and it is either self-supplied now or received now, and it is not self-supplied—nothing in the preceding argument allowed an exception for the arguer. At this instant, in the middle of this sentence, I am the lit air and not the lamp. I am being done.

The substitution is not a rhetorical device, and it is worth saying why it is licensed. Every premise used above was universal in form and none of them contained a clause about knowers. That a finite nature does not include its own existing was argued from what definitions are, not from what horses are. That what has being by participation receives it from what is being by essence was argued from the structure of having, not from a survey of things had. If those arguments hold at all, they hold of the reader; and if the reader is inclined to feel that his own case must be different, that feeling is itself the first datum of this section, and it has a name.

6.1 Augustine’s arrest

The tradition has a word for what can happen at this point, and the word is not “conclusion.” Augustine, who made this discovery in the first person and wrote it down more nakedly than anyone before him, records the double shock of it, and his own narrative separates the two shocks cleanly.

The first is where the sustaining source turned out to be. Not far away, at the top of some ladder of beings, but closer to him than he was to himself: “You were more inward to me than my most inward part; and higher than my highest”—*interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*.⁴⁵ The sentence is not devotional exaggeration. It is the exact converse, in the first person, of the article quoted in the last section: what is innermost in me is my existing, and my existing is what is being given.

The second shock is what he himself turned out to be. Book VII records the moment as an ascent that arrives and then fails to hold: the mind, tracing the changeable back to what does not change, “with the flash of a trembling

glance... arrived at that which is”—and then “I was not able to fix my gaze thereon; and my infirmity being beaten back, I was thrown again on my accustomed habits.”⁴⁶ Turned toward what simply is, he registered his own manner of existing as if for the first time: “I trembled with love and fear; and I found myself to be far off from You, in the region of dissimilarity.” And of everything below God he saw that “they neither altogether are, nor altogether are not”—with the reason attached, in one of the most compressed sentences in the literature: “They are, indeed, because they are from You; but are not, because they are not what You are.”⁴⁷ Two chapters earlier he had stated the same thing about the world at large: “I looked back on other things, and I perceived that it was to You they owed their being... because You hold all things in Your hand.”⁴⁸

Most striking of all, for the argument of these pages, is the sentence in which Augustine describes what kind of “above” he had met. Not spatial, not comparative, not a matter of degree: “Nor was it above my mind as oil is above water, nor as heaven above earth; but above it was, because it made me, and I below it, because I was made by it.”⁴⁹ That is not a man learning a doctrine. That is a man losing his footing—finding that the floor he stands on is not floor but hand.

6.2 A name for the arrest

This essay proposes a name for the experience, and the name is a coinage, offered as such and attributed to no one: *ontological vertigo*. It means the reflexive apprehension of asymmetric dependence in the order of being—the arrest that occurs when the metaphysics of the preceding sections stops being about things and is recognized, by a particular knower, as the present truth about himself.

Four clarifications keep the term honest. It is an act of intellect, not a required feeling; the trembling Augustine reports may accompany it or not, and nothing below argues from the sensation. It is not doubt; the vertigo is precisely proportional to how much one takes the argument to have *succeeded*. It is not a religious experience in the modern sense, since it delivers no message, no vision, and no consolation—what it delivers is a fact already in one’s possession, suddenly in the first person. And it is not rare in principle, only in practice, because the fact it apprehends is the most evenly distributed fact there is. What is rare is holding still for it. The knowledge that I do not hold myself in being is like the knowledge that I will die: universally available, structurally resisted, and transformed the moment it moves from the third person to the first.

Why *vertigo*, and not some gentler word? Because of the asymmetry, which is the part that ordinary talk of “depending on God” fails to convey—and which the tradition states with a precision worth pausing over.

6.3 The relation that runs one way

Dependencies we know are mutual, if only slightly. The nursing infant depends utterly on its mother—and the mother’s body, schedule, and heart are reorganized around the infant. The employee depends on the firm, and the firm’s revenue depends on the employee. Every creaturely relation has some return current, however faint. Here there is none, and Aquinas states it with a serenity that can read as coldness until it reads as the whole point: “Since therefore God is outside the whole order of creation, and all creatures are ordered to Him, and not conversely, it is manifest that creatures are really related to God Himself; whereas in God there is no real relation to creatures, but a relation only in idea.”⁵⁰

The technical machinery behind that sentence is worth one paragraph, because without it the claim sounds like an insult. Relations, Aquinas observes, come in three kinds. Some are real at both ends: double and half, father and son, mover and moved. Some are merely notional at both ends, as when a thing is said to be “the same as itself.” And some are real at one end only—and his example of the third kind is not theological at all. Knowledge is really related to the thing known, but the thing known acquires nothing by being known; a mountain is not altered by being studied. So too, he says, “‘on the right’ is not applied to a column, unless it stands as regards an animal on the right side; which relation is not really in the column, but in the animal.”⁵¹ Walk around a column and it becomes the column on your left. Nothing happened to the column.

Now four misreadings, each of which the article itself refuses.

The first is that God, on this account, is not really Creator or Lord—that the whole relation is a fiction we project. Aquinas answers it directly in the same article: “Since God is related to the creature for the reason that the creature is related to Him: and since the relation of subjection is real in the creature, it follows that God is Lord not in idea

only, but in reality.”⁵² The lordship is real because the subjection is real. What is denied is not the relation’s truth but its location: it does not exist as something *added to God*.

The second is that the doctrine makes divine knowledge, will, and love into fictions. It does not, and cannot, because those are not accidents caused in God by us but God’s own substance—a point the tradition insists on elsewhere and which section 8 will use. The denial in q. 13, a. 7 is narrow and exact: creation adds no accident to God, effects no change in God, and constitutes God in no way. Whether God knows and loves what he sustains is a different question, answered elsewhere, and answered affirmatively.

The third is that the asymmetry makes the creature unreal—a shadow, a dream in the mind of the absolute. It says the reverse. The reality is all on the creature’s side: the creature is really related, really dependent, really there. What the column illustration denies is a change in *God*; what it affirms is that the standing-in-relation is a genuine feature of the world. A dream is not really related to anything, having no reality with which to be related.

The fourth is that all this is a peculiarly cold, scholastic invention. It is the oldest thing in the file. Augustine, in the middle of the arrest quoted above, says it as a prayer: “And You are the Lord my God, since You stand not in need of my goodness.”⁵³ The council said the same thing dogmatically: God is “in himself and of himself most blessed,” and creation was not for increasing his beatitude, nor for acquiring anything.

So: my existing adds nothing to what sustains my existing. The relation on which everything about me hangs makes, from the other side, no difference at all—not because the other side is indifferent in the way of a negligent father, but because it is already the fullness that a difference would have to be added to. I am, at this moment, wholly suspended from what I cannot inconvenience, enrich, threaten, repay, or affect. The infant at least kicks. Before God I cannot even kick, since the kicking, too, is on loan.

Vertigo, then, in the strict sense: the ground’s refusal to push back. A physical fall at least ends; this is the discovery that, ontologically, I am always falling—and that the falling is called existing, and that it is painless, ordinary, and sustained on purpose from underneath. What a mind does in the seconds after seeing this is, in miniature, the whole religious question, and the options are exactly two.

7 The Reading That Recoils

The first option is to experience the asymmetry as an assault and to pull away from it. Call this *recoil*—another term this essay defines for its own use. Recoil is not the initial lurch, the trembling Augustine felt; a shudder is not a position. Recoil is what the shudder becomes when it hardens into a reading: the interpretation of total dependence as a threat to one’s own reality, met with the will’s withdrawal.

7.1 Recoil transcribed

Its inner voice is easy to transcribe, and the transcription should be given at full strength rather than in the weakened form that is easy to answer.

If my existence is on loan at every instant, then I am not real in my own right. If everything in me is received, then nothing in me is mine—not my acts, which are powered from elsewhere; not my achievements, which are gifts wearing my name; not my endurance under difficulty, which was supplied along with the difficulty; not even my refusal, which uses borrowed breath. And notice what this does to praise and blame. If I did not supply the courage, I cannot be commended for spending it. If the whole of me is derivative, then the word “I” names a location where things happen rather than an agent who does them. A dependence that absolute is indistinguishable from annihilation with extra steps—and worse, it is annihilation that expects gratitude. Better to look away; better still to resent it.

The transcription deserves respect, because it is not stupid. It correctly registers the scale of what the argument showed and refuses the anesthetic of half-measures—the polite theism in which God made us long ago and now we are mostly on our own. Recoil has, at least, done the metaphysics. It has also noticed something true about the human situation that a certain kind of piety papers over: the sense of authorship is not a trivial thing to lose, and a picture that dissolves it is not made acceptable by being solemn.

7.2 The picture underneath

But everything in the transcription rests on one load-bearing assumption, and it is worth extracting: that God and the creature occupy the same causal floor, so that whatever is attributed to one must be subtracted from the other. On that picture, agency is a pie. If God supplies my existing and my acting, my slice is zero, and “I” names a puppet with unusually complete strings. The picture is so natural that it is rarely stated, and it is imported intact by both sides of many arguments about providence—by the believer who thinks that God must leave room for us, and by the objector who thinks that we leave no room for God.

The same-floor picture is precisely what the preceding argument ruled out. It requires that God be one item in the inventory of causes, a very large one; and the whole ascent, from the essence–existence distinction onward, reached something that is not an item in the inventory at all but the reason there is an inventory. Two causes compete when they are causes of the same order, contributing to one effect in the same way—two men pushing a car, two authors sharing a byline. The relation established in sections 3 to 5 is not of that kind. What God causes, in causing me, is not a rival version of my acts; it is *me, acting*.

The tradition works this out with care, and its formulations are more useful than any paraphrase. God, Aquinas argues, works in every agent in three ways at once: as the end for which every operation is done; as the first agent in whose power every secondary agent acts, “for the first agent moves the second to act”; and as the giver and preserver of the very forms and powers by which things act—“just as the sun is said to be the cause of the manifestation of colors, inasmuch as it gives and preserves the light by which colors are made manifest.” And since being is innermost in each thing, “it follows that in all things God works intimately.”⁵⁴ Then the two replies that state the non-competition exactly: “God works sufficiently in things as First Agent, but it does not follow from this that the operation of secondary agents is superfluous”; and, decisively, “One action does not proceed from two agents of the same order. But nothing hinders the same action from proceeding from a primary and a secondary agent.”⁵⁵

Reach for a case where the structure is visible. The sun and the eye do not compete to explain seeing; the eye sees *because* light is pouring in—remove the light and you do not liberate the eye, you blind it. The singer and the song do not split the credit for the melody; the song’s whole reality is the singer’s gift, and the gift is precisely *the song’s own existing*. The Catechism’s sentence had the structure exactly: God upholds creatures in being and thereby “enables them to act.”⁵⁶

Existence-from-another is not existence-minus. It is the only kind of existence a creature could have, and it is entirely, non-metaphorically existence: the air is really bright, the iron really burns, the man really decides. To feel subtracted-from by the discovery that one is sustained is like feeling plagiarized by one’s own reflection. Nothing has been taken. There was never a prior, independent self whose holdings were confiscated; there is a self at all because the holding never stops.

7.3 Two virtues that recoil reads as one vice

The tradition’s name for living inside the corrected picture is not servility, and the clearest evidence is that it requires two dispositions rather than one, each guarding against the other’s excess.

Aquinas derives them together, from a single analysis of what a difficult good does to the appetite. Such a good attracts, because it is good, and repels, because it is hard; so “a twofold virtue is necessary with regard to the difficult good: one, to temper and restrain the mind, lest it tend to high things immoderately; and this belongs to the virtue of humility: and another to strengthen the mind against despair, and urge it on to the pursuit of great things according to right reason; and this is magnanimity.”⁵⁷ They are not a compromise between two errors. They are two accurate responses to two facts about the same creature.

Humility answers the fact that nothing in me is from me—the exact fact the vertigo disclosed. Its object, Aquinas specifies, is not the human social order in the first place but the creature’s standing before God: humility “regards chiefly the subjection of man to God, for Whose sake he humbles himself by subjecting himself to others.”⁵⁸ And its content is stated with a precision that excludes the caricature: “Whatever pertains to defect is man’s: but whatever pertains to man’s welfare and perfection is God’s.”⁵⁹ Humility is therefore a claim about ownership, not about worth—the difference between saying *this is not mine* and saying *this is not good*.

Magnanimity answers the other fact: that what has been given is genuinely great and genuinely operative. It “by its very name denotes stretching forth of the mind to great things,” and its reason for stretching is not self-assessment

but inventory: “There is in man something great which he possesses through the gift of God; and something defective which accrues to him through the weakness of nature. Accordingly magnanimity makes a man deem himself worthy of great things in consideration of the gifts he holds from God.”⁶⁰ Aquinas even anticipates the objection that ambition and humility must collide, and refuses it in one sentence: “It is contrary to humility to aim at greater things through confiding in one’s own powers: but to aim at greater things through confidence in God’s help, is not contrary to humility.”⁶¹

Held apart, each collapses. Humility without magnanimity curdles into the self-contempt that calls itself piety and is really a last bid for self-manufacture—if *I cannot be my own source, I will at least be my own accuser*, which keeps the self at the center of the account by making it the defendant. Magnanimity without humility inflates into the fantasy of aseity that the vertigo just demolished. Together they are simply the truth, held steady: everything received; the received thing real and great.

7.4 The diagnosis

Recoil, in other words, is not refuted so much as diagnosed. It is right that the asymmetry is total and right that no dignity could survive it *if dependence were rivalry*. It goes wrong at the picture, and the picture, once seen, can be exchanged; the facts cannot.

It is worth noting what the diagnosis does not claim. It does not say that anyone who recoils is stupid, or wicked, or insincere; nothing here judges a person’s interior state, and the essay makes no claim about how common any of this is. It does not say that the corrected picture is emotionally easy—the argument’s whole force in section 6 was that the fact is structurally resisted. And it does not say that recoil has been argued out of existence: a reader may accept every step above and still find the conclusion unbearable, which is a fact about the will and not about the premises.

The creature that finishes reading the diagnosis is therefore exactly as suspended as before, lit air in a universe of lit air. What has changed is only that one interpretation of the suspension has been shown to rest on a picture the argument excludes. The remaining question is whether the other reading can be held with open eyes, and what it finds if it looks up the beam.

8 Consent, and the Shape of the Gift

The second option is consent: the will’s agreement with what the intellect saw. Not resignation, which agrees the way a prisoner agrees with the wall, and not optimism, which agrees by not looking. Consent says: it is true that I do not hold myself in being, and I am willing that it be true.

8.1 What consent is, and is not

Three boundaries keep the word from doing more work than it can. Consent is not belief in anything further; a reader who has followed the argument and is unwilling to add revealed premises can perform it exactly as stated. It is not an emotion, though it may have emotional consequences; the vertigo was an act of intellect and its answer is an act of will, and neither is a mood. And it is not resignation to a fate. Resignation agrees with what cannot be helped, and its characteristic tone is the tone of a man who has stopped arguing with weather. Consent agrees with what is the case because it is the case, and the difference is visible in what each does next: resignation lowers its expectations, consent looks harder at the thing agreed to.

Which is why consent sounds passive and is not. Everything depends on what it consents *to*, and to see that, one has to look again at the structure left standing at the end of section 6.

8.2 The shape of a giving that cannot be repaid

The source sustains everything and gains nothing. It cannot gain: no return current, no real relation back, no beatitude to be increased. Now ask what kind of giving that is—the question recoil never stays to ask.

Among creatures we know it only in traces, and the traces are instructive because of how we already judge them. The mother of a newborn who can know nothing of her, and will remember nothing of these months; the craftsman perfecting a joint no inspector will ever see; the anonymous donor; the man who does not correct a false attribution of his own work to someone else. In every case the absence of return is what makes us call the act generous rather than transactional. Giving that expects no return we call love, and we rank it higher precisely in proportion as the possibility of return recedes.

Now push the case to its limit. Here the absence of return is not an ethical achievement—not a return declined but a return metaphysically impossible—and the giving happens anyway: at every point of being, at every moment, to everything that is, and it could stop and does not. If the traces are called love because of the missing return current, what is to be said of the case where the current is missing by necessity?

8.3 The judgment that God loves

Aquinas turns this observation into a formal judgment—the summit of what unaided reason can say here—and the argument is short enough to follow in full. Everything that exists is good in the measure that it exists, “since the existence of a thing is itself a good.” God’s will is the cause of all things, so anything that has existence or any other good has it as willed by God. “To every existing thing, then, God wills some good. Hence, since to love anything is nothing else than to will good to that thing, it is manifest that God loves everything that exists.”⁶²

Then the difference from our loving, stated as a difference in the direction of causality: our love is awakened by a goodness already there, “whereas the love of God infuses and creates goodness.”⁶³ We love what is already worth loving; that love is a response, and the beloved’s goodness precedes it. Divine love cannot be a response, because there was nothing there to respond to. It is the reason anything is there to be responded to at all.

Two texts deserve to be set beside that conclusion. The first is the sentence Aquinas cites as his scriptural warrant, from the Book of Wisdom: “Thou lovest all things that are, and hatest none of the things which Thou hast made.”⁶⁴ The second is the Catechism’s, and its placement is the striking thing: having stated that God upholds and sustains his creatures at every moment, and that recognizing this dependence is “a source of wisdom and freedom, of joy and confidence,” the paragraph closes by quoting the same passage of Wisdom—“For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made. . . . How would anything have endured, if you had not willed it?”⁶⁵ The same verse stands behind the Church’s teaching on conservation and behind the philosophical judgment that God loves what he sustains, because in both cases the reasoning runs the same way: what is held in being is held on purpose, and holding on purpose is what willing good to something means.

To love is to will good to something; to exist at all is already to be receiving good—being, the good under every other good. The council’s phrase, quoted earlier as dogma, can now be heard as the exact converse of the vertigo: creation was *not for increasing his own beatitude*. What made the arrest dizzying was that my existence makes no difference to God. What consent discovers inside the same fact is that my existence was therefore never extracted, owed, or useful—that it can only have been *given*. The asymmetry that looked like an abyss is the signature of gift. No one holds a debtor in being gratuitously, at every instant, innermost, forever, for nothing. The falling was never falling. It was being carried.

One correction to the record belongs here, in fairness to the tradition being used. Section 5 marked a seam: the freedom of creation is dogma, and this essay’s compressed ascent did not establish it. That remains true of *this essay*. It should not be taken to mean that the tradition regarded divine freedom as inaccessible to argument. Aquinas argues it explicitly: since God’s goodness is perfect and complete without other things, “inasmuch as no perfection can accrue to Him from them, it follows that His willing things apart from Himself is not absolutely necessary.”⁶⁶ The argument turns on exactly the fact this essay has been circling: that nothing is added to God by there being a world. This essay does not run that argument, and its conclusion does not rest on it. But a reader should not be left with the impression that a boundary of these pages is a boundary of reason.

8.4 Two restraints

Two restraints keep the conclusion from saying more than it knows.

First, “loves” is an analogical word. The judgment that God loves all things is a judgment about what God does—wills and causes good—reached by argument; it is not a window into what loving is *for God*, and natural reason cannot

make it one. It does not license the inference that God is fond of things, or moved by them, or affected in the way a lover is affected; the whole of section 6 stands against that. What it licenses is the statement that the good of every creature is willed, and that the willing is not a response to anything outside God.

Even the boldest formulation the tradition permits itself here is carefully fenced. Aquinas quotes Dionysius saying that “He Himself, the cause of all things, by His abounding love and goodness, is placed outside Himself by His providence for all existing things”—and immediately supplies the sense in which alone it is true: a lover is placed outside himself “inasmuch as he wills good to the beloved; and works for that good by his providence even as he works for his own.”⁶⁷ The ecstatic language is admitted and then given a determinate meaning that leaves the metaphysics of section 6 intact. That is the discipline of analogy in one gesture: the strong word is kept, and what it can mean here is stated.

Second, the inner life of God is closed to the ascent. Aquinas is categorical that “it is impossible to attain to the knowledge of the Trinity by natural reason,”⁶⁸ and the essay’s philosophical thread ends there. What has been reached is that the source wills the good of everything it sustains. What that willing is, in itself, has not been reached and will not be.

8.5 The failure of the words, which is not a failure of the argument

There is a last discipline, older than the scholastic one and harder to hold. Even the surviving words must be handled as the tradition’s masters handled them—as true, and as breaking in the hand.

The anonymous author who wrote as Dionysius, at the border of Greek philosophy and Christian prayer, counseled the mind ascending past every concept toward “Him Who is above every essence and knowledge.” His method is not the accumulation of better descriptions but their removal: we celebrate the source “through the abstraction of all existing things, just as those who make a lifelike statue, by extracting all the encumbrances which have been placed upon the clear view of the concealed, and by bringing to light, by the mere cutting away, the genuine beauty concealed in it.”⁶⁹ And so the denials at the end: the source “is neither soul, nor mind, nor has imagination, or opinion, or reason, or conception; neither is expressed, nor conceived,” and neither “lives, nor is life; neither is essence nor eternity”—not because it is less than these, but because it is not one of the things that *have* them.⁷⁰

Apophysis of that kind is not agnosticism, and it is certainly not the discovery that the argument failed. It is precision about a source the argument itself showed to be beyond the genus of borrowed things: exactly what one should expect to find at the end of a road whose first step was that existence is not a feature. The creature’s best sentences about God are true the way a map is true of a country: reliably, and without resemblance.

8.6 The fork, and what lies past it

So Part I closes at the fork it uncovered. A mind that follows the argument to its end stands arrested: wholly real, genuinely acting, and not for one instant self-possessed—held, innermost, by what it cannot repay and was never asked to. Recoil reads the holding as humiliation and is wrong about the picture, not the scale. Consent reads it as gift, has the better of the argument, and finds that its natural terminus is not a proposition but a posture—the reverence the tradition calls adoration, owed to the excellence that gives and does not receive.⁷¹

What that posture looks like when an embodied life—a creature of mornings, obligations, and a body—takes it up is the matter of Part II; what the source has revealed about itself beyond the ascent’s reach, and what it makes of creatures who consent, is the matter of Part III. The present essay claims what it argued: that the vertigo is the truth; that the truth was never a threat; and that the ground beneath the falling creature is not ground but hands, and always was.

Notes

¹Both illustrations belong to the tradition before they belong to this essay, and the reader should know it in advance rather than discover it later. The builder who causes the house's *becoming* but not its *being*, and the air lit by the sun "as long as the air remains illuminated," are Aquinas's own examples in the two articles worked in section 5 below: *Summa theologiae* I, q. 104, a. 1, corpus, and I, q. 8, a. 1, corpus; both checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The song and the singer, the spring, and the development of all three are this essay's. The images are introduced here without their conclusions; the arguments that earn them are given in their places.

²The essay's positive case does not rest on refuting existential inertia or brute-fact accounts; it argues from the essence-existence analysis of sections 3–5 and exhibits the rival structure rather than dismantling it. The limitation is repeated in the appendix, and no later conclusion is presented as though these positions had been disposed of. Both labels are current in contemporary philosophy of religion rather than in the scholastic sources; they are used here as the reader's names for the rival, and no particular contemporary author's version is attributed, quoted, or engaged.

³Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX (Θ), ch. 8 (1049b), in the public-domain translation of W. D. Ross, *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, vol. VIII: *Metaphysica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908); wording checked 2026-07-25 in the Internet Archive scan of the 1908 printing (item `worksof aristotle0008unse`), re-downloaded that date and found byte-identical to the copy checked 2026-07-24. The same chapter adds the illustrations Aristotle takes from craft: "it is thought impossible to be a builder if one has built nothing, or a harper if one has never played the harp; for he who learns to play the harp learns to play it by playing it."

⁴*Metaphysics* IX, ch. 8 (1049b), Ross, checked 2026-07-25 as above. The temporal qualification is Aristotle's own: "the actual member of a species is prior to the potential member of the same species, though the individual is potential before it is actual"—this seed precedes this oak, but an oak preceded the seed.

⁵*Metaphysics* IX, ch. 8 (1050a–b), Ross, checked 2026-07-25 as above: "men have the art of building that they may build. . . Further, matter exists in a potential state, just because it may attain to its form; and when it exists actually, then it is in its form." The chapter's closing inference—"actuality is prior in substantial being to potency; and as we have said, one actuality always precedes another in time right back to the actuality of the eternal prime mover"—is the sentence that carries Aristotle's cosmology.

⁶*Metaphysics* II (α), ch. 2 (994a), Ross, checked 2026-07-25 as above. Aristotle's efficient-cause example in the same passage is a chain of simultaneous movers—"man for instance being acted on by air, air by the sun"—and his verdict on the endless series of ends is unusually warm: "those who maintain the infinite series destroy the Good without knowing it. Yet no one would try to do anything if he were not going to come to a limit." The borrower-and-owner image is this essay's, not Aristotle's.

⁷*Metaphysics* XII (Λ), ch. 6 (1071b), Ross, checked 2026-07-25 as above. The argument is aimed partly at the Platonists: eternal Forms explain nothing about movement, "unless there is to be in them some principle which can cause movement."

⁸*Metaphysics* XII, ch. 7 (1072a–b), Ross, checked 2026-07-25 as above. The same chapter supplies the celebrated description of the first principle's life: "And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality. . . We say therefore that God is a living being, eternal, most good." The scholastic term for a series whose members cause only while the prior member is causing—an *essentially ordered* series—is not Aristotle's; the distinction is drawn out in section 4 below.

⁹Plato, *Phaedo* 100c–e, in the public-domain translation of Benjamin Jowett; wording checked 2026-07-25 at Project Gutenberg (ebook no. 1658, re-downloaded that date). Socrates prefaces the formula with its condition: "if there be anything beautiful other than absolute beauty. . . it can be beautiful only in as far as it partakes of absolute beauty." The passage belongs to his account of the "second sailing"; its generalization from beauty to being is the later Platonic and Christian-Platonic development, not a claim of the dialogue itself.

¹⁰Plato, *Republic* VI, 508e–509b, Jowett translation; wording checked 2026-07-25 at Project Gutenberg (ebook no. 1497). Two cautions belong with the quotation. First, the passage is an extended analogy about the conditions of knowledge, not a doctrine of creation: the Good is not said to make anything exist from nothing, and no maker appears. Second, the clause rendered "far exceeds essence in dignity and power" (*epekeina tēs ousias*) has been read in more than one way since antiquity, and nothing here depends on the stronger readings. It is cited for the structure it displays—source of being, itself outside the class of things that have being—and for the fact that the sun image was already in place at this exact joint of the argument.

¹¹*Metaphysics* XII, ch. 7 (1072b), Ross, checked 2026-07-25 as above. The first principle moves as an object of desire and thought—as the beloved moves the lover—not as an efficient cause conferring existence. Whether Aristotle's mover is in some further sense an efficient cause of the cosmos is long disputed in the scholarship; this essay takes no position beyond the text's own statement and builds nothing on the disputed reading.

¹²Plato, *Timaeus* 28a–30a, Jowett translation; wording checked 2026-07-25 at Project Gutenberg (ebook no. 1572). The same passage supplies the causal premise ("that which is created must, as we affirm, of necessity be created by a cause") and the famous reserve ("the father and maker of all this universe is past finding out; and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible"). Whether the making is meant temporally or as an expository device was disputed in Plato's own Academy and is disputed still; the point made here is independent of that question, since on either reading the Demiurge orders material he did not produce and consults a pattern he did not originate.

¹³*Summa theologiae* I, q. 44, a. 2, corpus; checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The article's conclusion—"it is necessary to say that also primary matter is created by the universal cause of things"—marks the point at which the Greek analysis is not corrected but completed: a cause of things *as beings* leaves nothing outside its effect, not even the substrate the Greeks treated as underived. Aquinas's history is compressed and schematic; it is quoted as the tradition's own frank account of what its predecessors had and had not asked, not as modern historiography.

¹⁴Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4 in the Leonine chapter division, corresponding to ch. 3 of the Baur-Koch text presented in the Corpus Thomisticum web corpus, where the passage was read: *Omnis autem essentia vel quiditas potest intelligi sine hoc quod aliquid intelligatur de esse suo; possum enim intelligere quid est homo vel Phoenix et tamen ignorare an esse habeat in rerum natura*. Latin checked 2026-07-25 at corpusthomisticum.org (oee.html); the English renderings of this treatise in the present section are labeled working glosses governed by the quoted Latin, no public-domain English translation having been identified. The chapter-numbering discrepancy is real and is recorded here rather than silently resolved: editions divide the treatise differently, so citations to "ch. 4" and "ch. 3" of it frequently designate the same text.

¹⁵*Ergo patet quod esse est aliud ab essentia vel quiditate, nisi forte sit aliqua res, cuius quiditas sit ipsum suum esse; et haec res non potest esse nisi una et prima*; same locus, checked 2026-07-25. The uniqueness argument turns on there being no way to multiply a thing that is nothing but existence: multiplication requires an added difference, a receiving matter, or a distinction between what is absolute and what is received, and *esse tantum* admits none of these.

¹⁶*Omne autem quod convenit alicui vel est causatum ex principiis naturae suae, sicut risibile in homine, vel advenit ab aliquo principio extrinseco, sicut lumen in aere ex influentia solis*; same locus, checked 2026-07-25. That the lit air appears here, at the joint where existence is shown to be received, and again at *Summa theologiae* I, q. 8, a. 1 and I, q. 104, a. 1, is the reason this essay treats the image as the tradition's rather than as an illustration of its own devising.

¹⁷*Non autem potest esse quod ipsum esse sit causatum ab ipsa forma vel quiditate rei (dico sicut a causa efficiente) quia sic aliqua res esset sui ipsius causa et aliqua res seipsam in esse produceret, quod est impossibile*; same locus, checked 2026-07-25. Aquinas's parenthesis ("I mean as by an efficient cause") is precise: he is not denying that a nature explains its own properties, only that it can confer its own existing.

¹⁸*Ergo oportet quod omnis talis res, cuius esse est aliud quam natura sua habeat esse ab alio. Et quia omne, quod est per aliud, reducitur ad illud quod est per se sicut ad causam primam, oportet quod sit aliqua res, quae sit causa essendi omnibus rebus, eo quod ipsa est esse tantum. Alias iretur in infinitum in causis, cum omnis res, quae non est esse tantum, habeat causam sui esse*; same locus, checked 2026-07-25. Note the two premises doing the work: that what is through another traces to what is through itself, and that an endless series of caused causes of *being* explains nothing. The regress denied here is the same essentially ordered kind analyzed in section 4 below; the treatise makes no claim about the world's age.

¹⁹The state of the thirteenth-century dispute is reported here at a stated secondary ceiling: John F. Wippel, "Godfrey of Fontaines," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, section 6 ("Essence and Existence"), substantive revision of 23 October 2018, read 2026-07-25 at plato.stanford.edu. That witness supplies the positions summarized: Giles's real distinction and its *res* language, Henry's intentional distinction, and Godfrey's identity thesis ("for him they are identical, and differ only in the way they signify"). No text of Giles, Henry, or Godfrey was collated for this essay, and no claim is made about their arguments finer than the cited witness supports. The later scholastic and early-modern continuations of the dispute are not summarized here at all, and no position is attributed to schools whose texts were not checked.

²⁰Reported at a stated secondary ceiling: Michael Nelson, "Existence," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, substantive revision of 5 May 2020, read 2026-07-25 at plato.stanford.edu, which narrates both sides of this history—Aquinas's argument in *De ente et essentia* ch. 4 (the entry's own citation) and the counter-tradition of Hume, Kant, Frege, and Russell for whom existence is not a first-order property of individuals. No primary text of Hume, Kant, Frege, or Russell was collated for this essay, and the paragraph above claims nothing finer than the cited witness supports. A full engagement with the quantificational account of existence is outside this essay's scope, and its absence is recorded in the appendix.

²¹*Summa theologiae* I, q. 44, a. 1, corpus ("Therefore all beings apart from God are not their own being, but are beings by participation"; *omnia alia a Deo non sint suum esse, sed participant esse*); wording checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The iron-and-fire comparison is Aquinas's own in the same corpus. Note the order of the article: by q. 44 the phrase "apart from God" has been earned by qq. 2–11; the present essay reproduces that order in compressed form. The divine name appears in the texts quoted here; the essay's own identification of the terminus so named is not performed but deferred, and section 4 identifies where the tradition performs it.

²²*Summa theologiae* I, q. 44, a. 2, corpus; checked 2026-07-25 as above. The reply to the third objection guards the claim's sense: the argument "does not show that matter is not created, but that it is not created without form." Nothing in this essay depends on the hylomorphic analysis of bodies as such; the article is used for its principle, that a cause of being reaches whatever belongs to a thing's being in any way.

²³*Summa theologiae* I, q. 3, a. 4, corpus (*Deus non solum est sua essentia. . . sed etiam suum esse*); checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The three arguments summarized are the article's own, in its order. The second is the one that matters most for what follows: existence is "that which makes every form or nature actual; for goodness and humanity are spoken of as actual, only because they are spoken of as existing."

²⁴*Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 11, corpus; checked 2026-07-25 as above. The other two reasons given are that the name signifies existence itself rather than any determinate form, and that it is maximally undetermined—whence the article's

quotation of John Damascene, that “He Who Is” “contains existence itself as an infinite and indeterminate sea of substance.” The article’s reply to the first objection preserves the counterweight: as regards the object intended, the name “God” is more proper, and more proper still is the Tetragrammaton. This essay quotes the article for its tense, not to settle the theology of the divine names.

²⁵*Summa theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3, corpus (*Prima autem et manifestior via est, quae sumitur ex parte motus*); checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. “Motion” (*motus*) here is the actualization of potency in general, not local motion only—a point on which every serious reading of the argument turns, since the objection that Newton disposed of the premise assumes the narrower sense. Aquinas’s own illustration in the corpus is heating: “that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot.”

²⁶Same corpus, checked 2026-07-25 as above (*et hoc omnes intelligunt Deum*). The hand and the staff are Aquinas’s own image, and they are the whole interpretive key: the staff’s moving is not merely later than the hand’s but derived from it at the moment it occurs.

²⁷*Summa theologiae* I, q. 46, a. 2, ad 7; checked 2026-07-25 as above. The distinction later schools called *essentially* versus *accidentally* ordered series is here in its classical form, with Aquinas’s own examples: the stone, stick, and hand for the first; broken hammers and human generation for the second. The article in which the reply occurs is the one that denies any demonstration of the world’s beginning—which is to say that Aquinas draws this distinction precisely in order to keep the two questions apart.

²⁸Reported at a stated secondary ceiling: Bruce Reichenbach, “Cosmological Argument,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, substantive revision of 1 July 2026, read 2026-07-25 at plato.stanford.edu, which surveys both the renewed defense of the Thomistic version and the objections to it, naming recent contributions on each side. No item in that literature was collated for this essay, and no assessment of any particular contribution is offered or implied. The essay’s positive argument does not rest on the First Way; it rests on the essence–existence analysis of section 3, which reaches the same terminus by a route that does not turn on motion at all.

²⁹The article titles cited are Aquinas’s own, checked 2026-07-25 at New Advent: ST I, q. 3, a. 7 (“Whether God is altogether simple?”), q. 3, a. 4 (“Whether essence and existence are the same in God?”), q. 7, a. 1 (“Whether God is infinite?”), q. 8, a. 1 (“Whether God is in all things?”), q. 11, a. 3 (“Whether God is one?”). This essay executes none of these arguments and does not claim they succeed; it identifies where the identification is done, which is the only point at issue here. The one argument among them that this essay does use—q. 8, a. 1—is worked in section 5.

³⁰*Summa theologiae* I, q. 46, a. 2, corpus (*mundum non semper fuisse, sola fide tenetur, et demonstrative probari non potest*); checked 2026-07-25 as above. Aquinas’s reason is worth recording: “the newness of the world cannot be demonstrated on the part of the world itself. For the principle of demonstration is the essence of a thing,” and a thing’s essence abstracts from here and now; nor can it be demonstrated on the part of the divine will, which is free in what it wills of things other than itself (compare I, q. 19, a. 3, quoted in section 8). The position was not the common one in his century, and the same article’s objections preserve the arguments of those who thought a beginning demonstrable.

³¹The threefold typology is reported at a stated secondary ceiling from Reichenbach, “Cosmological Argument,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (substantive revision 1 July 2026), section 2, read 2026-07-25: the first type “is based on the impossibility of an essentially ordered (ontological) infinite regress”; the second, “which Craig terms the *kalām* argument, holds that an infinite temporal regress of causes is impossible because an actual infinite is impossible”; the third is “espoused by Leibniz and Clarke.” No proponent’s primary text was collated for this essay, and nothing here evaluates the second or third family. This essay belongs to the first, and the appendix records that the second is excluded from its scope entirely.

³²*Summa theologiae* I, q. 104, a. 1, corpus (*esse cuiuslibet creaturae a Deo, ita quod nec ad momentum subsistere possent, sed in nihilum redigerentur, nisi operatione divinae virtutis conservarentur in esse*); wording checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. Aquinas takes the formula from Gregory the Great’s *Moralia* XVI and makes it his own conclusion. The article’s opening words are worth recording for what they claim and what they do not: “Both reason and faith bind us to say that creatures are kept in being by God”—a double warrant, of which this essay argues only the first.

³³Same article and corpus, checked 2026-07-25 as above. Aquinas’s second example is the cook, who “dresses the food by applying the natural activity of fire.” The analysis is general: an agent that is not the cause of a thing’s *form* as such is not the cause of the being that follows on that form, but only of the becoming. Everything then turns on whether there is an agent whose proper effect is being itself—which is the burden of q. 104, a. 1’s next step and of I, q. 8, a. 1.

³⁴Same article and corpus; the sun-and-air comparison and the being-by-participation conclusion are Aquinas’s own wording in the Dominican translation, checked 2026-07-25. The parallel with *De ente et essentia*’s “light in the air from the influence of the sun” (section 3 above) is exact, and the two texts are separated by roughly two decades of his working life.

³⁵*Summa theologiae* I, q. 45, a. 3, corpus; checked 2026-07-25 as above. The article’s conclusion is that creation, considered in the creature, “is nothing else than a certain relation to the Creator as to the principle of its being”—not a process the creature underwent, not an event with a duration, but the standing ordination of a receiver to its source. This is the doctrinal ground of the claim, made repeatedly below, that “at every moment” quantifies over creaturely time and not over acts in God.

³⁶*Summa theologiae* I, q. 104, a. 1 (“God cannot grant to a creature to be preserved in being after the cessation of the Divine influence: as neither can He make it not to have received its being from Himself”); checked 2026-07-25 as above. The form of

the claim is important: it is not a limit on divine power but a statement that the proposed object is not a possible object—the sentence describes nothing, like a square circle or a borrowed loan owned by the borrower.

³⁷*Summa theologiae* I, q. 8, a. 1, corpus; checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The reply to the third objection sharpens the same point against the picture of a remote cause: “No action of an agent, however powerful it may be, acts at a distance, except through a medium. But it belongs to the great power of God that He acts immediately in all things. Hence nothing is distant from Him, as if it could be without God in itself. But things are said to be distant from God by the unlikeness to Him in nature or grace”—distance from God, in the only sense the tradition allows, is a moral and not a spatial measure.

³⁸Same corpus (*Esse autem est illud quod est magis intimum cuilibet, et quod profundius omnibus inest. . . unde oportet quod Deus sit in omnibus rebus, et intime*); checked 2026-07-25 as above. The presence asserted is causal presence by essence, power, and operation, not pantheistic identity: precisely because God gives being to what is *other* than God, the intimacy and the distinction rise together. The same article’s first reply keeps both halves: “God is above all things by the excellence of His nature; nevertheless, He is in all things as the cause of the being of all things.”

³⁹Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* II.34.3 (heavens, stars, and all created things continuing according to the will of God; life bestowed, not arising from our nature) and II.34.4 (the soul “partakes in that life bestowed upon her by God”); quoted from the Roberts–Rambaut translation in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (1885), wording checked 2026-07-25 at the New Advent transcription. Irenaeus’s immediate target is a doctrine of the soul’s natural immortality; the general principle he uses against it—that continuance is bestowed—is what is quoted here.

⁴⁰*Adversus haereses* IV.39.2, same translation and witness, checked 2026-07-25 at New Advent (fathers/0103439.htm). The chapter’s larger argument concerns human growth toward perfection under the hand of the Maker—“if, then, you are God’s workmanship, await the hand of your Maker”—and includes moral exhortation not reproduced here; the two clauses quoted state the creature/Creator asymmetry that this essay’s argument reaches by another route.

⁴¹Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* 41.2–3 and 42.1; quoted from the Robertson translation in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 4 (1892), wording checked 2026-07-25 at the New Advent transcription. For Athanasius the sustainer is specifically the Word—a claim of Christian confession, not of philosophical demonstration, and cited here as witness to the antiquity of the conservation conviction rather than as a premise of this essay’s argument.

⁴²*Contra Gentes* 41.2, same translation and witness, checked 2026-07-25. The verbal resemblance to *Timaeus* 29e (“He was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything”), quoted in section 2 above, is noted here as this essay’s observation about two texts it has quoted, not as a source-critical claim about Athanasius’s reading of Plato. What has changed between them is the object: Plato’s craftsman, ungrudging, imparts order to what is already there; Athanasius’s God, ungrudging, “does not grudge even existence.”

⁴³First Vatican Council, dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* (24 April 1870), ch. 1 (*Hic solus verus Deus bonitate sua et omnipotenti virtute non ad augendam suam beatitudinem, nec ad acquirendam, sed ad manifestandam perfectionem suam per bona, quae creaturis impertitur, liberrimo consilio simul ab initio temporis utramque de nihilo condidit creaturam. . . Universa vero, quae condidit, Deus providentia sua tuetur atque gubernat*), with the corresponding canon (*De Deo. . . can. 5*) condemning the claim that God created by necessity rather than “by a will free from all necessity” (*voluntate ab omni necessitate libera*). Latin checked 2026-07-25 at the Holy See web text; the English renderings here are labeled working glosses governed by the quoted Latin. The council’s definition is received dogma, taught on the authority of revelation; the *freedom* of creation in particular goes beyond anything the philosophical argument of the preceding sections established.

⁴⁴*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 301, official Vatican English web text, wording checked 2026-07-25; compare CCC 300, checked at the same locus, which states divine transcendence and intimate presence together and quotes Augustine’s *Confessions* III.6.11 in the rendering “higher than my highest and more inward than my innermost self.” CCC 301 continues by quoting Wisdom 11:24–26 in the Catechism’s own rendering: “For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made. . . How would anything have endured, if you had not willed it?” These are citations of the Church’s teaching as teaching; the philosophical ascent of sections 2–5 stands on its own arguments, and a reader who rejects those arguments is not being asked to accept their conclusion on conciliar authority smuggled in afterward. The claim that recognizing dependence is a source of joy is precisely the claim sections 7 and 8 will have to earn by argument, and it is noted here as teaching, not as a premise.

⁴⁵Augustine, *Confessions* III.6.11, in the Pilkington translation (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 1), wording checked 2026-07-25 at the New Advent transcription; Latin checked 2026-07-25 at the Latin Library text of Book III. The sentence is retrospective: Augustine is describing the God he had been seeking “according to the sense of the flesh” while the sought one was nearer than the seeking. The Catechism quotes the same sentence at CCC 300 in a different English rendering.

⁴⁶*Confessions* VII.17.23, Pilkington, checked 2026-07-25 at the New Advent transcription of Book VII. The chapter narrates a staged ascent—bodies, then the soul’s sensing, then its reasoning power, then what is above the reasoning power—and its notable feature for this essay is that the arrival is momentary and the fall back is immediate. Augustine’s scenes in this book include elements far beyond the philosophical arrest isolated here: grace, scripture, and moral crisis are all in play, and the ascent’s incompleteness is, in his telling, a failure of the whole man and not of the argument.

⁴⁷*Confessions* VII.10.16 (trembling “with love and fear”; *regio dissimilitudinis*, rendered “region of dissimilarity” by Pilkington) and VII.11.17 (things below God “neither altogether are, nor altogether are not”; “They are, indeed, because they are from

You; but are not, because they are not what You are”); checked 2026-07-25 as above. The Pilkington rendering is quoted throughout; no collation against a critical Latin edition of Book VII is claimed.

⁴⁸*Confessions* VII.15.21, Pilkington, checked 2026-07-25 as above. The chapter heading supplied by the translation—“Whatever Is, Owes Its Being to God”—states the thesis of section 3 of this essay in five words, four centuries before the vocabulary of essence and existence was available to say it technically.

⁴⁹*Confessions* VII.10.16, Pilkington, checked 2026-07-25 as above. The passage is a rare case of a mystical text stating a metaphysical thesis exactly: the relation between the seer and what he sees is not a relation of rank within a common order but the relation of made to maker, which is what the following subsection analyzes technically as a relation real in one term only.

⁵⁰*Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 7, corpus (*in Deo non est aliqua realis relatio eius ad creaturas, sed secundum rationem tantum*); checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The article’s question is grammatical in appearance—whether names implying relation to creatures are said of God temporally—and metaphysical in substance.

⁵¹Same corpus, checked 2026-07-25 as above. Aquinas takes the knowable-and-knowledge case from Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V: such things “are called relative, not forasmuch as they are related to other things, but as others are related to them.” The column-and-animal illustration is his own in this corpus, and it is chosen precisely because a column is unmistakably real and unmistakably unchanged.

⁵²*Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 7, ad 5; checked 2026-07-25 as above. The reply’s structure matters: the reality of the lordship is secured by the reality of the creature’s subjection, exactly as the column’s being on the right is a real fact about the world though not an accident in the column.

⁵³*Confessions* VII.11.17, Pilkington, checked 2026-07-25 as above; the sentence follows immediately on the passage about things that “neither altogether are, nor altogether are not,” and echoes Psalm 15:2 in the Vulgate numbering. That the divine non-need is stated by Augustine as a reason for calling God “my God”—rather than as an obstacle to it—is the whole hinge on which sections 7 and 8 of this essay turn.

⁵⁴*Summa theologiae* I, q. 105, a. 5, corpus; checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The article opens by rejecting the opposite error at least as firmly: to deny creatures their own operation “would imply lack of power in the Creator: for it is due to the power of the cause, that it bestows active power on its effect,” and would make created powers pointless, “since the purpose of everything is its operation.” The essay quotes the corpus in summary and the replies verbatim below.

⁵⁵*Summa theologiae* I, q. 105, a. 5, ad 1 and ad 2; checked 2026-07-25 as above. *Of the same order* is the whole hinge. The compatibility of divine primary causality with genuine created freedom was disputed at length among Catholic schools, and this essay neither enters that dispute nor needs its resolution: what the recoil diagnosis requires is only the negative point that dependence in being does not subtract agency, because the divine causing is not one agency alongside mine but the reason there is a mine. The appendix records the exclusion.

⁵⁶*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 301, checked 2026-07-25 as above. The verb is worth noticing: not *overrides*, not *replaces*, but *enables*—and in the same sentence as the upholding, as its consequence rather than its compensation.

⁵⁷*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 161, a. 1, corpus; checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The derivation is from the passions treated at I-II, q. 23, a. 2 and the virtue analysis at I-II, q. 61, a. 2: hope and despair are the two movements toward and from an arduous good, and each needs its own moral corrective.

⁵⁸*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 161, a. 1, ad 5; checked 2026-07-25 as above. The reply distinguishes Aristotle’s treatment of subjection under civic justice from humility as a special virtue, whose term is God.

⁵⁹*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 161, a. 3, corpus; checked 2026-07-25 as above. The same article draws the practical consequence that guards the virtue from absurdity: “humility does not require a man to subject what he has of God’s to that which may seem to be God’s in another,” and those who have received God’s gifts “know that they have them.”

⁶⁰*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 129, a. 1, corpus (*magnanimitas ex suo nomine importat quandam extensionem animi ad magna*) and a. 3, ad 4; checked 2026-07-25 as above. The reply’s balance is exact: magnanimity esteems the received gifts truly, humility esteems the self’s non-aseity and defect truly; both “follow right reason,” so their coexistence in one person is not paradox but accuracy.

⁶¹*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 161, a. 2, ad 2; checked 2026-07-25 as above, quoting Augustine, *De virginitate* 31: “It is one thing to raise oneself to God, and another to raise oneself up against God.” The corpus of the same article locates humility in the appetite rather than in the judgment—“humility, properly speaking, moderates the movement of the appetite”—with knowledge of one’s own deficiency serving as its rule.

⁶²*Summa theologiae* I, q. 20, a. 2, corpus (“God loves all existing things”); checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent, Latin at Corpus Thomisticum. The definition doing the work—to love is to will good to something—is taken from Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II, and is used throughout the *Summa*’s treatment of love. The argument’s premise that God’s will is the cause of all things is established earlier, at I, q. 19, a. 4, and is not re-argued here.

⁶³Same corpus (*amor Dei est infundens et creans bonitatem in rebus*); checked 2026-07-25 as above. Our love, Aquinas says, “is not the cause of its goodness; but conversely its goodness, whether real or imaginary, calls forth our love.” The asymmetry is the same one section 6 analyzed, seen from the side of the good rather than of being: creatures are lovable to God because he made them so, not the reverse.

⁶⁴*Summa theologiae* I, q. 20, a. 2, *sed contra*, quoting Wisdom 11:25 in the Douay numbering, in the Dominican translation’s rendering; checked 2026-07-25 as above. Scripture is not independently quoted or exegeted anywhere in this essay; it appears here and in the following note inside the wording of the two witnesses being cited, in their own renderings.

⁶⁵*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 301, official Vatican English web text, wording checked 2026-07-25; the paragraph quotes Wisdom 11:24–26 in the rendering the Catechism’s English edition uses. That the Church’s catechetical statement of conservation and Aquinas’s philosophical argument for divine love converge on the same verse is a fact about the two texts, noted here; the essay draws no inference from the convergence beyond what each text states on its own authority.

⁶⁶*Summa theologiae* I, q. 19, a. 3, corpus; checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent. Aquinas distinguishes what God wills necessarily—his own goodness, the proper object of the divine will—from what he wills of things other than himself, which are willed as ordered to that goodness and are not necessary to it. The distinction between absolute necessity and necessity by supposition is drawn in the same corpus. This essay does not execute or assess the argument; it records that the seam it marked is a seam in its own presentation, not a boundary of the tradition’s claims.

⁶⁷*Summa theologiae* I, q. 20, a. 2, ad 1, quoting Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names* IV.1; checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent. The objection being answered was that love takes the lover out of himself, which cannot be said of God; Aquinas neither denies the Dionysian sentence nor reads it as a claim about divine change, but glosses “outside himself” as willing and providing the good of another. The Dionysian text is quoted here through Aquinas, as he quotes it, and is not separately collated.

⁶⁸*Summa theologiae* I, q. 32, a. 1, corpus; checked 2026-07-25 as above. The article adds the reason—natural reason reaches God through creatures, and creatures manifest the divine creative power which is common to the whole Trinity, not the distinction of persons—and the warning that attempting such proofs exposes faith to derision. That God is triune, and that the love reached analogically by reason is, in its own life, Father, Son, and Spirit, are truths of revelation; this essay’s argument neither reaches nor gestures at them, and the series to which it belongs takes them up only where revelation is explicitly on the table.

⁶⁹Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, ch. 1 (the ascent “to the union, as attainable, with Him Who is above every essence and knowledge”) and ch. 2 (the statue and the cutting away); quoted from the public-domain Parker translation (1897), wording checked 2026-07-25 at the CCEL transcription. The author is an anonymous Christian writer of the late fifth or early sixth century, conventionally cited under his pseudonym; he is not the Athenian convert of Acts 17.

⁷⁰*Mystical Theology*, ch. 5, Parker translation, checked 2026-07-25 as above. Cited for apophatic restraint only: the denials mark the failure of creaturely categories at the source of categories, not a retraction of the analogical judgments made above. The two moves are compatible in the tradition that made both, and the appendix records that this essay does not undertake the technical reconciliation of analogy and negation.

⁷¹On adoration as the act of reverence rendered to God on account of the divine excellence, see *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 84, a. 1, corpus (“Adoration is directed to the reverence of the person adored. . . it is proper to religion to show reverence to God”) and ad 1 (“Reverence is due to God on account of His excellence”); checked 2026-07-25, English at New Advent. The step from consent to adoration is here only named, not developed; Part II of this series takes it up, including the bodily acts treated in the same question at a. 2, which this essay does not enter.

A Positions on the Ground of Existence: A Synopsis

The table below is a navigational summary of the positions engaged in this essay, in the order in which the argument meets them, with the treatment each receives. It is editorial synthesis: every entry compresses a treatment given, with citations, verification dates, and qualifications, in the body, the Notes, and the References, which govern over this compression. “Reported” marks a position engaged at a stated secondary-witness ceiling rather than from collated primary text.

Position	What it holds about the present ground of existence	Text or locus used	Treatment in this essay
Existential inertia	Existence, once had, persists of itself; a sustaining cause is unnecessary.	Contemporary label; no primary text quoted.	Stated at full strength in section 1; the rival picture is exhibited and engaged, not refuted; the limit is recorded in the appendix.
Brute fact	Existence requires no cause at any point; explanation stops at the world.	Contemporary label; no primary text quoted.	Stated in section 1 as the harder form; not refuted; excluded from the essay’s positive claims.
Self-causation	A thing confers existence on itself.	<i>De ente et essentia</i> , ch. 4; ST I, q. 3, a. 4.	Refused as incoherent: what is not yet is in no position to confer anything.
Aristotle	Nothing actualizes itself; a simultaneous series requires a first, purely actual member on which nature “depends.”	<i>Metaphysics</i> II.2 (994a); IX.8 (1049b–1050b); XII.6–7 (1071b–1072b).	Instruments adopted (potency/act, the ordered series). The mover moves “by being loved”; it gives no being, and the cosmos is eternal and underived.
Plato	What has a perfection partially derives it from what is that perfection; the Good is source of being and beyond essence.	<i>Phaedo</i> 100c–e; <i>Republic</i> 508e–509b; <i>Timaeus</i> 28a–30a.	Participation structure adopted; the sun image noted as already in place. The Demiurge orders pre-existing material on a pattern he did not invent: no creation from nothing.
Aquinas: essence and existence	In every finite thing existence is really other than essence and must be received; in God alone they are identical.	<i>De ente et essentia</i> , ch. 4; ST I, q. 3, a. 4; q. 44, aa. 1–2; q. 13, a. 11.	Adopted as the essay’s framework and argued from its source text; the Latin governs, English renderings of the treatise are labeled working glosses.
Giles of Rome	A real distinction stated in stronger, sometimes thing-like terms.	Reported (SEP, “Godfrey of Fontaines,” §6).	Named as a variant within the tradition; not adjudicated, no text collated.
Henry of Ghent	No real distinction, but more than conceptual: an “intentional” distinction.	Reported (same witness).	Named; not adjudicated.
Godfrey of Fontaines	Essence and existence are really identical, differing only in mode of signifying.	Reported (same witness).	Named, and used to show that the essay’s framework was contested inside the tradition, not merely from outside it.
Hume, Kant, Frege, Russell	Existence is not a property of individuals; existential claims report that a concept is instantiated.	Reported (SEP, “Existence”).	The collision is stated, not settled; the essay’s claim is narrowed to what it needs—that no finite nature accounts for its own existing.
The First Way	Motion requires a first mover, itself unmoved; “this everyone understands to be God.”	ST I, q. 2, a. 3; q. 46, a. 2, ad 7.	Given in full with its own limits: the regress denied is the essentially ordered one; the identification is deferred to qq. 3–11; the essay’s case does not rest on it.
<i>Kalām</i> -type argument	An infinite temporal regress is impossible; the universe began and its beginning has a cause.	Reported (SEP, “Cosmological Argument,” §2).	Expressly not this essay’s argument; no claim is made about the world’s age, and the topic is excluded in the appendix.

Position	What it holds about the present ground of existence	Text or locus used	Treatment in this essay
Aquinas: conservation	Creatures would fall into nothingness but for the present operation of divine power; God is innermost in all things.	ST I, q. 8, a. 1; q. 45, a. 3; q. 104, a. 1.	Adopted and argued at length; conservation read as the non-interruption of one act of giving being, not as repeated creation.
Irenaeus, Athanasius	Creatures do not hold themselves; life and continuance are bestowed; the Word sustains all things.	<i>Adv. haer.</i> II.34.3–4; IV.39.2; <i>Contra Gentes</i> 41–42.	Cited as patristic witness to the antiquity of the conviction; Athanasius’s sustaining Word is flagged as Christian confession, not as a premise.
<i>Dei Filius</i> ; CCC 300–301	God, most blessed in himself, created freely from nothing and upholds creatures at every moment.	<i>Dei Filius</i> ch. 1 with can. 5; CCC 300–301.	Cited as the Church’s teaching, expressly beyond what the philosophy established; the seam is marked where they are quoted.
Recoil (project term)	Total dependence is a threat to creaturely reality; dependence subtracts agency.	ST I, q. 105, a. 5, with ad 1–2; II-II, qq. 129, 161.	Transcribed at full strength, then diagnosed: it presupposes a same-floor rivalry the argument excludes. Humility and magnanimity are shown to be jointly true estimates.
Consent (project term)	The asymmetry is the signature of gift; the creature agrees with the truth about itself.	ST I, q. 19, a. 3; q. 20, a. 2; q. 32, a. 1; <i>Myst. Theol.</i> 1–5.	Adopted, and bounded: “loves” is analogical, the divine inner life is not disclosed, and the Trinity is beyond natural reason.

B Scope, Method, and Qualifications

B.1 Reader, question, and method

This is a discursive metaphysical and theological article for a serious general reader, able to follow careful distinctions but not presumed to know scholastic terminology. It is Part I of a three-part series, *The Creature Before God*; each part is a complete essay, and this one carries the series’ foundation. Its governing question is what a creature apprehends when the metaphysics of received being is recognized as the present truth about the knower—the condition this essay names *ontological vertigo*—and whether that apprehension must end in recoil or can be consented to without self-deception. Its claim: existence in creatures is received, not possessed; the reception is presently and continuously sustained; the dependence is asymmetric, the sustaining source receiving nothing in return; recoil misreads this asymmetry through a same-floor rivalry picture that the argument itself rules out; and consent, reading the asymmetry as gift, terminates naturally in the analogical judgment that God loves all existing things—at which point natural reason reaches its boundary.

The argument proceeds in epistemic order: the becoming/being distinction, with existential inertia, brute fact, and self-causation stated as the alternatives and no theological premises in play; the Aristotelian and Platonic instruments, quoted at their loci, with an explicit account of what the Greeks did not reach; the essence–existence distinction worked from *De ente et essentia* and the *Summa*, with the schools that differ named at reported ceilings; the First Way given in full with its own limits, including the non-demonstrability of a temporal beginning and the distinction from *kalām*-type arguments; conservation and divine innermost presence, argued philosophically and then attested by patristic and magisterial witnesses cited *as* received teaching; the reflexive turn, Augustine’s record, the coinage, and the one-sided real relation with four misreadings refused; the diagnosis of recoil through noncompetitive causality and the paired virtues; and consent, the analogical judgment of divine love, and apophatic restraint. Revealed claims (free creation, the Word as sustainer, Trinity) are labeled as received where they appear and are nowhere presented as conclusions of the philosophical ascent. English is the working language; no liturgical rite, civil or canonical jurisdiction, or mutable discipline governs any conclusion. Online witnesses were checked on 2026-07-24 and re-checked or newly checked on 2026-07-25.

Source class	Function in the article	Governing boundary
Ancient philosophy	Aristotle supplies potency and act, the priority of actuality, the refusal of an endless series of causes, and dependence on pure actuality; Plato supplies participation, the Good as source of being, and the craftsman who orders pre-existing material.	Neither is credited with creation from nothing, free creation, or conservation; the limits are stated from the texts themselves in the section that uses them. Disputed readings (the mover as efficient cause; <i>epekeina tēs ousias</i> ; the <i>Timaeus</i> ’s temporality) are named and not relied on.
Thomistic philosophy and theology	<i>De ente et essentia</i> ch. 4 and ST I, qq. 2–3, 8, 13, 19–20, 32, 44–46, 104–105; II-II, qq. 84, 129, 161 govern the adopted metaphysical and moral framework.	Adopted as the article’s framework where Catholic theology permits schools; not asserted as dogma; each locus used at its exact argumentative level. <i>De ente</i> is quoted in Latin with labeled working glosses, and the chapter-numbering difference between editions is recorded.
Patristic witness	Irenaeus and Athanasius attest the antiquity of present-tense conservation; Augustine supplies the first-person record of the arrest and of divine non-need; Pseudo-Dionysius supplies apophatic restraint.	Witness to reception, not mechanical authority; Athanasius’s sustaining <i>Word</i> is confessional and flagged; the Athanasius– <i>Timaeus</i> verbal resonance is labeled as this essay’s observation; Dionysius is identified as pseudonymous.
Authoritative Catholic teaching	<i>Dei Filius</i> ch. 1 with canon 5 on free creation from nothing and God’s self-sufficient beatitude; CCC 300–301 on transcendence, intimacy, conservation, and the joy of recognizing dependence.	Cited as the Church’s teaching, explicitly beyond what the philosophy proved; dogmatic force confined to what the texts state; Scripture appears only inside these quotations and Aquinas’s, in their own renderings.
Secondary witnesses at stated ceilings	Three Stanford Encyclopedia entries supply the thirteenth-century dispute over the distinction (Wippel), the modern denial that existence is a property (Nelson), and the typology of cosmological arguments with the state of the essentially-ordered-series debate (Reichenbach).	Used only at reported ceilings with revision dates recorded; no primary text of the positions so reported was collated, and no claim finer than the witness supports is made.
Project synthesis	The coined terms (ontological vertigo, recoil, consent as used here), the song and spring, the development of the traditional images, the transcription of recoil, the synopsis table, and all final formulations.	Original editorial synthesis argued from the checked sources; attributed to no source and creating no doctrine. Where an image is the tradition’s (the house, the lit air), the note says so at first use.

B.2 Included and excluded scope

Included are: the distinction between causes of becoming and causes of being; existential inertia, brute fact, and self-causation stated as the rival options; the observational underdetermination of the question; Aristotle on potency and act (*Metaphysics* IX.8), on the impossibility of an endless series of causes (II.2), and on the eternal mover whose essence is actuality (XII.6–7); Plato on participation (*Phaedo* 100c–e), on the Good as source of being (*Republic* 508e–509b), and the *Timaeus*’s ordering craftsman (28a–30a); the real distinction of essence and existence argued from *De ente et essentia* ch. 4; the rival medieval accounts and the modern denial of existence as a property, both at reported ceilings; participation and the creation of primary matter (ST I, q. 44, aa. 1–2); subsistent existence (I, q. 3, a. 4) and “He Who Is” as signifying present existence (I, q. 13, a. 11); the First Way in full (I, q. 2, a. 3) with the essentially/accidentally ordered distinction (I, q. 46, a. 2, ad 7), the deferral of the identification to qq. 3–11, the

non-demonstrability of a beginning (I, q. 46, a. 2), and the distinction from *kalām*-type arguments; conservation (I, q. 104, a. 1), creation as a relation in the creature (I, q. 45, a. 3), and divine innermost presence (I, q. 8, a. 1); the patristic conservation witness of Irenaeus (II.34.3–4; IV.39.2) and Athanasius (*Contra Gentes* 41–42); the dogmatic teaching of free creation from nothing and the Catechism’s conservation paragraph; the reflexive first-person turn with Augustine’s record (*Confessions* III.6.11; VII.10.16; VII.11.17; VII.15.21; VII.17.23); the coinage and definition of ontological vertigo; the one-sided real relation (I, q. 13, a. 7, with ad 5) and four refused misreadings; the diagnosis of recoil via noncompetitive causality (I, q. 105, a. 5, with ad 1–2); humility and magnanimity as jointly true estimates (II-II, q. 161, aa. 1–3; q. 129, aa. 1 and 3); consent; divine freedom as argued by Aquinas (I, q. 19, a. 3) beside the essay’s own seam; the analogical judgment that God loves all things (I, q. 20, a. 2, with ad 1); the natural-reason boundary at the Trinity (I, q. 32, a. 1); apophatic restraint (*Mystical Theology* 1–2 and 5); and adoration named (II-II, q. 84, a. 1).

Excluded are: any argument from a temporal beginning of the universe (*kalām* or otherwise); physical cosmology; a full answer to existential-inertia and brute-fact positions; a treatment of the quantificational account of existence and its bearing on the scholastic distinction; adjudication among the medieval and later schools on the real distinction; assessment of the contemporary literature on essentially ordered series; the technical reconciliation of analogy with apophatic negation; the mechanics of divine concurrence and human freedom beyond what the recoil diagnosis requires; theodicy and the problem of evil; the bodily acts of adoration and the virtue of religion (Part II); grace, mystical experience, beatitude, and deification (Parts II–III); Trinitarian theology; independent exegesis of Scripture; and any claim about the psychology or culpability of particular persons.

B.3 Material qualifications

1. *Ontological vertigo*, *recoil*, and *consent* as used here are coined, reader-facing terms defined in the body. They are not received technical vocabulary and are attributed to no historical author.
2. The essay’s positive case presumes the success of the participation argument it works from *De ente et essentia* and the *Summa*; existential inertia and brute-fact accounts are named as serious alternatives and are answered only to the extent of exhibiting the rival picture, not refuted exhaustively.
3. The images of the house and the lit air are the tradition’s (ST I, q. 104, a. 1; I, q. 8, a. 1; *De ente* ch. 4), and the first note says so; the song, the spring, the borrower and owner, the pie, the reflection, and the map are this essay’s.
4. *De ente et essentia* is quoted in Latin from the Corpus Thomisticum presentation of the Baur–Koch text, with English renderings labeled as project working glosses; the chapter containing the argument is numbered 4 in the Leonine division and 3 in the edition consulted, and the essay records the discrepancy rather than silently resolving it.
5. The thirteenth-century dispute over the distinction (Giles of Rome, Henry of Ghent, Godfrey of Fontaines) is reported at a named encyclopedic witness with its revision date; no text of those authors was collated, no position is attributed to schools whose texts were not checked, and the dispute is not adjudicated.
6. The modern denial that existence is a property of individuals is likewise reported at a named witness; the essay states the collision, narrows its own claim to what it needs, and does not undertake the engagement, which is excluded from scope.
7. The First Way is presented with Aquinas’s own limits: it concerns essentially ordered, presently operating dependence (I, q. 46, a. 2, ad 7); it does not prove a temporal beginning (I, q. 46, a. 2); and “this everyone understands to be God” is a report of usage whose justification lies in the subsequent questions, identified here rather than executed. The essay’s positive case does not rest on this argument.
8. The typology distinguishing Thomistic, *kalām*, and sufficient-reason cosmological arguments is reported at a named witness. This essay belongs to the first family, makes no claim about the finitude of the past, and evaluates no argument in the other two families.
9. The contemporary debate over whether an essentially ordered series can regress without end is acknowledged at a reported ceiling and is neither surveyed nor adjudicated.
10. Conservation is the non-interruption of the single act of giving being, not repeated creation or a succession of divine decisions; “at every moment” quantifies over creaturely time, not over acts in God (I, q. 45, a. 3).

11. Divine innermost presence (I, q. 8, a. 1) is causal presence, not pantheistic identity; Creator and creature remain really distinct, and participation does not make creatures parts, modes, or fragments of God.
12. The one-sided real relation (I, q. 13, a. 7) denies a creature-caused accident or change in God. It does not make God's lordship notional (a. 7, ad 5), does not make divine knowledge, will, or love fictional, and does not make the creature unreal; the essay states each refusal beside the claim.
13. The freedom of creation and its ordering to an end are received dogma (*Dei Filius*), and this essay's philosophical thread does not establish them. That limit belongs to the essay's compressed ascent, not to the tradition: Aquinas argues divine freedom at I, q. 19, a. 3, which the essay cites without executing or assessing it.
14. Athanasius attributes conservation to the Word and Irenaeus to God's will and grace; both are cited as witnesses to the antiquity of the conservation conviction, not as philosophical premises, and their confessional content is flagged. The verbal resonance between *Contra Gentes* 41 and *Timaeus* 29e is noted as this essay's observation about two quoted texts, not as a source-critical claim.
15. Augustine's arrest scenes involve grace, scripture, and moral crisis beyond the philosophical apprehension this essay isolates; they are cited as the classic first-person record, not as demonstration, and no affective experience is made normative or required.
16. "God loves all existing things" (I, q. 20, a. 2) is an analogical philosophical judgment about what God wills and causes; it does not disclose the divine inner life, entail an emotion in God, or demonstrate the Trinity, which natural reason cannot attain (I, q. 32, a. 1). The Dionysian "placed outside Himself" is quoted as Aquinas quotes and glosses it, and not as an independent claim.
17. Humility's "nothing from oneself" concerns non-aseity, not worthlessness (II-II, q. 161, a. 3); magnanimity's esteem of received gifts is not pride (q. 129, a. 3, ad 4). Recoil is defined as a hardened interpretation, not as the initial shudder, and no judgment is made about the culpability of any person's response.
18. Consent to creaturehood is agreement with a metaphysical truth. It is not quietism, submission to injustice, or supernatural faith; the step from consent to adoration is named, not developed, and its lived form is deferred to Part II.
19. Pseudo-Dionysius is an anonymous Christian author of the late fifth or early sixth century, not the convert of Acts 17; his denials are cited as apophatic method, not as retraction of the essay's analogical conclusions, and the technical reconciliation of analogy and negation is outside scope.
20. The synopsis table is a compression of treatments given in the body and Notes, which govern over it; entries marked "reported" carry the ceilings recorded in their notes.

B.4 Notes, translations, rights, currentness, and review

The numbered Notes carry exact citations, edition and translation identifications, verification dates, witness ceilings, and qualifications that would interrupt the argument; no indispensable premise lives only in a note. Aristotle is quoted from the public-domain Ross translation (1908) in the Internet Archive scan; Plato from the public-domain Jowett translations at Project Gutenberg; Aquinas's *Summa* from the public-domain English Dominican translation with Latin checked at Corpus Thomisticum, and *De ente et essentia* from the Corpus Thomisticum Latin with labeled working glosses; Augustine from the public-domain Pilkington translation (NPNF 1/1) with one Latin phrase checked at a public Latin text; Irenaeus from the public-domain Roberts–Rambaut translation (ANF 1); Athanasius from the public-domain Robertson translation (NPNF 2/4); Pseudo-Dionysius from the public-domain Parker translation (1897). *Dei Filius* is quoted from the Holy See's Latin web text with labeled working glosses; the Catechism is quoted briefly from the official Vatican English web text with attribution. Scripture is not independently quoted or exegeted; the scriptural clauses that appear are inside quotations of Aquinas and of the Catechism, in those texts' own renderings. The three Stanford Encyclopedia entries are used as checked secondary narratives, cited with their revision dates and quoted only in short clauses with attribution. Official texts and third-party translations remain outside the project's CC BY 4.0 grant; project-created prose, coinages, and organization are project content.

Online witnesses were checked on 2026-07-24 (first edition) and on 2026-07-25 (this deepened edition), on which date every previously quoted witness was re-fetched and re-read and the newly added witnesses were checked for the first time; the Internet Archive text of Ross was re-downloaded and found byte-identical to the earlier copy. No mutable law or discipline is relied on. The 2026-07-25 revision deepens the 2026-07-24 edition: it adds the ancient-antecedents

section with its limits subsection, the *De ente et essentia* and rival-schools subsections, a separate section on the First Way and its limits, an expanded conservation section with the patristic and magisterial witnesses worked at length, the one-sided-relation subsection with its refused misreadings, expanded treatments of recoil, humility and magnanimity, consent, and apophasis, and the synopsis appendix. This revision received internal argumentative, source-consistency, quotation, rights, and production review by the authoring agent. Independent philosophical, patristic, Thomistic, theological, literary, and ecclesiastical review is outstanding; no imprimatur, nihil obstat, or ecclesiastical approval is claimed, and internal checking is not independent review.

C References

Ancient philosophy

- Aristotle, *Metaphysics* II (α), ch. 2 (994a, no infinite series of causes); IX (Θ), ch. 8 (1049b–1050b, act from act; the priority of actuality); XII (Λ), chs. 6–7 (1071b–1072b, the principle whose essence is actuality; the unmoved mover; motion by being loved; “on such a principle depend the heavens and the world of nature”); trans. W. D. Ross, *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, vol. VIII: *Metaphysica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908); public domain; wording checked 2026-07-24 and again 2026-07-25 in the Internet Archive scan of the 1908 printing, whose text was re-downloaded on the later date and found byte-identical.
- Plato, *Phaedo* 100c–e (participation; “by beauty all beautiful things become beautiful”); trans. Benjamin Jowett; public domain; wording checked 2026-07-25 at Project Gutenberg (ebook no. 1658).
- Plato, *Republic* VI, 508e–509b (the sun and the Good; the Good as author of the being of things known, itself beyond essence); trans. Jowett; public domain; checked 2026-07-25 at Project Gutenberg (ebook no. 1497).
- Plato, *Timaeus* 28a–30a (what is created has a cause; the maker past finding out; the ungrudging craftsman; order brought out of disorder); trans. Jowett; public domain; checked 2026-07-25 at Project Gutenberg (ebook no. 1572).

Patristic witnesses

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- Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Gentes* 41–42 (created nature fleeting of itself; God grudging not even existence; the universe kept from dissolution; the Word quickening and sustaining all things); trans. Archibald Robertson, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 4 (1892); public domain; checked 2026-07-25 at New Advent.
- Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* III.6.11 (*interior intimo meo*), VII.10.16 (the trembling arrest; “above it was, because it made me”; region of dissimilarity), VII.11.17 (things neither altogether are nor are not; “You stand not in need of my goodness”), VII.15.21 (whatever exists owes its being to God), VII.17.23 (“with the flash of a trembling glance, it arrived at that which is”); trans. J. G. Pilkington, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st series, vol. 1 (1887); public domain; checked 2026-07-25 at New Advent (Book III) and New Advent (Book VII); Latin phrase checked 2026-07-25 at The Latin Library.
- Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology* chs. 1–2 and 5 (ascent above essence and knowledge; the statue and the cutting away; the concluding denials); trans. John Parker, *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite* (London: James Parker, 1897); public domain; checked 2026-07-25 at CCEL. *Divine Names* IV.1 is quoted only as Aquinas quotes it at ST I, q. 20, a. 2, ad 1.

Thomistic framework

- Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, ch. 4 in the Leonine division (= ch. 3 of the text consulted): essence understood without existence (the phoenix); the light in the air from the sun; existence not caused by the nature; the one thing that is existence alone. Latin from the Baur–Koch text presented in the Corpus Thomisticum online corpus, checked 2026-07-25; English renderings in this essay are labeled project working glosses governed by the Latin.
- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3 (the First Way); q. 3, a. 4 (essence and existence identical in God alone), with a. 7, q. 7, a. 1, and q. 11, a. 3 identified for the deferred identification; q. 8, a. 1 (God innermost in all things); q. 13, a. 7 with ad 5 (the one-sided real relation; God really Lord); q. 13, a. 11 (“He Who Is”; present existence); q. 19, a. 3 (willing things other than himself not absolutely necessary); q. 20, a. 2 with ad 1 (God loves all existing things; the Dionysian gloss); q. 32, a. 1 (Trinity beyond natural reason); q. 44, a. 1 (beings by participation); q. 44, a. 2 (primary matter created; the history of causes); q. 45, a. 3 (creation a relation in the creature); q. 46, a. 2 with ad 7 (no demonstration of a temporal beginning; *per se* and accidental series); q. 104, a. 1 (conservation; builder, house, sun, and air); q. 105, a. 5 with ad 1–2 (God works in every agent; primary and secondary causes); II-II, q. 84, a. 1 (adoration); q. 129, a. 1 and a. 3, ad 4 (magnanimity; the great and the defective in man); q. 161, aa. 1–3 (humility, its object, and its content). English from the public-domain translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province via New Advent; Latin checked in the Corpus Thomisticum online corpus. All loci checked 2026-07-25; work, question, article, and division govern over either site’s presentation.

Authoritative Catholic witnesses

- First Vatican Council, dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* (24 April 1870), ch. 1 on God the creator (*in se et ex se beatissimus; non ad augendam suam beatitudinem; liberrimo consilio... de nihilo; providentia sua tuetur atque gubernat*) with canon 5 *De Deo rerum omnium creatore (voluntate ab omni necessitate libera)*; Holy See Latin text, vatican.va, checked 2026-07-24 and again 2026-07-25. English renderings in this essay are labeled working glosses governed by the Latin.
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 300–301 (transcendence and intimate presence, quoting Augustine; God upholds and sustains creation at every moment; the joy of recognizing dependence; Wisdom 11:24–26), official Vatican English web text, vatican.va, checked 2026-07-24 and again 2026-07-25.

Secondary witnesses at stated reported ceilings

- John F. Wippel, “Godfrey of Fontaines,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §6 (essence and existence: Giles of Rome, Henry of Ghent, Godfrey); substantive revision 23 October 2018; read 2026-07-25 at plato.stanford.edu. Used only for the reported state of the thirteenth-century dispute; no text of those authors was collated.
- Michael Nelson, “Existence,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; substantive revision 5 May 2020; read 2026-07-25 at plato.stanford.edu. Used only for the reported history of the denial that existence is a property of individuals.
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