

In the *Summa Theologica* an objection¹ argues that God appears to be imperfect because, though his essence is existence itself, existence seems to be imperfect. Therefore, God's existence must be imperfect.

Regarding perfection, Aquinas explains that “something is said to be perfect insofar as it is in actuality”², and that “a thing is called perfect when it lacks nothing with respect to the manner of its perfection.”³ Thus, in this article, perfect means existing in actuality, whereas imperfect means remaining in potentiality (to whatever degree). “Remaining in potentiality” can be understood as existing as the notion of the essence of a thing (the form); “existing in actuality” as existing as an individual thing “[having] a form, together with all that precedes and follows upon that form”⁴. This can be illustrated through the Christian concept of the Incarnation, where we read that “In the beginning was the Word”, that is, in potentiality with respect to Christ's humanity, and then that “the Word was made flesh”⁵, that is, in actuality. Christ (with respect to his humanity) became “perfect”, whereas he was “imperfect” prior to the Incarnation.

The objection, however, proposes the following syllogism:

¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 4, Article 1, Objection 3.

² *Summa*, I. Q. 4, Art. 1

³ *Summa*, I. Q. 4, Art. 1

⁴ *Summa*, I. Q. 5, Art. 5

⁵ John 1:1 (NAB)

Existence itself is imperfect.

God (i.e., his essence) is existence itself.

Therefore, God is imperfect.

With the second premise already proven⁶, the truth of this argument depends on its first premise, which states that “existence itself” is imperfect, and it is so *because* it is “most common and takes on addition from all things”.

It is said that *existence* is a most common or universal attribute, because it can be asserted of all things, i.e., “This is an existing thing.” Furthermore, it cannot be predicated by itself to identify anything that *actually* exists, but must be accompanied by other predicables. We cannot define “man” as “an existing thing” but must add “substantial”, “corporeal”, “animate” and “rational”, and cannot describe an *actual* man with adding more. Hence, the “existence” of things appears to be something imperfect and accidental to actuality. Since God’s essence is “existence itself”, God must, too, be imperfect.

In reply to this objection, St. Thomas asserts that *existence* is, in fact, *most* perfect but the first premise uses the term in a different sense. When a thing becomes *existent*, it moves from potentiality to actuality, that is, to perfection. The existence of *created* things is, by definition, an attribute received by them. The existence they receive is what causes them to become “actual” and, consequently, “perfect”. In God, on the other hand, his essence does not receive existence from any external source, but existence is his essence. In the Scriptures, God identifies himself

⁶ *Summa*, I, Q. 3, Art. 4.

by the name “*I am.*”⁷ and, with respect to created things, it is said, “For us there is one God, from whom all things *are.*”⁸

Therefore, in opposition to the third objection of the first article of question 4, on whether God is perfect, St. Thomas’ argument from existence appears to be:

Existence is perfect.

God (i.e., his essence) is existence.

Therefore, God is perfect.

⁷ Exodus 3:14 (NAB)

⁸ 1 Corinthians 8:6 (NAB)