



Reconsidering Arabic Roots for the *Tertia Via*

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Abstract

This paper reopens the debate on the possibility that Aquinas borrowed his *tertia via* from a Latin translation of Maimonides' 'Guide for the Perplexed'. After introducing the text of the *tertia via*, I shall analyze the first part and conclude that while a 'metaphysical', tenseless reading is correct, we should not be nervous to call Aquinas's reasoning for what it is: flawed. Framing the problematic passage in its historical context, I shall then argue that the flaw lies not so much with Aquinas, but with the source he was borrowing from. This is Maimonides' *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn* ("The Guide for the Perplexed"), and in fact more specifically the blame is to be given to an early translator into Latin.

Keywords

Tertia via • Maimonides • Avicenna • contingency

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Amicus Aquinas, sed magis amica veritas

There is an "enigmatic"¹ argumentation in the first part of the third proof for the existence of God, that Thomas Aquinas offers in his *Summa Theologiae*. Freely translated, it reads "if everything is possible not to be, then at some time nothing was." Already a hundred years ago, scholars held exhaustive debates on the correct interpretation of this sentence.² And it is not like scholars have been silent since then.³ In this paper I would like to reopen the debate, specifically by looking at the possibility that Aquinas may have borrowed it from a Latin translation of Maimonides' *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn* ("The Guide for the Perplexed"), rather than having come up himself with this non sequitur. Influence of Maimonides (and Avicenna) on this first part of the proof has been dismissed in the past, but this dismissal could not take into account all the relevant source material, which we can do now, thanks to continued efforts at

¹ F. van Steenberghe, *Le problème de l'existence de Dieu dans les écrits de S. Thomas d'Aquin* (Louvain-la-neuve: Éditions de l'institut supérieur de philosophie, 1980), 194.

² P. Géný, 'A Propos des preuves thomistes de l'existence de Dieu', in: *Revue de philosophie* 31 (1924), 575-601. He opens by saying "Il semble que tout a été dit sur les preuves de l'existence de Dieu [...] surtout celui de la *Somme théologique*, ont été l'objet de l'étude la plus attentive et la plus minutieuse."

³ For entry into the history of the modern scholarly debate, I recommend F. Kerr, 'Recent Thomistica', Part I, in: *New Blackfriars* 83 (2002), 52-72; R. te Velde, *Aquinas on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 37-60.

critical editing and, of course, digitization of old editions and manuscripts.⁴ In particular, a close reading and textual comparison has, surprisingly, not been done before.

An additional reason to reopen this debate, using a historical approach, is to resist certain tendencies in Aquinas' renewed popularity,⁵ which has been called a rise of 'theoretical Thomism'.⁶ This is a more rigid, neo-scholastic portrayal of Aquinas as a genius whose "crystal-clear logic" does not tolerate dissension.⁷ It finds a broad audience, popular among educated laymen.⁸ This has allowed for expositions of Aquinas' works that have less and less to do with historical reality. This challenge, along with a rebuttal, has not been new. Already in 1998, Rudi te Velde responded to a book by Norman Kretzmann, saying that it "is a valuable contribution to contemporary [...] theology [...] however, it does contribute less to our understanding of Aquinas's thought."⁹ Most recently, Gaven Kerr made a similar effort for the *tertia via*, arguing forcefully that it is "problematic to read Aquinas' more general metaphysical thought in light of contemporary developments in modal metaphysics."¹⁰ It is in this context that I find continued discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of Aquinas' texts and thoughts to be highly valuable, in particular by adopting a historical, text-based approach.

After introducing the text of the *tertia via*, I shall analyze the first part and conclude that while a 'metaphysical', tenseless reading is correct, we should not be nervous to call Aquinas' reasoning for what it is: flawed. Framing the problematic passage in its historical context, I shall then argue that the flaw lies not so much with Aquinas, but with the source he was borrowing from. This is Maimonides' *Dalālat al-*

⁴ What once could be considered an exhausting, final word on the matter of the source of the *tertia via*, is now only a helpful aid: M. Gonzalez, *El problema de las fuentes de la "Tercera Via" de Santo Tomas de Aquino* (Madrid: Convento de San Pedro Mártir, 1961).

⁵ Aidan Nichols spoke of a 'new renaissance', A. Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 142. See also M. Levering, M. Plested (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), esp. xv-xix. This is a sharp turnaround from the '90s, see the bleak picture painted in D. Hudson, D. Moran (eds.), *The Future of Thomism* (New York: American Maritain Association, 1992).

⁶ G. Ventimiglia, *Aquinas after Frege* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1-11. Cf. the self-designated school of thought 'Analytical Thomism', M. Pugh, C. Paterson (eds.), *Analytical Thomism: Traditions in Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 2006). See also the four-part 'Recent Thomistica' by Fergus Kerr published in *New Blackfriars*, 2002-2006.

⁷ See J. Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 44;

⁸ See for example M. Fradd, R. Delfino, *Does God Exist? A Socratic Dialogue on the Five Ways of Thomas Aquinas* (St. Louis: Enroute, 2018). Matt Fradd is also the host of the 'Pints with Aquinas' podcast, another prime example of the ways in which a strict reading of Aquinas is used for navigating today's world, cf. K. Dugan, 'Manly Natural Family Planning: Cultivating Catholic Masculinity', in: *American Catholic Studies* 132:2 (2021), 34-38, which uses the podcast as an example. Another initiative worth mentioning in this regard is the 'Thomistic Institute' which "exists to promote Catholic truth" using Aquinas as a "touchstone", selling t-shirts with *Ite ad Thomam* ('Go to Thomas') as promotional materials: <https://thomisticinstitute.org>

⁹ R. te Velde, 'Aquinas's "Summa Contra Gentiles": A Metaphysics of Theism? A Critical Study', in: *Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales* 65:1 (1998), 176-187, esp. 180-181.

¹⁰ G. Kerr, 'Aquinas's Third Way', in: *Maynooth Philosophical Papers* 11 (2022), 1-20, esp. p. 4.

ḥā'irīn ("The Guide for the Perplexed"), and in fact more specifically the blame is to be given to an early translator into Latin.

1. *Tertia Via*: Text and Argumentation

Most articles on the third proof start with a simple translation, more or less divided analytically. It is, nevertheless, quite hard to objectively divide up the *tertia via* analytically. Since we need to refer to specific parts of the proof, let us therefore start off with a syntactic division into phrases. The text runs as follows:

#	Translation	Original
1	The third way is from possibility and necessity,	Tertia via est sumpta ex possibili et necessario
2	and runs thus.	quae talis est
3	We find among things some	Invenimus enim in rebus quaedam
4	that are possible to be and not to be,	quae suntabilia esse et non esse
5	since they are found to be generated and to corrupt, and consequently, [they are] possible to be and not to be.	cum quaedam inveniantur generari et corrumpi et per consequensabilia esse et non esse
6	But it is impossible	Impossibile est
7	that all that is, is as such	autem omnia quae sunt talia esse
8	for that which is possible not to be	quia quod possibile est non esse
9	at some time is not.	quandoque non est
10	Therefore, if all [things] are possible not to be,	Si igitur omnia suntabilia non esse
11	then at some time nothing was among things.	aliquando nihil fuit in rebus
12	Now if this were true,	Sed si hoc est verum
13	even now there would be nothing,	etiam nunc nihil esset
14	because what is not,	quia quod non est
15	does not come to be except by something	non incipit esse nisi per aliquid
16	that is.	quod est
17	Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence,	si igitur nihil fuit ens
18	it would be impossible for anything to come into being;	impossibile fuit quod aliquid inciperet esse
19	and thus nothing would be in existence,	et sic modo nihil esset
20	which is patently false.	quod patet esse falsum
21	Therefore, not all beings are possible,	Non ergo omnia entia suntabilia
22	but there has to be something among things which is necessary.	sed oportet aliquid esse necessarium in rebus
23	But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another,	Omne autem necessarium vel habet causam suae necessitatis aliunde
24	or it is not.	vel non habet
25	Now it is impossible	Non est autem possibile

26	to go on to infinity in necessary things	quod procedatur in infinitum in necessariis
27	which have their necessity caused by another,	quae habent causam suae necessitatis
28	as has been proved in regard to efficient causes.	sicut nec in causis efficientibus ut probatum est
29	Therefore, it is necessary to posit something	Ergo necesse est ponere aliquid
30	which exists necessarily of itself, not having	quod sit per se necessarium non habens causam
	something else as cause of necessity,	necessitatis aliunde
31	but rather being the cause of necessity for others.	sed quod est causa necessitatis aliis
32	This everyone speaks of as God.	quod omnes dicunt Deum

I base the text on five widely known printed versions.¹¹ These are: one of the earliest prints by Ulrich Zell (ca. 1470),¹² the influential Piana edition (1570),¹³ the authoritative Leonine edition (1888),¹⁴ the fairly popular Marietti edition (1926),¹⁵ and the widely used Blackfriars edition (1964).¹⁶ I deleted punctuation which is present in some editions, since of course this cannot be native to Aquinas' text and could falsely influence our reading. The text is very stable and merits only a few remarks, which I will give using the numbering of the phrases.

5: Zell, Piana, and Blackfriars do not have *possibilia*

7: Piana, Marietti and Leonine editions add *semper* between *talia* and *esse*

16: Zell has instead *quod habet esse vel quod esse*

21: Zell has *igitur* instead of *ergo*

30: Zell has *est* instead of *sit*

32: Zell and Blackfriars omit this line entirely.

The later differences in Zell are inconsequential. The first two differences luckily do not interfere with the syntactic division, but do merit further attention. I have kept *possibilia* in the text of phrase 5, in line with the consensus of scholars working on this *tertia via*. But omitting it is a viable option. Firstly, reading it with *possibilia* makes phrase 6 a repetition of phrase 4. Having such a repetition is compositionally poor. Giving Aquinas credit as an excellent writer would have us

¹¹ Already the print evidence of the *Summa* is massive, see J. Schmutz, 'From Theology to Philosophy: The Changing Status of the *Summa Theologiae*, 1500-2000', in: J. Hause (ed.), *Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 221-241, esp. p. 227. Notice also the impressive list of commentators in A. Michelitsch, *Kommentatoren zur Summa theologiae des hl. Thomas von Aquin* (Graz und Wien: Styria, 1924).

¹² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae: Pars prima* (Cologne: Ulrich Zell, ca. 1470), fol. 11b. Available online, Retrieved 23 July 2023 from: <http://tudigit.ulb.tu-darmstadt.de/show/inc-v-84/0022>.

¹³ D. Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici, *Completens Primam partem Summæ Theologiæ*, Tomus Decimus, Iussu S. Pii V (Rome: Apud hæredes Antonij Bladi & Ioannem Osmarinum Liliotum socios, 1570), folio 11A.

¹⁴ Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, *Opera Omnia: Tomus Quartus Pars Prima Summæ Theologiæ*, Iussu impensaque Leonis XIII (Rome: Ex Typographa Polyglotta, 1888), 31.

¹⁵ S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Summa Theologica*, Pars 1a, vol. 1 (Turin: Marietti, 1926), 15.

¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2 (1a. 2-11), ed. and transl. T. McDermott, O.P. (London: Blackfriars, 1964; Reprint Cambridge University Press, 2006), 14.

prefer to read it without the *possibilia*. Furthermore, reading without it emphasizes the modal indecision of such things: they have an equal liking to being as to not being and they stand in need of causes to affirmatively be (and equally need causes to affirmatively not to be, even if that only means the absence of the causes for it to be). This reading helps with the interpretation that Gaven Kerr presents, which I endorse, as will be discussed later.

A well-known issue is whether or not the text should read *semper* in phrase 7, as many editions do. Reading it with *semper* gives the sentence: "But it is impossible that all things which are of this kind exist always." And reading it without *semper* gives: "But it is impossible that all things which are should be of this kind."

Since much of the manuscript evidence does not have it,¹⁷ and since it makes philosophical sense to keep it out, I have not included it.¹⁸

For my translation and decisions regarding 5-7, I have followed Kerr (2022), given that he wishes to establish (and seems to me to accomplish) the philosophically most sound version of text.¹⁹ Since I will have some criticism of Aquinas' text, it helps to build it up as strong as possible. My translation differs where I thought a more literal translation was possible. Take for example my translation for 11. A more interpretative translation would be 'there would be a time when nothing existed' (or cf. Kerr: "at some time there was nothing"). I wanted to highlight that the same *in rebus* is used as in 3 and 20. This *in rebus* can also be translated as 'in reality' or 'out there'. It is used to refer to the set of all things that are actually existing, for us to observe. Some differences with Kerr are minor improvements, for example in 4: I use *that* instead of *which*, as the clause is a defining characteristic and cannot be dropped without loss of meaning.

There is a fairly strong consensus that the 180 words, divided into 32 phrases, can roughly be structured analytically in two parts, each consisting of an argumentation and a conclusion:

- Phrases 3-20 discuss how we witness contingent things to exist, but not all things can be contingent.
- Phrases 21-22 thus conclude that from the observation of the existence of contingent things, there exists at least one necessary thing.
- Phrases 23-28 discuss that no matter how many necessary things there are, at least one must be necessary by itself.
- Finally, 29-32 concludes that there is something necessary by itself, which is God.

¹⁷ D. Bonnette, *Aquinas' Proofs for the God's Existence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), 127-128; E.L. Mascall, *He Who Is* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), 47-48.

¹⁸ Note that not everyone agrees with this. Leo Elders connects it with the following lines 8-9 in order to keep the *semper*. The extra mental gymnastics do not contribute a lot more philosophical depth, in my opinion. L. Elders, *The Philosophical Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 102-103.

¹⁹ Note that, strangely, Kerr attributes the reading without *semper* to the Marietti edition while this is not true. Perhaps a later reprint of the Marietti edition dropped it? Or perhaps he was working from the Blackfriars edition after all? Kerr, 'Aquinas's Third Way', 3.

More detailed analytical divisions are hard to make. Four exemplary attempts vary wildly, from grouping the phrases into 15 arguments down to only 6, and they all skip some phrases. The only agreement one can find is that phrases 23 and 24 form one distinct argument.²⁰ I shall therefore continue to refer to the phrases, when discussing Aquinas' argumentation.

2. From Possible to Necessary: An Analysis

In this article, we focus on the first part of the *tertia via*; phrases 3-22. Here Aquinas argues that from the existence of contingent things, we can deduce the existence of one or more necessary things. This line of reasoning is kickstarted with an observation, in phrase 3. It is said "We find *in rebus* something." This technical term, *in rebus*, literally means 'among things'. It could be thought of as 'in reality', or 'out there in the world around us'. The observation of phrase 3 is simply an observation that something exists. This means that the set of things which we can label as existing is not empty. In 4-5, Aquinas points to things that undergo generation and corruption, which have a possibility for existing and for not-existing. Aquinas has now established two things: 1) there are existing things, 2) the existence of some these things is merely possible. This is as far as observation needs to carry us. In the remainder of the first part, Aquinas can use logical reasoning to establish that not all things of this set can be possibly existent and that at least something *in rebus* (in the set of things which exist) has to have its existence necessarily (concluded in 21-22).

It matters to understand the meaning of possibility and necessity, as the entire argumentation rests on it. Some take it as logical possibility.²¹ Others read it as a temporal possibility.²² I think the way the text is written demands us to gloss the "possibility" in 1, with 4 as "possible to be and possible not to be". And the potentiality to be or not to be is exactly how Aquinas defines contingency.²³ Anything that has come into existence, is in itself (*res in seipsa*)²⁴ uncommitted to existence or non-existence. Once it has either of those two, the existing thing has aspects of necessity. Aquinas' clearest statements on this are examples. "It is not necessary that Socrates

²⁰ Compare C.F.J. Martin, *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 159-160; E. Moad, 'Problems with Aquinas' Third Way', in: R. Arp (ed.), *Revisiting Aquinas' Proofs for the Existence of God* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 131-140, esp. 132-133; T. Pawl, 'The Five Ways', in: B. Davies and E. Stump (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 115-134, esp. 121; P. Weingartner, *God's Existence. Can it be Proven? A Logical Commentary on the Five Ways of Thomas Aquinas* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 76.

²¹ A. Kenny, *The Five Ways: St Thomas Aquinas' Proofs of God's Existence* (London: Routledge, 1969), 61; Weingartner, *God's Existence. Can it be Proven?*.

²² E.g. Van Steenberghe, *Le problème de l'existence de Dieu*, 191; Martin, *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations*, 155-170.

²³ *STh* Ia q. 86 a. 3; *ScG* I, c. 67 n. 3. Cf. Kerr, 'Aquinas's Third Way', 6-8.

²⁴ B. Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 894-904. Aquinas also describes this as speaking of 'nature absolutely', cf. J. Knasas, 'Making Sense of the Tertia Via', *The New Scholasticism* 54:4 (1980), 476-511, esp. p. 493.

sits...,” Aquinas states, “though it may be so by supposition; for, granted that he is sitting, he must necessarily sit, as long as he is sitting.”²⁵ Thus, in himself, Socrates has an equal capacity for sitting and standing and is uncommitted towards them. But once we observe Socrates to sit, this is abandoned. In the same way, just like any other thing, the generation of contingent things is a necessary consequence of their efficient causes.²⁶

But contingent things are material,²⁷ and are not eternal,²⁸ and thus once generated, their corruption is inevitable.²⁹ “No corruptible thing always exists,”³⁰ says Aquinas. Or, as he puts it in 9: “at some time it is not.” All of this is what makes it a contingent thing.

The contingency of things furthermore demands that its determinant (committing it to existence or not) needs to come from outside. Today this is called the principle of sufficient reason, and Aquinas expresses it in 14-16.³¹ In 17-20, this principle is used to argue that if everything was either not existing or indeterminated to existence and non-existence, nothing could come to be. There would simply be nothing to account for the coming to be of anything. Since we do know (from 3-5) that things have come to be, there must at all times be at least one thing that exists, or, as Aquinas puts it, at least one thing must be necessary. Aquinas only says the thing is ‘necessary’. On its own this statement is underdeveloped. After all, just as Socrates is necessary to sit while sitting, a contingent thing is necessary to exist while existing. But it seems Aquinas is trying to argue for a different sense of necessary, one related to being. In this case, necessary means ‘incorruptible’³² or ‘wherein there is no possibility of not-being’.³³ These are things that need a cause to become existent, but while existent they never cease to exist. As an example, Aquinas gives angels.³⁴ Heavenly bodies are also like this.³⁵

Aquinas needs some argument that a set of contingent things actually existing (*in rebus*) cannot hold up existence on their own. This is indeed what he states is the case in 10-11: “if all [things] are possible not to be, then at some time nothing was (*in rebus*).” A cursory reading may make this seem counterintuitive. We see contingent beings seemingly upholding themselves all the time, most notably the preservation of species by overlapping intervals of existence. Children grow old enough to become

²⁵ *STh* Ia q. 19 a. 3.

²⁶ *ScG* II, c. 30 n.7.

²⁷ *STh* Ia q. 86 a. 3.

²⁸ *ScG* III, c. 72 n. 5.

²⁹ *ScG* II, c. 30 nn. 8-9.

³⁰ *ScG* III, c. 72 n. 5.

³¹ Cf. *ScG* I, c. 15 n. 5; *De Ente*, §80 (Hs. 3). On the former see N. Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 84-112. On the latter see G. Kerr, *Aquinas's Way to God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 93-121.

³² *STh* Ia, q. 50, a. 5.

³³ *ScG* II, c. 30 n. 2.

³⁴ *STh* Ia, q. 50, a. 5.

³⁵ *ScG* I, c. 20 nn. 17-21.

parents and create new children, who grow old enough to be parents, etcetera. Still, Aquinas insists that a set of contingent beings will extinguish. Through the connector *igitur* ('therefore'), this statement is connected with 8-9: "That which is possible not to be at some time is not." This is simply a corollary of his definitions of contingent/necessary with regards to existence.³⁶

Why is 10-11 drawn out as a consequence of 8-9? This is the kernel of the exegetical problem of this passage that has vexed many scholars, ancient and contemporary.³⁷ Within those phrases it is especially the *quandoque* and *aliquando* that has impeded a satisfactory consensus on the meaning of these lines.³⁸ Because of the staggering size of scholarly literature available, I do not claim to offer an all-encompassing analysis of it, but I have identified three general solutions. 1) There are those who see it as a quantifier shift, a fallacious, broken logic, and leave it at that. Thomas Pater, for example, takes this approach in a 41-page analysis only to conclude that "If the *tertia via* can be shown to be valid, the task remains to be done."³⁹ 2) Then there are those who propose that the inference is valid when we take into account one or more hidden premises. These premises are supposed to be so self-evidently part of Aquinas' thinking, that we can safely include them in our analysis. One such premise is that "all possibilities will be reached in infinite time." More recently the 'principle of plenitude' is applied for this purpose.⁴⁰ 3) Lastly, a sizeable (perhaps majority) group of scholars maintain that the temporal expressions should not be taken literally. They call this a 'metaphysical' interpretation. In their thinking, Aquinas is saying that if there were only contingents, then everything is 'metaphysically' in a state of indecision as towards existence or non-existence. Thus, there would be nothing to make them come into being.⁴¹ This reasoning relies on the separation of essence and existence. In Aquinas' thinking, we can consider essence (sometimes called common nature)⁴² on its own separate from the individual thing which it constitutes, either having existence or not. The metaphysical interpretation utilizes this thinking. As

³⁶ Some scholars do draw out lengthy discussions on its validity. Gény, 'A Propos des preuves thomistes', 582; Kenny, *The Five Ways*, 56; T.G. Pater, 'The Question of the Validity of the Tertia Via', in: J.K. Ryan (ed.), *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), vol. 2, 137-177, esp. p. 140; M. Augros, 'Aquinas's "Tertia Via"', in: *Angelicum* 82:4 (2006), 767-792; J. Bobik, 'The First Part of the Third Way', in: *Philosophical Studies* 17 (1968), 142-160.

³⁷ Lints already saw this. R. Lints, 'Attempts to Bridge the Gap in the Tertia Via', in: *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24:4 (1986), 531-539.

³⁸ Knasas, 'Making Sense', 489; cf. J. Owens, 'Quandoque and Aliquando in Aquinas' Tertia Via', in: *The New Scholasticism* 54:4 (1980), 447-475; Pater, 'The Question', 142.

³⁹ Pater, 'The Question', 177; cf. Kenny, *The Five Ways*, 67; J.F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000); Lints, 'Attempts to Bridge the Gap'.

⁴⁰ F.C. Coplestone, *Aquinas* (New York: Penguin Books, 1955), 124; É. Gilson, *Le Thomisme* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1922), 59; Cf. Martin, *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations*, 156.

⁴¹ Knasas, 'Making Sense'. Cf. L. Chambat, 'La tertia via dans saint Thomas et Aristote', in: *Revue Thomiste* 32 (1927), 334-338; J. Owens, 'Cause of Necessity' in Aquinas's Tertia Via', in: *Mediaeval Studies* 33 (1971), 21-45; Elders, *The Philosophical Theology*; Kerr, 'Aquinas's Third Way'.

⁴² J. Owens, 'Thomistic Common Nature and Platonic Idea', in: *Mediaeval Studies* 21 (1959), 211-223.

Owens puts it: "The consequence of preceding total non-existence follows from the common nature itself, and not from its distribution in individuals."⁴³

This metaphysical reading finds support in comparing the *tertia via* with *Summa Contra Gentiles* 1:15:5. In the latter, Aquinas states:⁴⁴

Omne autem quod est possibile esse, causam habet: quia, cum de se aequaliter se habeat ad duo, scilicet esse et non esse, oportet, si ei approprietur esse, quod hoc sit ex aliqua causa. Sed in causis non est procedere in infinitum, ut supra probatum est per rationem Aristotelis. Ergo oportet ponere aliquid quod sit necesse-esse.

Everything which is possible to exist has a cause because, since it is equally related to two [contraries], namely, being and non-being, it must be owing to some cause that being accrues to it. Causes cannot proceed to infinity as we have proved by the reasoning of Aristotle. We must therefore posit something that is a necessary being.

In this argumentation, the starting premise ('we observe contingent things existing') and the second part of the argument is the same as in the *tertia via*. It is essentially only the troublesome passage that reads different, which eschews temporality and replaces it with "equally related". Those who favor a metaphysical reading for the *tertia via*, such as Joseph Owen, will therefore happily argue that "It exhibits the same general structure as the *tertia via*."⁴⁵ However, those who favor a temporal reading, such as Norman Kretzmann, will maintain that "there are more than enough significant differences between the two arguments."⁴⁶

There is a recent attempt to bridge the two camps, provided by Gaven Kerr. His solution is not so much to speak of a metaphysical reading,⁴⁷ but of a tenseless reading. By tenseless he means that "Aquinas is not speaking of coming to be and ceasing to be in the past or future, but he is talking about the nature of possibility as such."⁴⁸ The tenseless aspect is especially apparent in his application to the *aliquando*, the moment at which nothing would be (phrase 11). This word cannot be tensed, either future or past, because "if there is nothing in existence," Kerr argues, "there is no time; for time is the measurement of the before and after in a process of change."⁴⁹ He admits that a literal reading is still strained, but at least it removes the composition fallacy. I think refining the metaphysical reading by calling it a tenseless reading points out better the uncommitted nature of things in themselves of which I spoke of earlier.

The meaning and intention of Aquinas' argumentation in 8-11 may be fairly clear by now when read in context. It should be noted, however, that the phrasing in

⁴³ Owens, 'Quandoque and Aliquando', 463.

⁴⁴ ScG I, c. 15 n. 5.

⁴⁵ J. Owens, *Towards a Christian Philosophy* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 227.

⁴⁶ Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism*, 97.

⁴⁷ Which he places himself in. Kerr, 'Aquinas's Third Way', p. 12 fn. 25; p. 9 last line; p. 15, first paragraph.

⁴⁸ Kerr, 'Aquinas's Third Way', 7.

⁴⁹ Kerr, 'Aquinas's Third Way', 14.

the *tertia via* is historically unusual and a phrasing as Aquinas adopted in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is historically much more common. This is all the more notable when taking into account that the phrasing in *Summa Contra Gentiles* makes more immediate sense. When phrases 8-11 from the *tertia via* are read on their own, without knowledge of the interpretative strategies developed by scholars, the argumentation simply does not add up. In this sense, it is flawed and it begs the question: why is this so?

3. Reconsidering Maimonides

When comparing the *Summa Theologiae* with the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, it has been pointed out that the latter is a philosophical exposé,⁵⁰ while the former is theological in nature, for teaching purposes.⁵¹ Of course, reality is more nuanced,⁵² but the comparison opens up the possibility for us to evaluate Aquinas' wording choices from different perspectives other than its philosophical contents. An important perspective is the historical one. Not every thesis or argument Aquinas wrote was original to him. He was an avid reader of philosophy and made good use of the advances made by those who came before him, so much so that he is often called a 'synthesizer'. This way of characterizing already comes through in the encyclical *Aeterni patris* from 1879, which states, in reference to the philosophy and theology that came before him, that "...Thomas added and joined, distributed in admirable order, and increased..."⁵³ As it turns out, this is the case too for phrases 8-11 of the *tertia via*. I wish to argue that in this case, he appropriated the way Maimonides had phrased the argument.

I am not the first one to point to Maimonides as the source of the *tertia via*. Among modern scholars, Clemens Baeumker notes it for the first time, at the turn of the century. He quite dryly states "Die Beweisführung dagegen, welche Thomas von Aquino [...] bietet, gibt mit einigen kleinen Modifikationen die Beweisführung bei Maimonides Schritt für Schritt wieder."⁵⁴ For Baeumker the reliance on Maimonides is a mere aside, into which he does not delve deeper. In the 1920s, the Jesuit scholar Paul Gény explores this reliance more, depending on Munk's translation of

⁵⁰ Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism*, 44.

⁵¹ Davies thinks the *Summa* is aimed at beginners judging from the introduction and the emergence of the Dominican order, but Torrell places it at the Masters level, given its *lectura* style. Schmutz puts it at the highest, research level of theology. B. Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide & Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8-13; J.-P. Torrell, *La « Somme de théologie » de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1998), 91-102; Schmutz, 'From Theology to Philosophy'.

⁵² Te Velde, 'Aquinas's 'Summa Contra Gentiles'', 176; Te Velde, *Aquinas on God*, 9-11.

⁵³ Leo XIII, *Aeterni patris* [August 4, 1879], in: I. Pennachi and V. Piazzesi (eds.), *Acta Sanctae Sedis* (Rome: Typographia Polyglotta, 1894), 97-115, esp. p. 108. The passage is translated in M. Jordan, *Rewritten Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 4.

⁵⁴ C. Baeumker, *Witelo: ein Philosoph und Naturforscher des XIII. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: Aschendorffschen Buchhandlung, 1908), 335-338.

Maimonides.⁵⁵ Some important scholars agree with Gény's analysis, such as Etienne Gilson.⁵⁶ But already within that same decade, Lucien Chambat suggests that Aristotle is the safe source. He argues that in Maimonides' version, the most important element is the principle that 'what holds for a species must come true,' and since Aquinas does not mention it, any connection between the two thinkers should be dismissed.⁵⁷ The most forceful argumentation against Maimonides comes much later, by Henri Holstein.⁵⁸ He advances three arguments: 1) Maimonides speaks of a trichotomy into 'everything is incorruptible, everything is corruptible, or some are incorruptible while others are corruptible'. Aquinas does not. 2) The order of argumentation is different. 3) Maimonides mentions a principle which his proof relies on; 'whatever is possible for a species, must necessarily come to be'. Aquinas does not. For Holstein, the second argument "suffirait, ce semble, a montrer l'originalité de saint Thomas."⁵⁹ Only later, by Avital Wohlman, is this different structure analyzed, and concluded that there is a 'parallélisme [...] plus remarquable.'⁶⁰ Later generations of scholars did not pursue this parallelism. John Knasas, in the 80s, still mentions that Maimonides had been suggested as a source but dismisses it without discussion.⁶¹ Christopher Martin, in the 90s, finds it "undeniable that St Thomas is using Aristotle's language here."⁶² In the 21st century, Aristotle is simply assumed as the only backdrop against which to evaluate the *tertia via*.⁶³ Gaven Kerr does mention both Maimonides and Aristotle, but only in a footnote.⁶⁴

Before we move on to discuss Maimonides as a source, it stands to reason to discuss why Aristotle cannot be the sole or immediate source. Two passages have been noted

⁵⁵ Gény, 'A Propos des preuves thomistes', 578-590. Remarkably, soon after its publication Père Gény was shot to death by an Italian soldier on the streets of Rome. Cf. P. Descoqs, 'Les derniers écrits du P. Geny', in: *Archives de Philosophie* 3:3 (1926), 96-137; Ph. Artières, *Vie et mort de Paul Gény* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2013).

⁵⁶ Gilson, *Le Thomisme*, 59.

⁵⁷ Chambat, 'La tertia via'. Both *Metaphysica* 12, 6 and *De Caelo* I, 12 have been suggested as key passages by which Aquinas would have been inspired. Cf. Th. Connolly, 'The Basis of the Third Proof for the Existence of God', in: *The Thomist* 17:3 (1954), 281-349; D. O'Donoghue, 'An Analysis of the *Tertia Via* of St. Thomas', in: *Irish Theological Quarterly* 20:2 (1953), 129-151.

⁵⁸ H. Holstein, 'L'origine aristotélicienne de la « tertia via » de saint Thomas', in: *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 48 (1950), 354-370.

⁵⁹ Holstein, 'L'origine aristotélicienne', 360.

⁶⁰ A. Wohlman, *Thomas d'Aquin et Maïmonide: un dialogue exemplaire* (Paris: Cerf, 1988), 60-67. Before him, Manuel Gonzalez had already dug up all relevant passages of Maimonides, be it only in Latin translation. But he did so too for Aristotle and in the end cast only more doubt on the relevance of Maimonides. Cf. Gonzalez, *El problema de las fuentes*, 62-72.

⁶¹ Knasas, 'Making Sense of the Tertia Via'.

⁶² Martin, *Thomas Aquinas: God and Explanations*, 157.

⁶³ D.B. Twetten, 'Aquinas's Aristotelian and Dionysian Definition of "God"', in: *The Thomist* 69:2 (2005), 203-250; Augros, 'Aquinas's "Tertia Via"'; Weingartner, *God's Existence. Can it be Proven?*; A. Barkman, 'From Contingency to Necessary Being', in: R. Arp (ed.), *Revisiting Aquinas' Proofs for the Existence of God* (Leiden: Rodopi, 2016), 123-130; Pater, 'The Question'.

⁶⁴ Kerr, 'Aquinas's Third Way', 3 fn. 3.

as backdrops for the *tertia via*. These are *On the Heavens* I.XII (281.a28-30) and *Metaphysics* 12.VI (1071b5-26). The former runs thus:⁶⁵

Having made these distinctions clear, we must proceed to what follows. If certain things have the power both of being and of not being, an outside limit must be set to the time (*necesse aliquod tempus determinatum esse plurimum*) of their being and their not being, the length of time, I mean, for which the thing can be or not be.

Aristotle's remarks here are ultimately aimed at concluding that an everlasting being cannot be corruptible. This is certainly a useful notion for Aquinas, as it is congruent with his own conclusion in the *tertia via*. However, the cessation of existence for anything is markedly different from the cessation of existence of everything. This is reflected in the word choice as well. If we keep it to the Latin (which is, after all, what Aquinas was working with), Aristotle is here speaking of a period of time (*aliquod tempus*) and not a moment in time (*quandoque, aliquando*). Besides, Aquinas himself in his own commentary on this passage does not draw out the conclusion that not everything that exists can be contingent.⁶⁶

The other passage, from *Metaphysics*, reads as follows:⁶⁷

we must now [...] show that there must be some substance which is eternal and immutable. Substances are the primary reality, and if they are all perishable, everything is perishable. [...] There is a difficulty, however; for it seems that everything which actually functions has a potentiality, whereas not everything which has a potentiality actually functions; so that potentiality is prior. But if this is so, there need be no reality; for everything may be capable of existing, but not yet existent.

This passage is much more similar in goal and setup to the *tertia via* than the former passage. Indeed, this last part is very close to the phrases 8-11 which we are discussing. The Latin that Aquinas was reading for this last part reads:⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, transl. W.K.C. Guthrie, Loeb Classical Library (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1960), 111. For the Greek and Latin as most likely used by Aquinas, see next note.

⁶⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *In De Caelo*, in: *Commentaria In libros Aristotelis De caelo*, vol. 3 *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici Opera Omnia Iussu Impensaue Leonis XIII* (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1886), 103-105. This is available on several websites with parallel English translation by Fabian Larcher and Pierre Conway (unpublished, College of St. Mary of the Springs, 1964), see e.g. <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~DeCael.L26>. Retrieved 15 June 2023.

⁶⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, transl. H. Tredennick, Loeb Classical Library (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1962), 141-143.

⁶⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *In Meta.*, in: M.R. Cathala (ed.), *In Duodecim Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio* (Turin: Marietti, 1964), 585.

Quamvis dubitatio. Videtur enim agens quidem one posse, potens vero non omne agere. Quare prius esse potentiam. At vero si hoc, nihil erit entium.⁶⁹ Contingit enim quidem posse esse, nondum vero esse.

And here is Aquinas' commentary on it, basically rephrasing it according to his own thinking:⁷⁰

*Dicens quod si potentia sit simpliciter prior actu, sequitur quod **aliquando nihil sit**: contingens est enim id quod potest fieri, sed nondum fit. Et ita, si prima entia sunt in potentia, sequitur quod non sunt actu: et sic nihil aliorum erit.*

He says that, if potentiality is prior absolutely to actuality, it follows that **at some time nothing may exist**; for the contingent is what can come to be but has not yet done so. Hence, if the first beings are potential, it follows that they do not exist actually; and so no other being will exist.

I made bold the words that are exactly under scrutiny here: whereas phrase 11 of the *tertia via* reads "aliquando nihil fuit in rebus" here Aquinas writes "aliquando nihil sit." This similarity may seem like a smoking gun for the influence of Aristotle on Aquinas. But note that phrase in question does not appear in Aristotle's text, but only in Aquinas' commentary. Moreover, it is commonly thought that the prima pars of the *Summa Theologiae* was completed in 1268,⁷¹ whereas the commentary on Book XII of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* is dated no earlier than 1271.⁷² This suggests that the correlation is the other way around: it shows an influence of the *tertia via* on Aquinas' Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. To that we should add the observation that the actual aim of Aristotle in this passage is to consider whether the world could be generated from 'chaos' or 'night'. Moreover, Aristotle is primarily concerned with the dichotomy of actuality and potentiality, rather than existence and non-existence. While Aristotle is obviously a relevant backdrop for Aquinas' *tertia via* — as Aquinas' entire philosophy may be fruitfully interpreted through comparison with Aristotle's corpus — the specific line of argumentation and its wording cannot be traced back to Aristotle with confidence.

Let us instead reconsider Maimonides, by taking a closer look at the Arabic original and Latin and Hebrew translations of Maimonides' text. This has, oddly enough, not

⁶⁹ Since this is the crucial part, I give the original Greek as well to show the Latin is a fair translation: οὐθὲν ἔσται τῶν ὄντων. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 142.

⁷⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *In Duodecim Libros*, 586; English translation: J. Rowan (transl.), *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1961), 485.

⁷¹ J.-P. Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Volume 1 The Person and His Works*, transl. R. Royal (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 146.

⁷² Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 232. Compare B. Davies, E. Stump, 'Chronological List of Aquinas's Writings', in: B. Davies, E. Stump (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 533-535.

been done by modern scholars, which is a missed opportunity. We know that Arabic sources made a great impact on Aquinas.⁷³ Maimonides held significant influence for Jewish as well as for Christian philosophers and theologians.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Maimonides' proofs for the existence of God are central to his thinking.⁷⁵ And, importantly, the part of *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn* containing philosophical proofs for the existence of God (the first chapters of part II) was translated into Latin as a separate letter that circulated early on, showing the popularity and significance of specifically this part of Maimonides' book.⁷⁶ Maimonides is therefore a very likely candidate for having influenced Aquinas' thinking on the matter.

In the following table, the most relevant part of Maimonides' text is given, along with numbers corresponding to the phrases of the *tertia via* given above. I have availed myself of the original, Arabic version,⁷⁷ the commonly known Latin version *Dux neutrorum*,⁷⁸ and a partial Latin translation which includes the proof called *Liber de uno deo benedicto*.⁷⁹ From the outset it should be noted that Aquinas did not reproduce Maimonides' text word for word. Correspondence is therefore an interpretative task. In some cases, I found that multiple phrases could be matched with a part of Maimonides' text, which is indicated with a slash, in the most-right column in which I placed the phrase numbers for corresponding passages in Aquinas' text. In several cases I concluded that, while Maimonides and Aquinas clearly used different arguments, these arguments served a similar purpose. In such cases, the corresponding phrase number is given in italics.

⁷³ C. Vansteenkiste, 'Autori Arabi e Guidei nell'opera di San Tommaso', in: *Angelicum* 37 (1960), 336-401; C. Vansteenkiste, 'Avicenna-citaten bij S. Thomas. Tekststudie', in: *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 15 (1953), 457-507.

⁷⁴ J. Stern et al. (eds.), *Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed in Translation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019).

⁷⁵ M. Rubio, 'Maimonides' Proofs for the Existence of God and their Aristotelian Background in the „Guide of the Perplexed“', in: J.A. Aertsen and A. Speer (eds.), *Was ist Philosophie im Mittelalter?* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), 914-921. See also M. Rubio, *Aquinas and Maimonides on the Possibility of the Knowledge of God* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 210-244.

⁷⁶ D. Di Segni, 'Early Quotations from Maimonides's Guide of the Perplexed in the Latin Middle Ages', in: C. Manekin and D. Davies (eds.), *Interpreting Maimonides* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 190-207.

⁷⁷ Ibn Maymūn, *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*, ed. by H. Atay (Cairo: Maktabat al-thaqāfa al-dīniyya, 1974), 273. Although originally written in Judeo-Arabic, I refer to this edition in Arabic script for convenience. A critical edition remains a desideratum.

⁷⁸ Maimonides, *Dux Neutrorum*, in: D. Di Segni (ed.), *Moses Maimonides: Dux Neutrorum vel Dubiorum Pars II* (Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming), 13-14. I thank the editor for providing the relevant passage before publication. Cf. Rubio, *Aquinas and Maimonides*, 296-297.

⁷⁹ W. Kluxen, 'Rabbi Moyses (Maimonides): Liber de Uno Deo Benedicto', in: P. Wilpert (ed.), *Judentum im Mittelalter* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1966), 167-182.

Liber de uno deo benedicto	Dux neutrorum vel dubiorum	Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn	Aq #
...	...	...	...
Et secundus modus similiter est falsus,	Item pars secunda vanitas est	وأما القسم الثاني فهو أيضا محال	6/20
quoniam si omne quod est cadit sub generatione et corruptione,	quoniam si omne ens fuerit generabile et corruptibile	وبيانه لأنه إن كان كل موجود واقعا تحت الكون والفساد	7/10
esset omnis res inventa	dicemus quod omnia sunt	فالموجودات كلها كل واحد منها	8
possibilis, ut corrumpetur	possibilia corrumpi	ممکن الفساد	9
	possibile autem in genere necessario est generabile et corruptibile sicut scis	والممكن في النوع لا بد ضرورة من وقوعه كما علمت	
ergo corrumpetur aliquando.	et sequitur necessario quod omnia entia sunt corrupta	فيلزم أنها تفسد أعني الموجودات كلها	10
Et si omnis res corrumpatur,	quod si ita fuerit	وإذا فسدت كلها	12
aliquando nihil invenitur,	nichil remanebit	محال أن يوجد شيء	11
quia non remanet aliquid quod faciat aliquid.	ergo nec dator esse	لأن لم يبق من يوجد شيئا	14-16
Et tunc est necessarium quod nihil aliquando	et sequeretur quod nichil esset omnino.	ولذلك يلزم أن لا يكون شيء موجود بته	13

est inventum, et modo similiter.			
Et nos videmus aliqua esse inventa,	Nos autem videmus multa esse	ونحن يشاهد أشياء موجودة	3
et nos similiter inventi sumus in esse.	et nos etiam sumus sequitur	وها نحن موجودون	
Et tunc certificatum est per hanc speculationem, ex quo inventae sunt res generabiles et corruptibiles, sicut nos videmus,	ergo necessario secundum istam considerationem quod si sunt aliqua generabilia et corruptibilia sicut nos videmus	فيلزم ضرورة بهذا النظر أن كان ثم موجودات كائنة فاسدة كما نشاهد	21
quod unum inveniatur quod nec sit generabile nec corruptibile. Et ille inventus nec generabilis nec corruptibilis non habet in se possibilitatem aliquando ad aliquid;	quod sit aliquod ens non generabile nec corruptibile in quo non est possibilitas ad corruptionem omnino	أن يكون ثم موجود ما لا كائن ولا فاسد وهذا الموجود الغير كائن ولا فاسد لا امكان فساد فيه أصلا	
immo est necesse esse, non possibile esse.	sed est necessarium in esse non possibile esse.	بل هو واجب الوجود لا ممكن الوجود	22
...	...	...	...

The similarity is striking. Indeed, we notice that almost all of Aquinas' text is accounted for, to the exception of 17-19 (which is more or less a repetition of 11-13). Aquinas used a different argument for 14-16 and 21, and he also shuffled some things around. Lastly, we notice, of course, that some parts of Maimonides' text cannot be found in Aquinas', perhaps because Aquinas wished to reduce the argumentation to its essentials.

As striking as the similarity is, it will be of ultimate use if it can shed light on the problems we encountered while reading phrases 8-11. We established that it is the connection between 8-9 and 10-11 that is insufficiently argued for. Even more

specifically, it is the temporal terms in 9 and 11, *quandoque* and *aliquando*, that frustrate the internal logic of the first part of the *tertia via*. When we compare those lines with Maimonides' text, a remarkable similarity occurs.

Phrase 11 in Aquinas' text reads:

aliquando nihil fuit in rebus

And the corresponding phrase in Maimonides' text reads:

aliquando nihil invenitur

My thesis is that Aquinas used Maimonides' third philosophical proof for God's existence from *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*, in the translation given in *Liber de uno deo benedicto*, either directly or through an intermediary. While he did streamline the argument, the very core (phrases 8-11) stayed close to the text he had in front of him, the temporal wording being a direct quote. Aquinas using Maimonides' temporalized version of the argument explains the remarkable use of *aliquando nihil* better than claiming the two authors came up with it independently. Notice that the Arabic original simply states "if all of them perish, it is impossible that there exists something." Thus, the awkward choice of words is in fact not Maimonides' fault, but that of the translator who created the *Liber de uno deo benedicto*.

Of course, we should take into account that Latin translations of Maimonides were mostly based on Hebrew versions.⁸⁰ The Hebrew translation of Yehuda Alharizi reads *ואם כולם נפסדים הוא שוא להמצא דבר* ("if all things perish, it is impossible for anything to exist"),⁸¹ and Ibn Tibbon's translation reads *כש יפסדו כלם מן השקר שימצא דבר* ("when all have perished, it is impossible something exists").⁸² The *kshe*, 'when', of Ibn Tibbon may have been of influence, but this word is still at some distance semantically from the 'sometimes' (*aliquando*) used in *Liber de uno deo benedicto*. This *Liber* is therefore the earliest book to testify to this phrasing which makes the author-translator of the *Liber* the most likely culprit of introducing the sentence "if all things perish, sometimes nothing is found." It should be noted that the other, later translation (which was still early enough for Aquinas to have used it), *Dux neutrorum*, removes the *aliquando* but emphasizes that nothing remains, rather than saying that it is impossible for something to remain, which pushes the text in the same semantic direction.

A final argument in favor of the influence of Maimonides on Aquinas, is that there were other options available, and yet this was the phrasing Aquinas chose. Dominicus Gundissalinus (d. > 1190) records an argument that a corruptible thing

⁸⁰ Caterina Rigo states, in summary, that the *Dux neutrorum* is based on Alharizi's version, but the translator sometimes took Ibn Tibbon's version and the original into account. C. Rigo, "Dux neutrorum and the Jewish Tradition of the Guide of the Perplexed" in: J. Stern et al. (eds.), *Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed in Translation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), 81-139, esp. p. 82.

⁸¹ Maimonides, *Sefer Moreh nevukhim*, transl. Yehuda Alharizi, ed. S. Scheyer (Warsaw: ha-Tsefirah, 1904), 143.

⁸² Maimonides, *Sefer Moreh nevukhim*, 3 vols., transl. Ibn Tibbon, ed. I. Euchel (Vienna: Anton Edler von Schmid, 1828), vol. 2, fol. 8a (π). I unfortunately did not have access to the modern edition by Yehuda Even-Shemuel.

must have a beginning to its existence so that it first was not and then came to be, and that from this we can conclude that there must be something that did not come to be and will not perish, or else an infinite regress would ensue.⁸³ Richard of Saint Victor (d. 1173) also does not give the full argument, but does say that temporal things owe their existence to others, while eternal things must necessarily exist.⁸⁴ Neither use temporal phrasing. Of course there was also available the Latin translation of Avicenna's *al-Shifā'* (*Liber de philosophia prima*), from which the correct non-temporal reasoning could have been gleaned.⁸⁵ Aquinas, despite all of this, did not do so, making it all the more likely that he did so by following the Latin translation *Liber de uno deo benedicto*.

There is an interesting twist to this story when we look into the early reception of the *quinquae viae*. One text, whose attribution to Siger of Brabant has been contested, copies Aquinas' Maimonidean argumentation but attributes it to Avicenna.⁸⁶ Peter of Auvergne, just one generation after Aquinas, also names Avicenna as the source for the *tertia via*.⁸⁷ Indeed, in his rendering he throws out the Maimonidean passage and replaces it with a more straightforward argumentation concerning the necessity of any contingent for a cause and the impossibility of this going on to infinity. This is, more or less, the same as the modern 'metaphysical' reading of the first part of the *tertia via*. What I think we are witnessing here, is an early uneasiness with the flaw in the first part and a desire to make things right by going straight back to the source. Not to Maimonides and his Latin translator, as they were only the source of the flawed argumentation, but beyond them to Avicenna, the actual mastermind of this proof for the existence of God.

⁸³ Dominicus Gundissalinus, *De processione mundi*, in: J.A. Laumakis (transl.), *The Procession of the World* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), 36-37.

⁸⁴ Richard of Saint Victor, *De Trinitate*, in: R. Angelici (transl.), *On the Trinity* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2012), 75.

⁸⁵ Specifically Bk. 1, Ch. 6. Ibn Sīnā, *al-Shifā'*, in: M.E. Marmura (transl.), *The Metaphysics of The Healing* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 29-34; G. Anawati (transl.), *La métaphysique du Shifā': Livres I à V* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1978), 115-117; S. van Riet (ed.), *Liber de Philosophia Prima sive Scientia Divina I-IV* (Leuven: Peeters, 1977), 46-48. This passage is not complete on its own. The initial observation that there are things in existence is made in I.5 and the actual inference that we speak here of God is only in VIII.3. Cf. M. Marmura, 'Avicenna's Proof from Contingency for God's Existence in the Metaphysics of the Shifā'', in: *Mediaeval Studies* 42 (1980), 337-352; J. McGinnis, 'The Ultimate Why Question: Avicenna on Why God is Absolutely Necessary', in: J. Wippel (ed.), *The Ultimate Why Question* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 65-83; D. de Haan, 'Where Does Avicenna Demonstrate the Existence of God?', in: *Arabic Sciences & Philosophy* 26 (2016), 97-128.

⁸⁶ Siger de Brabant, *Quaestiones in Physica*, in: Ph. Delhay (ed.), *Questions sur la physique d'Aristote (texte inédit)* (Louvain: Éditions de l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie, 1941), 194.

⁸⁷ W. Dunphy, 'The *Quinque Viae* and Some Parisian Professors of Philosophy', in: A. Maurer (ed.), *St. Thomas Aquinas 1274-1974 Commemorative Studies* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), vol. 2, 73-103, esp. pp. 79, 90, 102.

5. Conclusion

Thomas Aquinas offers an argument for the existence of God based on possibility and necessity in his *Summa Theologiae*. It is known as the *tertia via*, as it is the third proof in a series of five, given near the beginning of the *Summa*. The possibility and necessity that is spoken of, are to be read with regards to the existence of a thing. For Aquinas, essence and existence can be meaningfully distinguished which opens up an inquiry into the possibility and necessity for something to exist. Such a potency can be called contingency, which makes things material and temporal, meaning that their generation and corruption are in need of an outside determinant. Based on the principle of sufficient reason, it is possible to list all conditions for realizing the possibility, after which its existence becomes a necessity.⁸⁸ As such, contingent things can have aspects of necessity, but only from outside of themselves.

Aquinas wishes to argue that if every contingent is in need of a determinant, then the set of all contingents needs a determinant. This would deny the possibility for a causal loop or an infinite series of contingents. If these came about, they could indeed exist, but how do they come about? Not because of internal conditions only, because then they would not be contingent. Thus, there is an outside determinant. Aquinas will further argue that of these determinants, there can only be one which is truly necessary of itself, which we call God.

Of the 180 words that the *tertia via* consists of, 2 stick out: *quandoque* and *aliquando*. They are essential in the argumentation that a set of contingents cannot come about on its own. These temporal words, connecting phrases 8 to 11, do not logically add up when read literally. Some scholars have chosen to downplay the importance of this non sequitur. Others have embraced the temporality, and by supplying Aquinas' argumentation with further assumptions have massaged the meaning of the text towards logical clarity. A third group has, in my opinion correctly, opted to read the passage metaphysically. It is not so much that "at some point nothing would exist", but that in the end, nothing would be a complete and satisfying cause for the existence of it all.

While the metaphysical reading, without temporal wording, was widely available as evidenced by Dominicus Gundissalinus, Richard of Saint Victor, and Avicenna Latinus, Aquinas chose specifically to phrase his argument as *aliquando nihil fuit in rebus*. This begs for an explanation. In Maimonides' *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*, a proof appears that is structurally nearly identical to the *tertia via*. Its Arabic does not have the temporal wording of the argumentation that contingents cannot exist on their own. Its Hebrew translations have a slight hint towards it by using כִּשְׁ, 'when'. But when we turn to an early, somewhat forgotten, Latin translation of Maimonides' proof, we read *aliquando nihil invenitur*. The exact same wording of *aliquando nihil* is

⁸⁸ If this sounds deterministic, that is because it is. However, Aquinas was concerned for providing space for divine and human free will, cf. A. Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind* (London: Routledge, 1993), ch. 6; R. Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 7.

striking. It would be easier to explain the co-occurrence as deliberate influence rather than coincidence. This proves that Aquinas was reading and using Maimonides when constructing his proofs for the existence of God. It is, then, in the Arabic context, specifically their Latin translations, that the inspiration for the *tertia via* should be sought.