

GOD'S EXISTENCE IN *DE ENTE ET ESSENTIA*

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“A small mistake in the beginning is a big one in the end.” These opening words of St. Thomas’s *De Ente et Essentia* are a direct quote from Aristotle’s *On the Heavens and the Earth*. Thus St. Thomas sets out this principle to show that he will very carefully give all the syllogisms necessary in order to explain the basic metaphysical notions, which lead to proof of God, the First Being. This principle, that a small error multiplies, applies to all aspects of life; for example, a small error in a mathematical formula will become infinitely larger, a misguided throw will spin further from the target, and even a seemingly minor sin can lead to grave offenses. In this conference on modern atheism, we have seen in the historical works that this principle regarding error applies to the spread of atheism. By examining atheism, we saw how a “small mistake” in the beginning leads to a completely erroneous system. In stark contrast to the atheistic schools of thought, St. Thomas’s *De Ente* sets out to examine all reality free from the slightest mistake. In this paper we will begin with the historical context of *De Ente*, continue by providing an outline of the chapters of the text, then we will focus on the explanation of God’s existence, (chapter four), and finally, conclude with some applications. *De Ente* addresses the metaphysical notions: *ens* and *essentia*, which are the first known by man.¹ This work’s goal is to explain the notion of essence and *ens* through reality, and examine the logical intentions, genus, species, and difference. After explaining *ens* and *essentia*, the Angelic Doctor orders the types of being from the most composed to the one, perfectly simple being. From this St. Thomas demonstrates that there must be a First Being, which is God.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

THE YOUTHFUL SCHOLAR WRITES HIS METAPHYSICAL TREATISE

Even as a child in Monte Cassino, St. Thomas was known for posing the question: “What is God?”² It is not surprising that one of his first, more “personal works,” *De Ente et Essentia*, ends up providing a way to defend God’s existence.³ St. Thomas wrote this short treatise or “opusculum” while living in the Dominican monastery of Saint Jacques. At the time he wrote *De Ente*, between 1252 and 1256, St. Thomas was about twenty-seven, had been a Dominican for almost a decade, and had been studying under St. Albert the Great in Paris for seven years.⁴ This early and brief metaphysical treatise shows the philosophical roots that reach their culmination about ten years later in St. Thomas’s final theological masterpieces, his *Summa contra Gentiles*⁵

¹ St. Thomas quotes the opening lines of Avicenna’s *Metaphysics*: “*ens* and *essentia* are what is first conceived by the intellect.”

² *Catholic Encyclopedia*’s article on *Saint Thomas Aquinas*.

³ By twenty-seven, St. Thomas was called from St. Albert the Great’s care in Cologne to the monastery of Saint Jacques in Paris, where his writing developed. See a summary of St. Thomas’s early Dominican years by M. Dr. Aracoeli, SSVM “Novitiate in prison: Friar Thomas Aquinas and his first defense of Religious Life.”

⁴ J.P. Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Person and his Work, Volume 1* (Washington: CUA Press 1996), 48. Today, there are 181 manuscripts of this text and 165 of them are complete.

⁵ He began this in 1259.

and *Summa Theologiae*.⁶ Yet still as a developing student, St. Thomas's little treatise, comprised of six chapters, is addressed to "his brothers and companions while he was not yet a master."⁷ St. Thomas wrote this at the direct request of his brothers, continuing in a tradition followed by others such as St. Albert the Great, who would render this brotherly service of explaining crucial topics.⁸ Indeed, the full title of the treatise is *De ente et essentia ad fratres et socios*.⁹ This work is the opening of St. Thomas's heroic intellectual charity.¹⁰ As a prolific writer, St. Thomas wrote this treatise while working on two other quite different genres: his *Commentary on the Sentences*¹¹ and his polemical work *Apology for Religious Orders*. The first, the *Commentary on the Sentences*, was required in order to gain a degree in Paris.¹² Most likely, St. Thomas wrote *De Ente* after having already commented on the first part of Book I of the *Sentences*.¹³ As a young scholarly Dominican, St. Thomas courageously sets out to help his brothers seek Truth through his explanation of the basic metaphysical notions in *De Ente*.

ST. THOMAS'S SOURCES IN *DE ENTE ET ESSENTIA*

Let us consider St. Thomas's "library" of philosophical thought. What were St. Thomas's key sources as he lived in the academic world of the mid-thirteenth century? Notably, he uses non-Christian writers! He concentrated on both the ancient Greeks and the modern Arabic scholars. St. Thomas is unafraid: he uses the old and the new alike, side by side. Wherever he finds a seed of Truth, he unperturbedly presents their thought and even occasionally critiques it. In *De Ente*, St. Thomas uses a synthesis of four thinkers: Aristotle, Boethius, Avicenna, and Averroes.¹⁴ Even in the opening lines of *De Ente*, it is notable that St. Thomas first quotes Aristotle and then proceeds to a reference from Avicenna. Both would have been known by the audience. Throughout every section of the metaphysical treatise, St. Thomas uses these Greek and Arabic sources.

⁶ He began the *Summa* in 1268.

⁷ Torrell, 348.

⁸ *De Ente et Essentia* was followed by his defense of mendicant religious life, *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem*. While St. Thomas undistractedly presents his metaphysical handbook, it must be noted that he remains intellectually focused in a time of exterior turmoil: there were many attacks on mendicant poverty and his Dominican way of life. During this same period of teaching years in Paris, he also wrote another treatise, *De principiis naturae*, which used Averroes in an explanation of change in nature. Another more complete title (*De principiis naturae ad fratrem Sylvestrum*) again specifies that he is addressing his brother in religion. This time it is specifically Sylvester.

⁹ In English, *On Being and Essence for brothers and companions*. Still, the Leonine edition uses the condensed name: *De Ente et Essentia*.

¹⁰ Torrell, 49. His written works expanded into twenty-six (out of his ninety works) being written at the specific request of another.

¹¹ Torrell, 40. As a rising scholar St. Thomas was obliged to know Peter Lombard's book. St. Thomas immediately develops his style especially with his use of "more than 2000 quotations from Aristotle in the commentary on Lombard's four books (800 are from the *Nicomachean Ethics*)".

¹² "The apprentice was required to present in order to become a master artisan." At the time, "all the scholastic writers were obliged to pour their instruction into this mold." Torrell, 39.

¹³ J. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: CUA Press 2000), 404. *De Ente* was probably written before having continued with Book II, distinction 3.

¹⁴ Along with the ancient text *Liber de causis*.

OUTLINE OF THE TEXT

FROM COMPOSED BEINGS TO THE FIRST CAUSE

In some sense, *De Ente* reads like a dense metaphysics handbook for his brothers in religion. What does St. Thomas explain in each of the chapters of *De Ente*?

- 1) *Ens*¹⁵ in composed substances
- 2) Essence¹⁶ in composed substances (including matter and body)
- 3) Composed essence related to genus, species, difference
- 4) **Essence in separated substances** (the soul, intelligences, and in the First Cause)
- 5) Essence in diverse substances (God, created intellectual substances, substances composed of matter and form)
- 6) Essence in Accidents

COMPOSED SUBSTANCES

As a refreshing contrast to the strained methods of modern thought, St. Thomas's "system" is surprisingly basic; he returns to the Aristotelian process of using our senses to first grasp reality. This is St. Thomas's method: begin the way man natural proceeds from composed to simple substances. "Since we acquire knowledge of what is simple from what is composed, and come to what is prior from what is posterior, so that, beginning with what is easier, we may progress more suitably in learning."¹⁷ Man first can conceive of composed substances. For example, Socrates sees a man. In composed substances, "there are form and matter, for example, in man, soul and body." He clarifies that matter is not simply placed or added to the essence nor is it mere relation between matter and form. Rather, essence in composed substances includes real composition of matter and form. This is in accord with reason since it is neither the form alone nor the matter alone, but both, even though the form "alone in its own way is the cause of such *esse*."¹⁸ Overall, the essence of a real thing has *esse*, and in composed substances, this essence is a composition of matter and form.

IMMATERIAL SUBSTANCES

From composed substances St. Thomas progresses to simple substances, which do not depend on matter. He explains that "some substances are simple and some are composed, and essence is in both. But essence is in simple substances in a truer and more noble way according to which they also have a more noble *esse*; for they – at least that simple substance which is first, and which is God – are the cause of those which are composed."¹⁹ While simple substances are higher, because they are not limited by matter, there is still an admixture of potency in separated substances. Finally, in his discussion of separated substances, he points out that one must be first.

¹⁵ *Ens* is the participating and receiving principle: "that which is." St. Thomas divides *ens* into (i) the ten categories and (ii) what signifies the truth of propositions.

¹⁶ Essence is "that through which and in which a thing has *esse*." (*De Ente* Ch. 1)

¹⁷ *De Ente*, Leon. 369:11.

¹⁸ *De Ente*, Leon. 371:55.

¹⁹ *De Ente*, Leon. 370:63.

Even from the preliminary stage of St. Thomas's argument, he does not hesitate to show where the text will go: there is a First Cause of all other substances, and that first perfectly simple substance can only be one. God is the only Self-Subsisting Substance, pure act.

As St. Thomas leads us through the grades of being, he explains that these simple substances are also called separated substances. They are "'separated' because they are 'separated' completely from any matter." These forms are utterly immaterial; therefore, "the substance is not a form impressed on matter, as is the case with material forms."²⁰ St. Thomas proceeds to a notable demonstration of the levels of gradation. "Whence those forms which are nearest to the first principle are forms subsisting of themselves, that is, without matter."²¹ St. Thomas explains that some substances cannot be without matter because of their distance from the first principle; however, others that are closer to the first principle are only form. Why this gradation? It shows that there is one subsisting act of being (*Ipsium Esse Subsistens*), then come the substances that are form without any matter, and then most knowable to us and composed are the forms that need matter. This is the progression: the composed substances have form and matter whereas the simple ones are form alone. But if simple substances are not material, how can there be a multitude of them, and what distinguishes them from God? In these immaterial substances, there is a composite still of form and *esse*.²² Yet, St. Thomas distinguishes that while they are forms alone without matter, "they are not utterly simple." Again, there is still an admixture of potency. Only the First Substance, God alone, can be pure act.

PROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE – THE ONE UNIQUE CAUSE

CHAPTER FOUR OF *DE ENTE*

In contemporary philosophy's analysis of *De Ente*, the emphasis falls completely on Chapter Four of the text. While the whole text provides an explanation of finite realities, this chapter shows how we can arrive at a philosophical notion of the First Cause. St. Thomas provides a proof for the existence of a First Being along with an ontological account of the finite created being (*ens*). To respond to the philosophical questions of modernity, contemporary scholars turn to St. Thomas's proof in Chapter Four. We find the twenty-seven year old Dominican summarizing being, which leads to the strong defense: there is one First Being.

To analyze the argumentation for God's existence from chapter four, we will consider the text according to the three divisions used by contemporary scholars. Fr. Cornelio Fabro presents these divisions as three arguments whereas Msgr. John Wippel uses interrelated phases.²³ Using

²⁰ *De Ente*, Leon. 376:20.

²¹ *De Ente*, Leon. 375:55.

²² It is notable that St. Thomas never explicitly calls these "separated substances" by the term "angels;" on the other hand, he freely and repeatedly states that the first Simple Substance is God. Either way, his argument lends to a metaphysical proof of God's existence whereas an explanation of angels be more proper to theology.

²³ While Fr. Fabro's division is into "argument" in the logical and metaphysical order, Msgr. Wippel calls these division three interrelated "phases." He explains these "phases" in his writings on *De Ente* such as his article "Metaphysics" in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press 1993), 100-103 and his book *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (CUA Press: Washington, DC 2000), 404-410.

these three steps, we see how the argument unfolds. The first stage is in the logical context whereas the second and third are metaphysical. While St. Thomas did not set out to write *De Ente* as a proof of God's existence, he shows that a proper ordering of finite realities leads to a first being. In the third step, he shows that the first being truly is; this is the proof of God.

FIRST STAGE: REAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN ESSENCE AND *ESSE* (ACT OF BEING)

Here we address the questions: what is the substance that is pure act? We have moved from composed to separated substances. Now we ask: what is the *first* substance, which is without any potency? In the beginning phase, St. Thomas states:

Every essence or quiddity can be understood without anything being understood about its *esse*. For I can understand what a man is, or what a phoenix is, and yet not know whether they have *esse* in the real world. It is clear, therefore, that *esse* is other than essence or quiddity unless perhaps there is a thing whose quiddity is its *esse*.²⁴

A man can “know” what another man or a phoenix is while remaining ignorant of the act of being itself. It might not actually exist in reality!²⁵ *Esse* is distinct from essence; this is the first argument on which St. Thomas will build. As we proceed from the first argument to the second, Fr. Fabro carefully notes that “there is direct continuity between the logical aspect and the following metaphysical ones in the Thomistic text... as it is clear from the fact that the first metaphysical argument works as the ‘*minor*’ of the logical argument, with which it is even grammatically connected: ‘therefore it is evident that *esse* is different than the essence or quiddity, **unless** perhaps there is a thing whose quiddity is its *esse*.’”²⁶ In the first phase, the major premise is the logical conclusion: *esse* and essence are really distinct.²⁷ Directly connected by the conjunctive use of “unless,” St. Thomas already places the second argument as the minor premise. Here, Fr. Fabro warns we must safeguard the harmony and continual unity of the Thomistic argument. Instead of artificially breaking the argument into divided statements, there is a direct link from this first logical argument right into the second and third, which are in the ontological and metaphysical realm. Therefore, by placing the real distinction in the logical realm, St. Thomas can move to the two metaphysical arguments.

²⁴ *De Ente*, Leon. 376:90-102. “...*nisi* forte sit aliqua res, cuius quidditas sit ipsum suum esse.”

²⁵ Fr. Fabro notes that St. Thomas also uses this logical argument from *De Ente* in *In II Sent.*, Dist. 3, q. I, a. q; and later on *S. Theol.*, I^a, q. 3, a. 5; cf. also *C. G.*, I, c. 22, where is applied in inverted way to God, and *Comp. Theol.*, c. 11.

²⁶ Fr. Fabro, *La Nozione Metafisica Partecipazione* (EDIVI: Segni 2005), 212. (Fr. Fabro calls it “*ratio logica*.”) *De Ente*, Leon. 376:102.

²⁷ However, it must be noted that not all Thomists agree over *which* of the three stages is where St. Thomas establishes the real distinction between *esse* and essence. Yet, the validity of this argument of the real distinction (regardless of the stage) is still accepted by most Thomists. Fr. Fabro explains this questioning of the real distinction: “The «logical reason» has received an extraordinary acceptance among Thomists, who in their manuals, based on *De Ente*, quote it first; nonetheless for others either defendants of the real distinction, like Schiffini, or adversaries like Fr. Descoqs, it is of doubtful value: Descoqs rather says it as contrasting with the *moderated realism* that St. Thomas always and tirelessly defended against realistic exaggerations of Avicenna and of those who took inspiration from the absolute Realism.” (from the section on “Transcendental Participation” in Fr. Fabro’s book *La Nozione Metafisica Partecipazione* (EDIVI: Segni 2005), 212.

SECOND STAGE: THE POSSIBILITY OF ONLY ONE PURE *ESSE*

The Angelic Doctor proceeds to consider whether there is a First Thing. St. Thomas gives a further preparation for the metaphysical proof of God's existence; he speaks hypothetically: *if* this being is, it is one. That one would have to be pure *esse*. Multiplication only comes from being received and consequently, it would be more than one and limited. In the second argument, he shows that to be the First it must be the Only.²⁸

...there can be but one such thing, the First Thing, because it is impossible to plurify a thing except: (1) by the addition of some *difference*, as the nature of the genus is multiplied in its species, or (2) by the *reception of a form* into diverse matters, as the nature of the species is multiplied in diverse individuals, or (3) by this: that *one is absolute* and the *other is received* into something;²⁹ for example, if there were separated heat, it would by virtue of its very separation be other than heat which is not separated. Now, if we posit a thing which is *esse* alone, such that this *esse* is subsistent, this *esse* will not receive the addition of a difference because it would no longer be *esse* alone, but *esse* plus some form. And much less will it receive the addition of matter because it would no longer be a subsistent *esse*, but a material *esse*. Whence it remains that such a thing, which is its own *esse*, cannot be but one.

In this section, St. Thomas explains the possibility of a first being that is *esse tantum*, act of being alone. In *De Ente*, solely by developing the metaphysical notions, the Angelic Doctor has shown that the one is absolute, and also, all other being is received from that "First Thing."

THIRD STAGE: FIRST CAUSE OF ALL

Finally, the third argument is again in the metaphysical realm, showing that the phases have a beautiful harmony. St. Thomas moves from the possibility in the second argument to the certainty of the third, which concludes that there is necessarily a First Being. This final point, alluded to in the second argument, is that all *esse* is received from the First Being. In all else, essence and *esse* differ; therefore, *esse* is received from the *esse tantum*. Fr. Fabro explains that this is an argument of causality, and it serves as an application of the Aristotelian pair of "act" and "potency." It is *ex parte creaturae*.³⁰ This relation is explained by Msgr. Wippel who expounds on St. Thomas's third argument: "Essence and *esse* are related as potency and act in substances other than God."³¹ There is only one being that is Pure Act. In this third argument, St. Thomas presents that "whatever belongs to a thing is either caused by the principles of its nature, as the ability to laugh in man, or comes to it from some extrinsic principle, as light in the air

²⁸ Fr. Fabro explains that this second argument of the "*ipsum esse subsistens*" as only one comes *ex parte Dei*." Pg. 211.

²⁹ While it is not explicit in *De Ente*, St. Thomas sets the stage for the development of participation.

³⁰ Fr. Fabro distinguishes: "The second metaphysical argument starts with the fact that the being of creature is caused *ab* (from) extrinsic, and not *ab* (from) intrinsic as the «*proprium*» of any essence." Pg. 213-214.

³¹ Wippel, *Metaphysical Thought*, 405.

from the influence of the sun.”³² Then, he develops efficient causality, which is necessary because it is impossible for a thing to bring itself into being; nothing can efficiently cause itself. So, St. Thomas points out that either the thing’s *esse* is caused by its nature or its *esse* comes from without, that is, it is caused efficiently. We have arrived! There must be one first cause, which is the cause of *esse* for all other things. This first cause must itself be uncaused. “Otherwise, there would be an infinite regress among causes, since everything which is not *esse* alone has a cause of its *esse*.”³³ This is the elimination of infinite regress.³⁴ Here it is clear that all *esse* is from God. He alone is pure act; all other beings contain potency and receive their act of being from him. St. Thomas states: “Now everything which receives something from another is in potency with respect to what it receives, and what is received into it is its act. It is necessary therefore that the quiddity itself or the form, which is the intelligence, be in potency with respect to the *esse* which it receives from God; and this *esse* is received as an act.”³⁵ Certainly, there are various degrees of potency, which was shown in the earlier chapters of *De Ente*. That which “is nearer to the First Being has more act and less potency.”³⁶ Still, only the First Being is pure act. All others receive from this one, first and singular source. The third argument goes from hypothetically positing an infinite being to saying that the *esse tantum* must exist in order to be the efficient cause of all other beings, which have *esse* in a received and limited way. While St. Thomas does not pause here to develop efficient causality, he plants a seed of what will become his second “via” or way to God, nearly ten years later, in his *Summa Theologiae*.³⁷ There must be a first cause, and all other beings receive from this First Cause.³⁸

Finally, to conclude this analysis of *De Ente*, we cannot fail to note the final points St. Thomas makes, especially his analysis of God in chapter five. In fact, he begins this section by reaffirming that: “There is a thing, God, whose essence is his *esse* itself.”³⁹ There can be nothing added to God’s *esse*. Furthermore, it is not that other perfections are lacking in *esse tantum*; rather, this pure *esse* has “all the perfections which are in every genus.” Here, with backing from “the Philosopher and the Commentator” (Aristotle and Averroes), St. Thomas affirms that this is why God is “simply perfect.”⁴⁰ Not only does God have all perfections, but also he has them in the most perfect way since in him they are simply and only one. All other things have them in a diversified and therefore limited manner. As God is all perfection, he is also perfectly simple *esse*.

³² *De Ente* ch.4.

³³ *De Ente*, Leon. 377:135.

³⁴ Msgr. Wippel examines how St. Thomas’s position of infinite regress shifted during his career. (*Metaphysical Thought*, 409).

³⁵ *De Ente*, Leon. 377:145.

³⁶ *De Ente*, Leon. 377:176.

³⁷ Both the second way of the *Summa Theologiae* and *De Ente* use the principle of efficient causality with the objection of a regress to infinity of caused causes. Msgr. Wippel’s analysis is that in *De Ente* St. Thomas begins with the effects and provides a more comprehensive metaphysical treatment. In contrast, in the second way the argument focuses first on the first cause rather than the effect. (*Metaphysical Thought*, 460).

³⁸ See ST I, q. 2, a. 3.

³⁹ *De Ente*, Leon. 378:4.

⁴⁰ *De Ente*, Leon. 378:30-42.

Next, St. Thomas distinguishes the essence in created intellectual substances. While their *esse* is not limited by matter, *esse* is received from above. Lower in the level of gradation are substances composed of matter and form, in which their *esse* is “doubly” received and limited. In material substances, the *esse* is received into the substantial form and the form into the particular matter. The *esse* of material things are “twice” received whereas the intellectual substances, such as angels, only “fall” once. Finally, St. Thomas concludes his short metaphysical treatise with an explanation of the essence of accidents. In the final sentences, the Angelic Doctor examines the essence of substances and accidents, how essence is in composed and simple substances, and finally, how the universal intentions of logic are found in all of these except the “First Principle, which is infinitely simple.”⁴¹ In its pure simplicity, there is no division of either genus or species. By this methodical process of examining the building blocks of both logic and metaphysics in *De Ente*, the Angelic Doctor has shown that there is a First Thing, the uncaused cause and pure act, which gives being to all other things.

APPLICATIONS

This understanding of God as pure *esse* is certainly in accord with Christianity. God is the cause of all other things, without God there is nothing else, all things depend on God. Very far from this philosophical explanation is the deist watchmaker God that sets into motion and abandons; rather, this is a transcendent God that is necessary and perpetually necessary. Even in this metaphysical notion of *esse tantum*, we see that it is in accord with Sacred Scriptures. God tells Abraham: “I Am Who Am.” This central revelation of God from Exodus 3:14-15 shows that God reveals Himself as “He Who is.” How well this fits with the explanation from *De ente*! No other composed essence or even separated substance could claim this. Only pure *esse* can answer in such simplicity. God is the First Principle, the simple being who is the cause of all other beings. Socrates would be forced to say: “I am a man.” Rather, God is, and all other beings are in relation to this pure *esse*.⁴²

This First Principle can only be one, and it is the cause of all other beings. However, this examination of the uncaused cause makes us ponder why this First Cause would bring others into being? What are other creatures in relation to God? Following St. Thomas’s *esse tantum*, all others are nothing without the First Cause. They only have *esse* because it is given them by God. Their dependence is absolute. He as pure perfection lacked nothing. It follows then that God’s giving *esse* to others is certainly not required. Therefore, it is completely gratuitously that the First Being causes other beings. While this did not fall under the realm of St. Thomas’s metaphysical treatise, later in his *Summa Theologiae*, he explains that God is good. Motivated by this “pure goodness,” God always acts out of love.⁴³ God is the one who loves first, so man’s response of love is due back to his first love. This First Being does not act out of power or sovereignty as the First, but He is a giver of love. Furthermore, another application of *De Ente*’s *esse tantum* reaches the realm of creation. If there is this First Being, He is the creator of all that

⁴¹ *De Ente*, Leon. 381:163-170.

⁴² See a full explanation in Kerr, 166-171. Gaven Kerr’s *Aquinas’s Way to God* (Oxford: Oxford Press 2015).

⁴³ *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, qu. 6 (God’s goodness), qu. 20 (God’s love). In *De Ente*, St. Thomas also quotes the Book of Causes: “it is said that the individuation of the First Cause, which is *esse* alone, is through its pure goodness.”

is. In creation, it must be maintained that there is a first Creator.⁴⁴ This is a fitting application of *De Ente*, in which God is pure *esse*, and all other beings derive their *esse* from this First Being.

CONCLUSION

St. Thomas's short treatise, *De Ente et Essentia* provides the explanation that there is a First Cause and all other beings receive from this first simple being. God is the subsisting act of being. Even within the backdrop of basic metaphysical notions especially in chapter four, there is first a logical real distinction between essence and *esse*. Next, in the second and metaphysical argument, the Angelic Doctor shows that if this First Being is, there can only be one Pure Act since all other beings have some element of potency. Finally, this First Being is the First Efficient Cause or else there would be infinite regress among causes. Prior to his theological masterpieces, *De Ente* provides a demonstration that God is because his effects are truly known to us. St. Thomas's explanation of composed substances, immaterial substances, and finally the one First Substance lead to his development of the five ways of proving God's existence, particularly through his second way of efficient causality. God is *Ipsum Esse Subsistens*, and all other beings receive their causality from this First Cause.

At first it may be difficult to see how St. Thomas's early treatise, *De Ente et Essentia*, relates to modern atheism, but it is highly relevant. Not only does this work give us the metaphysical background for the saint's later proof of the existence of God, but also it shows that God's existence can be proven by natural reason alone. Modern thought begins with Descartes's *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore, I am), making man the source of thought, being, and consequently, all reality; progress comes through his own experience. This leaves no room for the necessity of a First Being; following the Cartesian Method, I begin, I continue, and I end – in myself. Yet, this dull horizontal system is in stark contrast to St. Thomas's work, which is refreshingly transcendent, making it surprisingly timely. St. Thomas's unclouded explanation of being provides a deep analysis and proof of God's existence. As the modern world is dominated by constantly increasing and developing technology, St. Thomas's work remains steadfast because it presents unchanging principles. The Church proclaimed in the First Vatican Council (1870) that the existence of God can be known by human reason alone, so let us, the members of the Church, defend God's existence. If atheism and all its many forms can be disproven by natural reason, how can we use the ordering of being, from complex beings to the one simple being, to defend God? St. Thomas shows us the way. Throughout this treatise, *De Ente et Essentia*, he orders all being by explaining and distinguishing the metaphysical notions: *ens* and *essentia*. Therefore, God, the First Being, is the cause of all other beings.

⁴⁴ See chapter seven of Gaven Kerr's *Aquinas's Way to God*.