AQUINAS’S FOURTH WAY: 
FROM GRADATIONS OF BEING

I. THE DATUM: GRADATIONS OF BEING

AQUINAS: “The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like.”

A. The Transcendentals: Being, Goodness, and the True

- Aquinas has in mind being and those aspects of being that transcend all individuals and the Aristotelian categories of substance and accidents. Each of the transcendentals designate one and the same thing, being, but under a different aspect.

- **Goodness.** Goodness is being considered under the aspect of that which is desirable. The good is that which is perfective of a thing’s nature. What is perfective of a thing’s nature is what will help a thing be what it is meant to be—to fully actualize its nature. Now, all things desire their own perfection. Therefore, all things desire what is going to make them fully be the kind of thing they are meant to be. And since the good is that which will make something fully be the kind of thing it is meant to be, the good is that which all things desire. See *Summa Theologiae* I:5:1.

- **Truth.** Truth is being considered under the aspect of that “quality present in any being in virtue of which it can be grasped by intellect, or, to put in other terms, the intelligibility of being” (Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 471). In other words, anything that exists in some way has an aptitude to be an object of knowledge. And since intelligibility, or truth, is found wherever being is found, truth and being are convertible.

B. The Gradations of the Transcendentals

- **Being.** Accidents are more restricted in being than substances, since accidents can only have being inasmuch as they exist in a substance. A substance has independent existence in a way that accidents do not. It doesn’t exist in something else like an accident does. Both a corporeal being and an incorporeal being have being, but the latter more than the former. A corporeal being is a composite of matter and form whereas an incorporeal being is not. A creature exists and God exists, but unlike God in a creature essence and existence are distinct.
• **Goodness.** We judge that a plant is good and an animal is good, but we also judge that an animal is better than a plant. The reason for this judgment is that an animal has more perfections than a plant (not only assimilation of nutrients, growth, and reproduction, but also sensory powers and self-motion). And, of course, we judge that humans are even higher in goodness than plants and animals, since humans possess even higher perfections (e.g., intellect and will). Notice that being is less and less limited as we ascend the hierarchy of being.

• **Truth.** Like goodness, the gradations of truth depend on the degree of being present in a thing. The more limited a being is, the less intelligibility there is to be conformed to an intellect. The less limited a being is, the more intelligibility there is to be conformed to an intellect. For example, there is more being to be known in a plant than there is in a rock. There is more being in an animal to be known than in a plant, and still further in a human, and even further in a purely spiritual being like an angel.

II. THE ARGUMENT: PART ONE (Dialectical)

*AQUINAS:* “But "more" and "less" are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in Metaph. ii.”

A. Approach #1: Ascent Up the Hierarchy of Being

**P1:** If there exists a gradation of beings that range from the more limited to the less limited, then it’s reasonable to conclude that there exists an unlimited being.

**P2:** There exists a gradation of beings from the more limited to the less limited.

E.g., plant, animal, human, angel, etc.

**C1:** Therefore, it’s reasonable to conclude that there exists an unlimited being.

B. Approach #2: Comparative Judgments of More and Less for Beings Insofar as they are Beings

**Step One:**

**P1:** Whatever comparative judgment is made it is made based on some standard.
e.g., Car A vs. Car B (insofar) -> being a car

e.g., Oak tree A vs. Oak tree B (insofar) -> being an oak tree
e.g., Lawn grass A vs. Lawn grass B (insofar) -> being grass.
e.g., Oak tree vs. grass (insofar) -> vegetative being.

e.g., dog A vs. dog B (insofar as dog) -> being a dog.
e.g., ape A vs. ape B (insofar as ape) -> being an ape.
e.g., ape vs. dog (insofar) -> sentient being.

e.g., animal life vs. vegetative life (insofar) -> animate being
e.g., rational animal vs. non-rational animal (insofar) -> animate being.

e.g., angel vs. human being (insofar) -> intellectual being.

**P2: Comparative judgments for different modes of being are made**

- e.g., animate being vs. inanimate being
- e.g., sentient being vs. vegetative being
- e.g., intellectual being vs. non-intellectual being

**C1: Therefore, comparative judgments for different modes of being are made based on some standard—the standard of being itself.**

- e.g., animate being vs. inanimate being (insofar) -> being
- e.g., sentient being vs. vegetative being (insofar) -> being
- e.g., intellectual being vs. non-intellectual being (insofar) -> being

**Step Two:**

**P3: The standard by which we make comparative judgments is the maximum of the description under which things are being compared.**

- e.g., Oak tree -> the fullness of what it means to be an oak tree.
e.g., Grass -> the fullness of what it means to be grass.
e.g., Vegetative life -> the fullness of what it means to have vegetative life.
e.g., Dog -> the fullness of what it means to be a dog.
e.g., Ape -> the fullness of what it means to be an ape.
e.g., Animal Life -> the fullness of what it means to have animal life.
e.g., Life -> the fullness of what it means to be a living being.
P4: Comparative judgments for different modes of being are made based on the standard of being (from C1).

C3: Therefore, the standard by which we make comparative judgments for different modes of being is the maximum of being (maximum of not just one mode of being but the maximum of being itself—not restricted to any mode of being).

III. THE ARGUMENT: PART TWO (Metaphysical)

*AQUINAS*: “Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.”

Step One

P1: If there exists gradations (varying degrees) of being in things, then the things that are graded have being in a limited way.

_P1 Validation:_
1. Whatever doesn’t exhaust the fullness of being has being in a limited way.
2. Things that have being in graded modes don’t exhaust the fullness of being.
3. Therefore, things that have being in graded modes have being in a limited way.

P2: X has a graded mode of being (e.g., Fido compared to rational animal).

C1: Therefore, X has being in a limited way.

Step Two

P3: Whatever has being in a limited way has its act of being per accidens.

_P3 Validation:_
1. Whatever perfection a thing has per se cannot be possessed in a limited way (e.g., the essence of a triangle doesn’t have three straight sides to a more or less degree).
2. On supposition a thing has being in a limited way.
3. Therefore, on supposition that thing doesn’t have being per se (it has it per accidens).

P4: X has being in a limited way (e.g., animal).

C2: Therefore, X has being per accidens.

Step Three
P5: Whatever has being per accidens has its nature (essence) conjoined to an act of being (existence) by an extrinsic cause at every moment it exists.

**P5 Validation:**
1. The conjoining (which must be at every moment it exists) is either due to the diverse principles themselves, to nothing, or to an extrinsic unifying cause.
2. Can’t be due to the diverse principles themselves (not nature because act of being is per accidens; not the act of being because there are other kinds of beings).
3. Can’t be due to nothing (if nothing to distinguish between non-unity and unity, then non-unity).
4. Therefore, the conjoining must be due to an extrinsic unifying cause (at every moment it exists).

P6: X has its act of being per accidens (from C2).

C3: Therefore, at every moment X exists it has its nature (essence) conjoined to an act of being by a concurrent extrinsic cause, call it CEC-A.

**Step Four**

P7: Either CEC-A has its act of being per se or has its act of being per accidens.

P8: If CEC-A has its act of being per se, then CEC-A is God.

P9: If CEC-A has its act of being per accidens, then at every moment CEC-A exists it would have its nature conjoined to an act of being by an concurrent extrinsic cause, call it CEC-B (see P5 validation; the same would apply to CEC-B if it had being per accidens).

**Step Five**

P10: The series of CECs either exists with at least one CEC that has its act of being per se or exists without a CEC that has its act of being per se.

P11: The series of CECs cannot exist without at least one CEC that has its act of being per se.

**P11 validation:**
1. If the series existed with no CEC that has its act of being per se, then there would be no source from which the concurrent CECs in the series could derive their act of being.
2. If there were no source from which the CECs could derive their act of being, then no CEC in the series would have being.
3. But at least one CEC does have being, namely CEC-A (from C3).
4. Therefore, there must be a source from which the CECs in the series derive their act of being.
5. Therefore, the series of CECs must exist with at least one CEC that has its act of being per se.
C4: Therefore, either CEC-A has its act of being per se (from P8), or the series of CECs exists with a CEC that has its act of being per se (from P10 & P11).