THE PROOF FROM CONTINGENCY

As we consider the majesty of the Universe we might ask ourselves what is its most universal element. Is it—

Light ?	Movement ?
Gravity ?	Causation ?
Order ?	Materiality ?
Life ?	Circular motion ?

It is none of these but the one reality in which they all share, summed up in the one word—**BE**. They all exist ; they all exercise, in one fashion or another, existence. *Be*, St Thomas says, is the act of all acts, the perfection of all perfections. And so we approach the third way of proving God's existence which turns on this greatest of realities, *Be*.

In his work, *De Ente Et Essentia*, in the course of dealing with the distinction between essence and existence, St Thomas sets out one of a number of proofs. Here is a paraphrase of his argument.

Every *quiddity* can be understood without including in its understanding *be* or existence. We can consider a man or a phoenix without the need to consider whether these exist in the real.
Hence, the *be* of a thing is other than its *quiddity*, nature or form, unless there should exist some entity whose *quiddity* is to be. Hence in any thing other that this thing, its *be* is other than its *quiddity*.

Now whatever belongs to some thing is from a source which is either—

[*intrinsic* to it   -   as to laugh is proper to man as an incident of
[his human nature,
[or
[
[*extrinsic* to it   -   as light is found in the air from the Sun.

But *be* (existence) cannot derive from the *quiddity* or form of the thing as from an efficient cause because then the thing would be the cause of itself (would bring itself to be) which is impossible.

Therefore it must be the case in every thing whose *be* is other than its *quiddity* or nature, that it get its *be* from another. And because everything which is (exists) through another is reduced to that which is through itself as to its prime cause, there must be some thing which is the cause of *be* to all things because it is itself *be* purely. Otherwise there would be regress to infinity in causes, since every thing which is not *be* purely, has a cause of its *be*. And this (thing) is the prime cause, which is God. (*De Ente Et Essentia* c. 5, nn. 3, 4)

St Thomas proves the same elsewhere in his works, notably in the *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3, and in the *Summa Contra Gentes* I, 15, n. 5.

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A contingent thing is indifferent to and *be-not*. A necessary being, in contrast, is one—

whose necessity is either—	[efficiently caused [by another, [or [[is uncaused	(such as prime matter, spiritual soul, *aether)* - - -	[necessary [*secundum quid* [necessary *simpliciter* [(be-through-self)

The necessary *secundum quid* (i.e., after a fashion) are those things which cannot be destroyed though, taken absolutely of course, they are contingent. They are hypothetically necessary. The necessary *simpliciter* is the one being which exists through itself, the one being whose *quiddity* is to be. The following further illustration will assist.

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              [ either CONTINGENT . . . . . . . . . . . . . .          ]
              [                                                        ] both of which
BEING         [                                                        ] ABSOLUTELY
  may be      [                                                        ] are CONTINGENT.
  understood  [                        [ either HYPOTHETICALLY    ]
  to be       [                        [        NECESSARY         ]
              [                        [
              [ or NECESSARY ;         [
              [      and then          [
                                       [ or  ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY.
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To these considerations we should this important note. Every contingent being has an efficient cause not only as to—

[why it becomes, rather than becomes not,
[
[but also why it is, rather than is not.

That is, every contingent being has an efficient cause both as to *become* and as to *be*. Dr Woodbury insists on this. He writes :

"BEWARE OF IMAGINATION ! It is not to be thought that once a caused thing has been brought to be, it spontaneously perseveres in be-ing without the benefit of any causation—somewhat as a ship, once launched on the water, may be imagined to persevere in floating of its own accord. (Rather, the ship is being perpetually caused to float by the support of the water, and if the water were withdrawn, [it] would at once drop to the bottom ; just as also a house would at once collapse if the stones, bricks and timber were melted). And indeed, of a thing which is caused to be, the influence of the efficient cause of its BE is required while-so-ever the thing is, for not the same is it that it be at the next instant as that it be at this instant, as Descartes well says, therefore over and above the causation required that it be at this instant, further causation is required that it be at the next instant. Hence not ever does a contingent being, or a

being which not from itself is, escape the necessity of being actually caused efficiently, save by ceasing to be.

"Accordingly, the principle of efficient causality may be formulated thus: EVERY CONTINGENT BEING, OR BEING WHICH NOT FROM ITSELF IS, IF IT IS, HAS AN EFFICIENT CAUSE OTHER THAN ITSELF NOT ONLY OF ITS BECOME BUT ALSO ITS BE. "
[*Ostensive Metaphysics*, Treatise Two, *Natural Theology*, n. 1478]

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Now, note how in this proof, in contrast to the earlier proofs, we *have arrived* at the existence of God as the first being on whom all other beings depend. We will return to the issue when we come to see how the first in the other orders we have considered also must be identified as God.

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