



Pure and Simple: A Study of the Influence of Avicenna in the Thomistic Doctrine of Divine Simplicity

Tobian Habel Pesik

Centre for Foundational Education, Universitas Pelita Harapan, Jakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: tobianpesik@gmail.com or tobian.pesik@lecturer.uph.edu

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Abstract: *The doctrine of divine simplicity, or the idea that God is simple and not composed of parts, is central to the Thomistic concept of God, and by extension, central to classical Christian theology. This essay seeks to explore the philosophical foundations used by Aquinas in formulating this doctrine, with special attention given to the influence of the Persian philosopher Avicenna. Although Aquinas has biblical and theological motivations in formulating this doctrine, he is nevertheless indebted to Avicenna's philosophy in formulating how divine simplicity is to be understood in relation to the essence-existence distinction, to arguments of God's existence, and to other metaphysical issues in general. Avicenna's view of God's simplicity is an implication of his proof of God's necessary existence. Aquinas, in formulating his own doctrine of divine simplicity, even though unique in his context of formulating a Trinitarian theology, is both formally and materially indebted to Avicenna as regards to formulating God's unity and simplicity, as he follows him structurally and conceptually.*

Keywords: *Aquinas, Avicenna, Divine Simplicity, Essence, Existence.*

Introduction

Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity is, without a doubt, one of the most intricate and puzzling aspects of his thought. It is by no means a simple doctrine to understand (as ironic as that may sound). It is a complex doctrine which has been upheld and championed as the height of metaphysical investigation, as it is naturally the summit of unaided rational theology. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange OP, a well-known twentieth-century Thomistic theologian says of the doctrine: "*Tel est le terme des preuves thomistes de l'existence de Dieu, le terme de la métaphysique ascendante qui s'élève de choses sensibles à Dieu.*"¹ According to Garrigou-Lagrange, the doctrine of simplicity is the metaphysical terminus of the road that ascends from the empirical experience of the sensory world to God. In addition, the doctrine (in its various forms) has been defended as early as the Patristic theologians, followed by the Early and High Middle Ages, and on to the Post-Reformation and Modern-Contemporary eras. Prior to Aquinas, the doctrine had been defended by thinkers such as St. Augustine, St. Anselm, and Boethius.

However, as with every philosophical doctrine, it requires some explanation and elucidation. Aquinas employs biblical-theological resources to support this doctrine, most notably the incident of Moses's encounter with the burning bush in the Old Testament, where God reveals his name. Robert Barron

¹ Garrigou-Lagrange, *La Synthèse Thomiste* (Paris: Brouwer, 1950), 50.

writes, for example, that “For Thomas Aquinas... What God reveals [in the burning bush] is that his essence (who I am) is identical to his existence (I am).”² In addition to this, however, Aquinas also employs extra-biblical sources, particularly from philosophy, in order to nuance his own understanding of the doctrine of simplicity. One of his most important sources, explored in this paper, is Avicenna's philosophy. Aquinas's use of the essence-existence distinction (originally Avicenna's categories) culminates in the identity between essence and existence in God, and as a consequence, Aquinas argues, both in the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, that ‘being’ (*esse*) is properly said of God, and that therefore he is not contained in a genus, nor is he a substance; in other words, God is simple.

The purpose of this essay is to look at how Aquinas is influenced by Avicenna in his formulation of the doctrine of divine simplicity. By studying Aquinas's literature, particularly in the *prima pars* of the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Commentary on the Sentences*, we can see just how influential Avicenna was to Aquinas. As we will see below, the ideas of Avicenna, particularly on the distinction between essence and existence, the concept of necessity, and his arguments for the existence of God, are indispensable for understanding Aquinas's thinking in context.

A brief note should be made regarding the state of scholarship on this topic. The doctrine of divine simplicity has been treated extensively in contemporary Christian literature. Modern scholars, such as James Dolezal (*God Without Parts*) and Edward Feser (*Scholastic Metaphysics*), have revisited its metaphysical foundations, and have articulated and defended the doctrine well. However, what is often missing in both Dolezal and Feser's works is a contextual-historical approach to the issue. They focus on pure metaphysical and theological arguments rather than tracing the origins of the arguments in historical context. On the other hand, scholars such as David Burrell (*Knowing the Unknowable God*) and Jon McGinnis (*Avicenna*), among others, have highlighted Avicenna's influence on Aquinas. This essay therefore situates itself within a long line of inquiry while focusing specifically on the way Aquinas appropriates and transforms Avicenna's metaphysical categories.

Defining Divine Simplicity

Before analysing the contours of the doctrine, it must first be properly defined. Just what is the doctrine of divine simplicity? Perhaps the best way of answering this question is by saying that God is simple, in opposition to any kind of composition. To say that God is simple is to state that He, unlike everything else in creation, is not a composite, since all composites consist of parts and are therefore dependent (and posterior) on those parts. James Dolezal defines a part as “anything in a subject that is less than the whole and without which the subject would be different than it is.”³ Aquinas (following Avicenna, as will be shown below) posits an identity between essence and existence in God, indicating that God is an absolute being and can in no way be dependent or composed of parts. Some of the terms that Aquinas uses throughout his writings to ascribe such a doctrine to God are the terms *actus purus* (pure act) and *ipsum esse subsistens* (subsistent being itself).⁴ Concerning the term ‘pure act,’ Edward Feser writes in his book

² Robert Barron, *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 2008), 81.

³ James Dolezal, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God's Absoluteness* (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 140.

⁴ Sometimes also *ipsum esse per se subsistens*.

Scholastic Metaphysics that “the notion of that which is pure actuality or *actus purus* is the core of Scholastic philosophy’s conception of God, and its existence is the upshot of the key Scholastic arguments for the existence of God.”⁵

Avicenna’s Proof of the Necessary Existent: Going from Existence to Absolute Unity

Before inquiring into Aquinas’s view of the matter, let us take a look at Avicenna’s thoughts. The discussion of God *qua* the First Principle of Being, which is supremely one, has been taken up as a topic of discussion by philosophers before Aquinas and Avicenna. For Aristotle, for example, such a being is the “sort of principle on which the heaven and nature depend,”⁶ and is, therefore, the supreme object of metaphysical speculation. Plotinus had a similar conception of such a being, except that his scheme characterised such a being as the centre from which all other things “emanate.”⁷ Avicenna, being part of the Muslim Peripatetic tradition of philosophy, continues this tradition of inquiry into God’s existence and nature. In this section, we will see how Avicenna’s notion of simplicity is tied into his argument for the existence of such a First Principle of Being, also known as the “proof of the necessarily existent,” both of which are influential to Aquinas’s own view. Avicenna argues for the “proof of the necessary existent” throughout his corpus of writings. The following is a briefly reformulated structure of the argument based on *The Book of Salvation* II. 12:

1. Something exists ([566] ‘Undoubtedly there is existence...’)⁸
2. This existence can either be (a) necessary or (b) possible/contingent
 - i. A necessary being exists by virtue of itself.
 - ii. A possible (or contingent) being derives its existence from something else
3. If it is the case that (a), then a necessary being exists.
4. If it is the case that (b), then the existence of contingent things requires a necessary being (‘...the existence of the possible terminates in a necessarily existent being.’)⁹

For Avicenna, “necessity” is the chief characteristic of God. Majid Fakhry in his book *A History of Islamic Philosophy* writes:

For Ibn Sina, the essential characteristic of this Being, who rises above the contingent entities, is necessity. The proof of its existence is logically bound up with this characteristic since however long the series of contingent entities in the world might be,

⁵ Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 38.

⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. XII. 1072b14. With regard to the term “the heaven,” it must be noted that Aristotle uses that Greek word Οὐρανός, both for the upper universe in contrast to the earthly realm and for the universe *including* the earth. See FC. D. C. Reeve et al., eds., *Introductory Readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy, Second Edition* (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2015), 306.

⁷ For Plotinus, the world of metaphysical beings is “described as a chain of being with a supreme being (“the One”) at the top of the scale, and descending levels in order: Mind (nous), Soul (psyche), and the material world. He conceives of this ladder as a downward path and an upward path.” See John M. Frame, *History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (P & R Publishing Co., 2015), 78-80.

⁸ Avicenna. *The Book of Salvation*. II. 12. Trans. Jon McGinnis. *The Book of Salvation* is also known as *Kitab Al-Nijat* in Arabic.

⁹ Avicenna.

it must terminate ultimately in a necessary principle upon which this series depends. Otherwise, it would not be a contingent series.¹⁰

In this proof, Avicenna observes that the first in a *per se* series of efficient causality must necessarily exist. Developing this idea further, Avicenna also asserts that such a necessity entails unity, and as such, the second major characteristic of the Supreme Being is absolute unity. In *Salvation* II.5, Avicenna states that it cannot be the case that the necessary existent is composed of several different principles or parts. He writes: “We also say it cannot be the case that the necessary existent has principles that are gathered together and the necessary existent is constituted of them; [in other words], it has neither quantitative parts nor the parts of a definition and account...”¹¹ The reason that the necessary existent cannot be composed of parts in any way is that if it were, it would jeopardise its necessity, and by extension, the structure of the proof’s argumentation. Avicenna writes:

That is because with anything described thus, each of its parts is neither the same as any other part nor the same as the composite. So either each of its two parts, for instance, can exist independently, but the composite cannot exist apart from them, and so the composite would not exist necessarily. Or one of them can [exist necessarily], but the composite cannot exist apart from it, and then neither the composite nor the other parts can exist independently, and so again [the necessary existent] would not exist necessarily. But it is precisely the necessary existent that can exist necessarily!¹²

Avicenna argues, rightly, that anything composed of parts must necessarily be dependent and posterior to those parts, since anything composed of parts (metaphysical or physical) must be caused to be composed, and would therefore not be ultimate. In the same passage, Avicenna states:

I have already explained this, that is, the parts are essentially prior to the whole, and so the cause necessitating existence would first necessitate the parts and then the whole, and none of them would exist necessarily. We cannot say that the whole is essentially prior to the parts, and so it is either later or simultaneous - how could it be?! - since then it would not exist necessarily.¹³

Avicenna further argues that because the necessary existent is not composed of parts, it is therefore “not a body, nor any matter of a body, nor a form of a body, nor an intelligible matter of an intelligible form, nor an intelligible form in an intelligible matter, nor divisible... and so it is one from these three perspectives.”¹⁴ The necessary existent cannot exist as a unity resulting from a composition of different parts. Rather, the necessary existent must exist as a necessary, uncaused, and most importantly, an uncomposed unity. The strongest form of such unity, according to Avicenna, is the identity between essence and existence in the necessary existent. God is not composed of essence and existence, but rather in God existence *just is* the essence. Fakhry comments:

Such a unity excludes every mode of composition, including the composition of essence (*mahiyah: quidditas*) and existence, since only entities which are contingent can admit of

¹⁰ Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (Columbia University Press, 1970), 173.

¹¹ Avicenna. *The Book of Salvation*. II. 5.

¹² Avicenna.

¹³ Avicenna.

¹⁴ Avicenna.

such composition, in so far as existence belongs to them by virtue of their dependence upon their cause, rather than by virtue of their own essence.¹⁵

Because God is a unity, God cannot exist as composed in any way, shape, or form. God cannot be a unity of matter and form, substance and accident, nature and supposit, or least of all, essence and existence. Rather, in God, essence is identical to existence. God's essence is *to exist*. The main reason behind this, as the quote by Fakhry suggests, is to safeguard God's being from any kind of causality. God is the First Principle of Being, and being absolutely necessary, he must be absolutely uncaused, and the only way to be completely uncaused is to be uncomposed. Jon McGinnis summarises this important point succinctly:

Neither can the necessary through itself be some composite of internal constitutive principles, such as form and matter, or genus and difference, or the like. That is because, as has already been seen, wholes or composites exist through their parts, but again parts are other than the whole... In short, concludes Avicenna, if there is something that is necessary through itself, it must be absolutely unique, utterly simple, and wholly devoid of any composition.¹⁶

Aquinas's Doctrine of Divine Simplicity and Avicenna's Influence

As we have seen, Avicenna's doctrine of God's simplicity (or absolute unity) is bound together with his proof of the existence of God as the necessary being. Such an implication is seen in Aquinas as well. For Aquinas, as for Avicenna, the simplicity of God is also necessarily bound together with the arguments used to prove his existence. Aquinas's arguments, found in question 2 of the *prima pars* (particularly q. 2. a. 3) offers no such possibility for an act-potency composition in God. In the argument from motion, for example, the argument relies on an understanding of 'motion' not in the sense of local motion but rather that "motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality."¹⁷ According to Aquinas, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another, but if that by which it is put in motion is itself in motion, we must continue to look for that by which it is put in motion. Of course, there cannot be an infinite number of caused causes (or "moved movers") in a causal series subordinated *per se* and not *per accidens*, and so we must necessarily arrive at a first mover not put in motion by another. Such a first mover, however, a mover which cannot be reduced from potency to act, must necessarily be *actus purus* or pure act, since that which is totally in act cannot be determined to any further actuality.

God is, at least from the arguments provided in question 2, pure actuality. In the various subsequent articles of question 3, Aquinas sees the consequences of denoting God as pure act with regards to the different modes of composition in the order of being. Aquinas agrees with Avicenna in saying that God is not a body and that he is not composed of matter and form. The culmination in denying all the compositions of act and potency in the different orders of being is to finally deny the composition of essence and existence

¹⁵ Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. 174.

¹⁶ Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 164–165.

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. I. q. 2. a. 3.

in God. In utilising the essence-existence distinction that he inherits from Avicenna, Aquinas claims that in God essence and existence are identical; God's very essence or nature is *to be*. A grasp of what the essence-existence distinction entails is important for us to understand Aquinas's argument.

The roots of Aquinas's use of the essence-existence distinction itself can be traced back to Avicenna. The classic example of Avicenna's argumentation for the essence-existence distinction can be found in his work *Remarks and Admonitions* III, Class IV, Ch. VI, where he says: "You must know that you understand the concept of triangle while in doubt as to whether or not concrete existence is attributed to triangle. This is after triangle is represented to you as constituted of a line and a surface and is not represented to you as existing."¹⁸ Avicenna's distinction between a thing's essence and its existence had a direct influence on Aquinas. In the *De Ente et Essentia* Aquinas uses a similar example, with a phoenix as its object: "I can understand what a man is or what a phoenix is and nevertheless not know whether either has existence in reality. Therefore, it is clear that existence is something other than the essence or quiddity, and this thing must be one and primary."¹⁹ Concerning Avicenna's essence-existence distinction, David Burrell comments:

Ibn Sina's discussions of *existing* (*mawjud* or *anniyya*) as distinct from *essence* (*mahiyya*) are all in the context of distinguishing necessary being (*wajib al-wujud*) from possible being (*mumkin al-wujud*)... There is only one whose existence is necessary, and that one, "the first, has no essence (*mahiyya*) except its existence (*anniyya*)."²⁰

In the process of distinguishing contingent being from necessary being, Avicenna identifies a new mode of composition in all things contingent, namely that of essence and that which makes a thing *to be*. Existence is the principle that must come to an essence to make it a fully subsisting being. In the same article David Burrell notes that, due to some confusion in translation at the time (the Arabic verb "to happen to" or "come to", like the Latin *accidere*, translates to 'accident'), many believed that Avicenna had characterised existence as a kind of accident, counting it as another one in Aristotle's categories. Burrell writes: "Yet it took Aquinas's radically new metaphysical step in his early *De Ente* to fashion an adequate response by removing *existing* (*esse*) from the entire slate of Aristotelian categories, proposing that it be understood in terms of the master-analogy of actuality/potentiality."²¹

Aquinas here views the distinction between essence and existence, as he does also for act and potency, to be a real distinction, and he gives a causal demonstration for denying this composition in God. He writes:

whatever a thing has besides its essence must be caused either by the constituent principles of that essence, or by some exterior agent. Therefore, if the existence of a thing differs from its essence, this existence must be caused either by some exterior agent or by its essential principles. Now it is impossible for a thing's existence to be caused by its essential constituent principles, for nothing can be the sufficient cause of its own existence, if its existence is caused. Therefore, that thing, whose existence differs from its essence, must

¹⁸ Avicenna, *Remarks and Admonitions*. Fourth Cl. Ch. 6.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*. Ch. IV

²⁰ David B Burrell, "Aquinas and Islamic and Jewish Thinkers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 65-66.

²¹ Burrell, 69.

have its existence caused by another. But this cannot be true of God; because we call God the first efficient cause. Therefore, it is impossible that in God His existence should differ from His essence.²²

Whatever a particular thing has besides its essence, be they essential or accidental properties, must arise either from that essence or from some agent exterior to it. Since there is a real distinction between essence and existence, it must necessarily arise out of the essence or must then be exterior to it. The former is, of course, impossible, since for a thing to be the sufficient cause of its own existence is absurd. It therefore must be caused by something exterior. But God is the first and necessary being, and absolutely so, and so there is no distinction between his essence and existence.

Like Avicenna, Aquinas allows the theoretical structure of his proofs for God's existence to inform his account of the nature of God. Aquinas introduces the act-potency scheme to this order of being. Aquinas states in article 4 that "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. Therefore, existence must be compared to essence, if the latter is a distinct reality, as actuality to potentiality."²³ However, since there is no potentiality in God, it follows that it cannot be that in Him essence is not identical to existence. Aquinas also argues further, by appealing to his arguments in article 3, that there is no supposit-nature composition in God; since it is already established that God is not composed of form and matter (i.e. that He is immaterial), the composition of supposit and essence in the material order does not apply to God. Participation is also denied of God: "...just as that which has fire, but is not itself fire, is on fire by participation; so that which has existence but is not existence, is a being by participation."²⁴ That which has existence, but is not existence or being itself (*ipsum esse*), is a being by participation. But God, being first and absolute, cannot have existence by participation, since that would mean his status of being 'absolute' and 'first' would have to be forfeited.

In light of the essence-existence identity in God, the doctrine of simplicity (for both Aquinas and Avicenna) falls into some *prima facie* oddities. In his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Aquinas asks the question of whether being (*esse*) is properly said of God and whether God is in the category/genus of substance, in d. 8 q. 1 a. 1 and q. 4 a. 2 respectively. This first oddity is treated in a parallel text in the *De Potentia Dei* q. 7. a. 2, where he asks whether God's essence or substance is the same as his existence, and in the *Summa Theologiae* I q. 4. a. 1. ad 3., where he argues that existence (*esse*) is the most perfect of all things. This section examines his article in the *Commentary on the Sentences*. It may seem dubious to properly name a thing after its act of existence, but Aquinas justifies that it is proper to name God after his act of existence through the doctrine of simplicity. In the *sed contra*, Aquinas again appeals to the authority of Sacred Scripture, namely the passage found in Exodus 3:14 where God reveals his name to Moses. He agrees with St. John of Damascus in saying that "'He Who Is' is the name of God proper in the highest degree."²⁵ Throughout the *corpus* of the article, Aquinas gives several reasons,

²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. I. q. 3. a. 4.

²³ Aquinas.

²⁴ Aquinas.

²⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, D. 8. Q. 1. A. 1., *sed contra*.

appealing to thinkers like St. Jerome, St. John of Damascus, and Dionysius. Most fittingly, however, he appeals to Avicenna and his essence-existence distinction (or rather, in this case, the identity of essence and existence in God). Aquinas writes:

...since in everything which is there can be considered its quiddity through which it subsists in a determinate nature and its being in virtue of which it is said of it that it is in act, then this name “thing” is imposed on the thing from its quiddity, [and] according to Avicenna this name “who is/that which is” or “being” is imposed from its act of being. Since, however, it is the case that in any created being its essence differs from its being, that thing is properly denominated by its quiddity and not by the act of being, as human being by humanity. However, in God His very being is His quiddity. And for this reason, the name taken from being names Him properly and is His proper name, just as the proper name of a human being which is taken from its quiddity.²⁶

According to Avicenna (insofar as his arguments can be found in *Metaphysics* Bk. II Ch. I) things are composed of their quiddity (or essence, or “whatness”) and their act of being. In created beings, there is a real distinction between quiddity and existence, and so we must denote a creature from its quiddity. However, since God is simple, his very act of being is his essence. As such it makes sense to denote God through his act of existence as his most appropriate name. Here we see that Aquinas’s use of Avicenna extends beyond proving God’s existence and characterising his simplicity, but also to the manner in which to name God.

A second oddity is the issue of whether God is in the genus or category of substance. Aquinas treats this issue in d. 8. q. 4, a. 2. Aquinas argues that God cannot be in the genus of substance. “Whatever is in a genus,” says Aquinas,

either is as the most general or is as something contained under it. But God is not in the genus of substance as the most general because He would be predicated of all substances; nor also [is He] as something contained under the genus because He would imply some addition above the genus and in this way the divine essence would not be the most simple. Therefore, God is not in the genus of substance.²⁷

Aquinas seems to be arguing both for the fact that God is not a substance (in the traditional Aristotelian sense) and that God is not composed of genus and species, both of which he also treats in the *Summa Theologiae*. Could it be that God is not a substance? Would that not make God into an abstract? Aquinas argues that God is not a substance in the sense that ‘substance’ denotes that which is composed together with accidents. Substance in this sense is to accidents as potency is to act, since as James Dolezal argues, “every subject is, in some sense, made actual by its accidents.”²⁸

Those with a strong theistic background might object and say that surely God must be characterised as a substance, otherwise, the only other option would be to characterise him as an abstract. In response to this, it should be noted that Aquinas does indeed refer to God as a substance, insofar as “substance” means a concrete particular, i.e., a fully subsisting subject. However, God is improperly called a substance if

²⁶ Aquinas.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, d. 8. q. 4. a. 2.

²⁸ Dolezal, *God Without Parts*, 59.

substance refers to that which stands under and supports various accidents.²⁹ It is important to note that, per the analogy of being, accidents necessarily exist as parts of a fully-subsisting being, and are attributed as ‘beings’ in an analogically weak sense. John F. Wippel writes: “Higher in their claim upon *being*, but still with only a fragile degree of being since they exist only in something else, are quantity, qualities, and the properties of substance. Highest in its degree of *being* is substance, that which is most perfect because it enjoys being in itself.”³⁰ In light of this statement, it is appropriate to call God ‘substance.’ However, in so far as it refers to substance in relation to accidents, it is more appropriate to call God a subsistence.

Even so, the oddity still remains; since God is not even in any genus, even the genus of substance, God is at risk of being indefinable. But Aquinas, following of course the traditions of the church fathers, theologians, and mystics before him, but most importantly following Avicenna, characterises God in precisely this way. Aquinas writes:

The third, more subtle reason is that of Avicenna... Everything in a genus has a quiddity different from its existence... In God, however, His being *is* his quiddity, for otherwise, it would occur to the quiddity and in this way, it would have been acquired by Him from another and He would not have existence through His essence. And for this reason, God cannot be in some genus.³¹

In the *Remarks and Admonitions*, Avicenna explicitly states that the necessary in existence is neither a species nor a genus. He states: “The conclusion of this is that that whose existence is necessary is one in accordance with the specification of its essence and in no way can it be stated of many.”³² For both thinkers, the rationale behind this argument is that everything in a genus must agree in quiddity but differ in existence; all things that agree in genus differ in being. But insofar as existence and quiddity (or nature) are identical in God, he cannot possibly be a member of any species and therefore cannot be in a genus. Some may object by saying that if God really cannot be contained in a genus, then it puts him beyond all categories of human definition. Fakhry comments:

Having no distinct essence, the Necessary Being has also no genus and no *differentia*. Now an entity of this kind is *indefinable* and indemonstrable and neither its being nor its action can be an object of discursive thought, since it is without cause, quality, position, or time. Furthermore, it is without equal.³³

Such a about a conception of God is found in a way into the philosophical theology of Avicenna, and by extension to Aquinas; one might call it a kind of negative or “apophatic” theology. For example, Avicenna writes in the *Remarks and Admonitions* that: “The First has no alike, no contrary, no genus, and no difference. Thus it has no definition and cannot be indicated except by pure intellectual knowledge.”³⁴

²⁹ In *De Ente et Essentia* ch.1, Aquinas distinguishes between simple and composite substances. The former refers to the human soul and angels (or pure intellects). The latter refers to corporeal substances, which consist of matter and form. What makes one kind of substance different from another is the intrinsic structure of essence-existence. God is not a substance in both sense of the term for in God not even a composition between essence and existence is there; they are identical.

³⁰ John F Wippel, “Metaphysics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 91.

³¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences*, d. 8. q. 4. a. 2.

³² Avicenna, *Remarks and Admonitions*. Fourth Cl. Ch. 20

³³ Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. 174. Emphasis mine.

³⁴ Avicenna, *Remarks and Admonitions*. Fourth Cl. Ch. 27

When one analyses Aquinas's arguments for divine simplicity in the *De Deo Uno* treatise, one will also find a similar kind of apophaticism, as Aquinas removes step-by-step any attempt to define God based on compositional categories, in an order starting from a negation of act and potency, bodily parts, form and matter, supposit and nature, genus and species, substance and accident, and finally essence and existence (the last of which Aquinas makes an *identity* of in God's being, rather than *removing* the categories). Robert Barron comments on Aquinas's entire approach to the doctrine of God this way: "the doctrine of God that Thomas develops in the *Summa* is really an anti-doctrine, that is to say, a consistent display of what God is not. Like a sculptor, Aquinas carefully carves away from our notion of God anything that smacks of the creaturely, the finite, the particular."³⁵ Although outside of the scope of this paper, I would argue that most of the negative or apophatic elements of Aquinas's theology is indebted to Avicenna, insofar as one can see how apophatic descriptions of God stem from arguments for God's existence and subsequent consequences of his simplicity. Such a conceptual move from proofs to consequences is both formally and materially found first in Avicenna and later in Aquinas.

One important thing to consider: it is striking to see that in *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 3, where Aquinas systematically treats divine simplicity, he does not explicitly cite Avicenna. One might ask why Aquinas avoided or neglected to mention Avicenna, given his indebtedness to Avicenna's thought as just discussed above. Several points need to be highlighted. First, the *Summa Theologiae* was essentially a pedagogical work, intended to be read by novices entering the Order of Preachers. When the *Summa* was composed towards the late stages of Aquinas' career, certain philosophical concepts (especially those stemming from Avicenna and Aristotle) had already become foundational to the debates within the University of Paris, to the point that they were treated as "common property" rather than foreign ideas needed to be re-explained. Throughout the *Summa*, it was Aquinas' habit to reserve explicit citations for when he is *disagreeing* with someone (like his frequent sparring with Averroes on the intellect) or when he needs a specific heavyweight quote to support a controversial *sed contra* section. Since the identity of essence and existence in God was becoming a standard (though debated) piece of metaphysical discourse, he felt no more need to cite Avicenna than a modern physicist feels the need to cite Newton every time gravity is mentioned. However, such for-grantedness pushes all the more necessary to trace latent ideas to their sources, lest they become analysed without historical context.

It's worth noting that in his earlier, more "academic" work *De Ente et Essentia*, Aquinas is much more transparent about his debt to Avicenna, such as in the following quote:

Avicenna says (*Metaphysics* 5.5) that the quiddity of a simple thing is the simple thing itself, because there is no other thing to receive the form. The second difference is that the essences of composite things, because they are received in designate matter, are multiplied according to the division of matter, and so it happens that some such things are the same in species but different in number. But since the essence of a simple thing is not received in matter, there can be no such multiplication in this case, and so among such substances we do not find many individuals of the same species, but rather there are as many species as there are individuals, as Avicenna expressly says in *Metaphysics* 5.2.³⁶

³⁵ Barron, *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, 77.

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, Ch. 4.4.

Both the *Summa* and the *De Ente et Essentia* discuss the issue of the essence of a simple existent, however in the *De Ente* Aquinas is more explicit concerning the genealogy of his ideas and arguments, including but not limited to his debt to Avicenna. This is because the *De Ente* is a more “academic” work while the *Summa* is a work of ecclesial, sacred doctrine, and thus his bibliographic priorities are not always the same throughout his works.

Where Aquinas Differs

It is clear that throughout Aquinas’s treatment of the doctrine of divine simplicity, he is heavily influenced by the thought of Avicenna. However, it must also be noted that Aquinas takes what he can from Avicenna’s thoughts and takes them in a new direction. One such significant point of divergence is in this last point previously mentioned. Though both Aquinas and Avicenna share many points of similitude concerning God’s simplicity, Aquinas takes God’s indefinability as a departure point to assert the analogy of being. Writing on the perennial problem of univocity vs. equivocity vs. analogy in relation to the doctrine of God, Herman Bavinck comments in his systematic theology that:

Because God is pure being—the absolute, perfect, unique, and simple being—we cannot define him; there is no genus to which he belongs as a member, no specific marks of distinction whereby we can distinguish him from other beings in this genus. Even the being God shares with all creatures is not to be understood univocally as identical but analogically and proportionally.³⁷

Bavinck’s quote encapsulates the Thomistic approach to the doctrine of God. From proofs, to simplicity, to analogy. Notice here how the doctrine of divine simplicity for Aquinas is inextricably bound with the idea of the *analogia entis*; this is in contrast to the position of Avicenna, who favours univocal predication of being, or the univocity of being. Avicenna, unlike Aquinas, does not take it to the last step. He starts with proofs, moves on to prove simplicity, but rests on the indefinability of God.³⁸ Furthermore, for Avicenna, divine simplicity flows from the necessity and unity of the First Principle, but his metaphysics tends toward emanationist cosmology. Aquinas, by contrast, integrates Avicenna’s categories into a specifically Trinitarian and Christological framework, grounding divine simplicity not only in metaphysical reasoning but also in biblical revelation (Exodus 3:14), the act–potency scheme, and a theology of Trinitarian Christology (as he does in the next section of the *Summa* after discussing the unity of God).³⁹

³⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2011), 176.

³⁸ In the *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*, Aquinas writes: “the idea of negation is always based on an affirmation, as evinced by the fact that every negative proposition is proved by an affirmative; therefore, unless the human mind knew something positively about God, it would be unable to deny anything about him. And it would know nothing if nothing that it affirmed about God were positively verified about him.” Aquinas makes room for negative theology, following the steps of Avicenna, but does not think that God is entirely indefinable, as seen from this quotation. See *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei*. Q. 7. A. 5. C. 7.

³⁹ The teleological end of Aquinas’s discussion of God’s simplicity is ultimately part of a larger aim, that is to reflect on the mystery of the Divine Trinity. Scott R. Swain says: “Though indispensable contributions may be found in the theologies of the Eastern fathers, pride of place in articulating a trinitarian concept of person belongs to the tradition of reflection that stems from Augustine through Boethius and reaches its apogee in Thomas Aquinas.” Scott R. Swain, “Divine Trinity,” chapter, in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016), 78–106, 94.

Thomas F. O'Meara argues: "The theological vocation of Thomas Aquinas and the religious context of the friar's presence in university life offer the setting for all the philosophical writings."⁴⁰ Seeing it this way, Aquinas goes beyond Avicenna, "baptising" his metaphysics of being, and employing it in the service of a sustained Trinitarian theological discourse. The Thomistic doctrine of divine simplicity is therefore both indebted to Avicenna and decisively distinct from him. Such a topic, however, is outside the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that it is undeniable that Aquinas is indebted to Avicenna in his formulation of the doctrine, and this essay seeks to point out those influences as found in the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Commentary on the Sentences*.

Conclusion

Ultimately, tracing the line of inheritance from Avicenna to Thomas Aquinas reveals that medieval Christian scholasticism's most robust defense of divine simplicity was built upon an Islamic philosophical foundation, developed through a mutual refinement of traditional Greek philosophical categories. By repurposing Avicenna's radical distinction between essence and existence (*esse* and *essentia*), Aquinas did not merely adopt a foreign conceptual tool; he transformed it into the very engine of his own theology, using the Persian philosopher's metaphysics to anchor the absolute unity of the Christian God. While Aquinas ultimately navigated this doctrine within a specifically Trinitarian framework—allowing absolute simplicity to coexist with a plurality of divine Persons—this profound cross-cultural debt nonetheless challenges traditional historiographical narratives of an isolated Western theological development. In the final analysis, Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity stands not as a rejection of Islamic intellectual contributions, but as a monument to their synthesis, proving that the summit of high medieval Christian thought was the sophisticated product of a cross-confessional intellectual dialogue between history's greatest minds.

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⁴⁰ Thomas F. O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas, Theologian* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 29.

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