


## Article

# Being and Essence of Creation in *Liber de Causis* and Aquinas's Reception

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**Abstract:** Derived from Proclus's *Elementatio Theologica*, *Liber de Causis* (LDC), with the concept of "creation" at its core, provides a substantial monotheistic adaptation of the former that was absorbed and criticized by medieval philosophers represented by Aquinas. Taking Aquinas's classical distinction between being and essence as the axis of inquiry, this paper first points out that, in contrast to Proclus, LDC not only introduces the concept of creation but also includes in this concept the distinction between being and essence. By reviewing the different readings of Avicenna and Aquinas on the division, this paper then sketches out two different tendencies in the medieval Arab and Latin worlds to either accept the concept of creation in LDC that both being and essence of individua are given from the One via intelligence or to take a further monotheistical transformation, which declaims the One bestowing the being of creations directly. Through this case study, this paper attempts to show the influence of LDC on Aquinas's thought and demonstrate the civilizational transitions, fusions, and exchanges that characterized medieval philosophy.

**Keywords:** Thomas Aquinas; *Liber de Causis*; Avicenna; creation; being and essence



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## 1. Introduction

*Liber de Causis* (LDC) is an essential work bridging late ancient Greek (Neoplatonism), Arabic, and Latin medieval philosophy, and it enormously influenced scholastic philosophy. The LDC is generally believed to have been written by an anonymous Arab scholar, presumably living in Baghdad in the ninth century, and probably by a scholar of the Al-Kindi school (Taylor 2020). Costa (1995) has even suggested that it was written by Al-Kindi himself. For a long time, the book was treated as the work of Aristotle. In reality, however, the content of the book is derived from the *Elements of Theology* by Proclus (and partially the ideas of Plotinus s. Steel (2022) and Costa (1992)), and the author has presented the content with a monotheistic twist.

The LDC explores the basic question of how the many derive from the One. The author, following the Neoplatonic way of thinking, argues that everything comes from the absolute One as the First Cause and equates it with pure goodness. The Absolute One and the many are not linked by several intermediaries but by a single intermediary, intelligence. The three entities of the Divine Principle—the First Cause, the Intelligence, and the Soul—constitute a hierarchical order, and each of these entities has a hierarchy within itself, which is also clearly inherited from the classical teachings of Neoplatonism.

Although the main topic of the book is rather Neoplatonic, the LDC is not a simple repetition of Neoplatonist thought but rather a modification and development of it, as Aquinas makes clear in the preface to the *Commentary on the Book of Causes*:

And in Greek we find handed down a book of this type by the Platonist Proclus, which contains 211 propositions and is entitled *The Elements of Theology*. And in Arabic we find the present book which is called *On Causes* among Latin readers, [a work] known to have been translated from Arabic and not [known] to be extant at all in Greek. Thus, it seems that one of the Arab philosophers excerpted it from

this book by Proclus, especially since everything in it is contained much more fully and more diffusely (*multo plenius et diffusius*) in that of Proclus. (Aquinas 1955, pp. 4–5; 1996, p. 4, my italics)

Here, Aquinas uses the pair of “more fully” and “more diffusely” to point out the two facets of the *LDC*: on the one hand, as noted above, the book inherits many of the classical doctrines of Neoplatonism; on the other hand, the author provides his own new development. However, what is the new development? As Steel (2022, p. 37) emphasizes, the *LDC* transforms Proclus’s thought in a distinctly creationist and monotheistic sense (*dans un sens créationniste et monothéiste*). It is, therefore, natural that one of the most central elements that researchers have focused on is the notion of “creation” in the text (e.g., Costa 1992; Taylor 2012, etc.). Furthermore, Sweeney (1959), Schäfer (2017), and Bertolacci (2022) have noted the distinction of existence and essence in the theory of creation in the *LDC*, and Bertolacci additionally explores Avicenna’s reception of this distinction. Although the influence of the *LDC* on Aquinas’s thought has long been explored in several dimensions (e.g., Beierwaltes 1963; Dodds 2016), the question of how Aquinas inherited the existence–essence distinction from the *LDC* and his debate with medieval Arabic thinkers (especially Avicenna) deserves further investigation. The intention of this paper is to explore, from a historical reception perspective, the origins of this division in the *LDC* and how it underwent development in the medieval Arab community (especially Avicenna) and subsequently impacted Aquinas’s thought and how Aquinas transformed it even further in terms of monotheism.

The second part of this paper explores Proclus’s emanation and the concept of creation in the *LDC* and the relationship between the two, especially concerning the existence–essence distinction; the third part explores Avicenna’s reception of the concept of creation and the named distinction in the *LDC* as the object of Aquinas’s critique; the fourth part explores Aquinas’s interpretation and modification of the distinction with his critique of Avicenna, showing the progression of the scholastic thought that further transforms the *LDC*’s notion of creation; and the fifth part is the conclusion.

## 2. Esse–Essentia—From Proclus’s Emanation to the Creation in the *LDC*

In this section, I first review the differences between the concept of creation by Plato as well as emanation in traditional Neoplatonism and creation in the monotheistic framework; I then inspect emanation in Proclus’s thought, pointing out his understanding of emanation containing elements that can be transformed in later times towards monotheistic creation. Finally, I analyze briefly how, on this basis, the *LDC* develops the two dimensions of the existence and essence of creation.

Both the creation of Demiurge in Plato’s *Timaeus* and the emanation of Neoplatonism differ significantly from classical monotheistic creation. The former differs from classical monotheistic creation in that Demiurge does not have ontological primacy but is secondary to, or ancillary to, the world of ideas, and Demiurge’s intentions of goodness are limited and often constrained by the material on which his work is focused (Hasker 1998).

In the traditional Neoplatonist concept of emanation, however, God or the One is the absolute transcendent, and as such, he cannot be predicated in any affirmative way—including “being”—but only in a negative way. Moreover, as we know well from this doctrine, God’s relation to the world is connected by a series of different grades: intelligence, soul, and finally matter. The lower substances in the grades come out of the higher ones by emanation, which does not diminish the original higher substances, such as a spring from a fountain or light from the sun. Hence, the inferior is ontologically lower and participates in the essence of the higher. A further important feature is that the participation of higher substances in lower substances is eternal and necessary and not dependent on, or contained in, the will (Hasker 1998).

These features of emanation distinguish it from monotheistic creation in numerous significant ways: on the one hand, monotheism does not recognize an intermediary connection between God and all substances and characterizes God’s direct presence and direct action

on creation; according to monotheism, God's creation must be a creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), and as such, it is neither incomplete, as in Plato's Demiurge, nor out of God's nature (*ex Deo*), as in the case of emanation, i.e., the creator and the created must be radically distinct. In addition, monotheism holds that creation cannot entail necessity but rather the will of God, who freely and voluntarily created the world (Hasker 1998).

If we look at Proclus's theory of emanation, we will recognize that his thought has certain modifications from the traditional notion of emanation and that these changes make his thought more affirmative of the notion of creation in monotheism. This is manifested in two ways.

First, Proclus reinforces the sharp distinction between first causes and other secondary causes; for example, in Proposition 30 of *Elements of Theology*, Proclus says:

For a term which proceeded (*προϊόν*) completely would have no identity with that which remained: such a term is wholly distinct from the prior. If it is to be united by any common link with its cause, it must remain in the latter as we saw that the latter remained in itself. If, on the other hand, it should remain only, without procession, it will be indistinguishable from its cause, and will not be a new thing which has arisen (*ἄλλο γεγονός*) while the cause remains. (Proclus 1963, pp. 34–35)

Moreover, although not all the substantiality of beings derives directly from the First Cause but rather from the plural gods according to the *Elements of Theology*, Proclus does imply in his thought that the First Cause has a certain unmediated connection with all beings (De Vogel 1966, p. 72). In this aspect, he partially departs from the traditional hierarchical theory of the doctrine of emanation.

From these two points, we can observe that there are certain elements and possibilities of transformation toward monotheistic creation in Proclus's thought: on the one hand, the One is absolutely transcendent and alien to the entities out of which it flows, and on the other hand, the One has the possibility of being directly related to all substances. After all, however, Proclus does not explicitly use the concept of "creation", let alone provide further clarification of the modalities and prescriptions of creation.

Building on Proclus's tendencies, the *LDC*, further influenced by Arab monotheistic religions (Taylor 2020, pp. 212–13), introduces the notion of creation, thus explicitly taking on monotheistic characteristics, although the creative activity of the One remains, as in Proclus's emanation, neither free nor voluntary (Taylor 2012, pp. 126–33). Even more importantly, the *LDC* defines the connotative framework of creation by making a clear distinction between being as a fact (*Seinstatsache*) and being's form (*Seinsart*) (Bertolacci 2022, p. 254; Schäfer 2017, pp. 192–93), while the creative activity of the First Cause in relation to created things equally encompasses both of these dimensions.

In Chapter VIII(IX):79 of the *LDC*, the author says: "The stability (*fixio*) and essence of every Intelligence is from the Pure Goodness, which is the First Cause" (Brand 1984, p. 27; Schönberger 2003, p. 20). Here, God (the First Cause, i.e., the pure Good) exerts two effects on the intelligence of the first creature: to bestow it the existence (stability) and to bestow it the essence. Therefore, the intelligence, and the soul beneath them, naturally "possess" existence and essence.

Thus, at the end of the chapter, the author of the *LDC* states that intelligence, soul, and nature are complexes (*yliathim*, Arabic: *kulliyatun*, "wholeness") (Bardenhewer 1882, p. 79) possessing existence (*esse*) and form (*forma*), and only the First Cause (God) is not a complex since He is Pure Existence (VIII(IX):90, Brand 1984, p. 28; Schönberger 2003, p. 22). In other words, "wholeness" is the opposite of "simplicity":

And if anyone says, "The First Cause must have *yliathim*", we will say, "Its *yliathim* is its infinity and its individuality is Pure Goodness, overflowing every perfection upon Intelligence and upon the rest of things by mediation of Intelligence". (VIII(IX):91, Brand 1984, p. 28)

It is clear from this passage that the First Cause (God) is not only existence itself but also goodness itself, i.e., He does not “have” existence and does not “have” goodness. In other words, existence and goodness are not accidental to the First Cause but are Himself (Schäfer 2017, pp. 192–93). In contrast, although intelligence “possesses” all goodness (omnes bonitates), it is not goodness itself but rather only possesses it, by means of which the First Cause overflows goodness into creatures.

Furthermore, the First Cause gives goodness, or formal completeness, to other things through intelligence. Specifically speaking, the First Cause maintains the world and governs it through intelligence:

has come to be that which maintains and governs the things that are after it and that which suspends its own power over them, only because they are not a substantial power for it; (but rather,) it is the power of substantial powers, because it is their cause. (VIII(IX):83, Brand 1984, p. 28)

Here, intelligence possesses the power (virtus) of bringing things that come after it into their proper prescriptive nature. Hence, we may say that this power is the substantial power (virtus substantialis) referring to these substances, that is, the power of the proper realization of their essence. In this way, the medieval monotheistic God–world relationship—creation, sustention, and government—is presented in the *LDC* in a neo-Platonist framework.

Therefore, it is clear that according to the *LDC*, the First Cause bestows the things of the secondary level into their proper essences (essentia) with the intermediary of the Intelligence, which is to say that, apart from directly relating to the essence of the Intelligence (by endowing it with the whole of goodness), the way in which the First Cause endows the essences of the things of the secondary level is indirect (by the intermediary of the Intelligence).

### 3. Avicenna’s Reception of the Esse–Essentia Structure in the Creation of the *LDC*

A natural question then is whether the First Cause bestows existence (esse) to all things except intelligence in the same indirect way.

It appears that the author of *LDC* thinks so in the following passage:

And indeed, the First Cause is neither Intelligence nor Soul nor Nature; on the contrary, it is above [Intelligence and] Soul and Nature, because it creates all things. However, it creates Intelligence without an intermediary and creates Soul and Nature and the rest of things by mediation of Intelligence. (VIII(IX):87, Brand 1984, p. 28)

Here, the First Cause “creates” the Intelligence, that is, bringing the Intelligence “creatio ex nihilo” into existence, so that the Intelligence is absolutely external to the First Cause. If we agree that creation (creare) consists of two main parts, namely, the bestowing of essence to created things and the bestowing of existence to created things, and that the First Cause’s bestowing of essence to created things is accomplished with the intermediary of intelligence, as has been said above, it seems that we must also affirm, in light of this text, that the first cause’s bestowing of existence is accomplished through intelligence.

If the passage above was not obvious enough, let us look at the *Liber de Causis*, III, 31–32:

And the soul performs these operations only because it is itself an example of the higher power. This is because the First Cause created the being of Soul (esse animae) by mediation of Intelligence, and as a result Soul has come to perform a divine operation. (III:31–32, Brand 1984, pp. 21–22; Schönberger 2003, p. 6)

Here, it is stated more clearly that the being of the soul (which is a substance below intelligence) is not created directly by the First Cause but is mediated by intelligence. That is, the First Cause (God) does not directly give existence to all things apart from intelligence.

Such a doctrine, however, is contrary to the monotheistic doctrine: in this doctrine, not only does God create all things “out of nothing” so that all things are absolutely separate

from God, but it seems that God should give existence to all (at least) individual souls directly and not through any intermediary. Thus, Aquinas provides the following criticism in his commentary on the *LDC*: “Some, however, *wrongly* understanding what he [i.e., the author of the *LDC*] says here, that the first cause created the being of the soul, with the mediation of an intelligence” (Aquinas 1955, p. 21; 1996, p. 24, n78, my italics and note).

Although we cannot be sure which philosophers are directly influenced by the *LDC*, at least for Aquinas, one of those he refers to here is the important Arab philosopher Avicenna. In chapter 10 of the *Treatise on Separate Substances* (*De Substantiis Separatis*), Aquinas says that some philosophers determine the procession of things coming into being from the First Principle according to a certain order down to the lowest bodies, and “this is the position of Avicenna which seems to be presupposed in the *Book of Causes*” (Aquinas 1959, p. 89; 1968, p. 59 line 23–27).

In Aquinas’s view, Avicenna accepts the Neoplatonist theory of emanation in the existential sense and argues that Avicenna reads the text in the *LDC* in this way and adopts this reading as part of his metaphysical–theological theory.

Recent research has shown, as Aquinas argues, that it is highly likely that Avicenna is indeed heavily influenced by the *LDC* (Costa 2000), even though he makes critical modifications to some of its elements, for example, on issues such as how God exists as Pure Being (Bertolacci 2022, p. 275) and the role of power in the process of creation (Lizzini 2022). In relation to the question of being in creation, if we read Avicenna’s *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, Book 9, Chapter 4, we find that Avicenna accepts the idea that the First Cause (God) bestows existence on all things through intelligence (Avicenna 1980, p. 478; 2005, p. 327).

However, how does Avicenna defend this view? In *The Metaphysics of The Healing*, the main defense Avicenna provides is that the creation of the First Cause is a single, nontemporal action:

The [...] First Truth [sc. the First Cause] [...] intellectually apprehends the order of the good in existence and how this ought to be—not [however] through an intellectual apprehension that moves from potentiality to actuality (fi’l), nor [through] an intellectual apprehension that moves (muntaqilun) from one intelligible to another (for His essence is free from what is potential in all respects [...]), but by *one act* of intellection. (Avicenna 1980, p. 478; 2005, p. 327, my italic)

Here, Avicenna argues that because of the ontological character of the First Cause, whose action of creation must be simultaneous or nontemporal, the thing that He creates must also be universally one, and only after this creation can the many come into being out of the created intelligence.

#### 4. Aquinas’s Reception of the Esse–Essentia Structure in the Creation in *Liber de Causis* and His Critique of Avicenna

This reading of the *LDC* by Avicenna, however, is criticized by Aquinas, and the most superficial reason for this is that Aquinas regards this interpretation as a departure from the monotheistic creation theory. In the *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 90, a. 2 co., Aquinas replaces the notion of “Intelligence” created by the First Cause in the *LDC* and by Avicenna with “angels” (on the equivalence of the two concepts, cf. *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 65, a. 4 co.) and accuses Avicenna of thinking that the angels (the Intelligence) are capable of producing rational souls since they are active through the power of God, and then says: “But this is quite impossible, and is against faith. For [...] the rational soul cannot be produced except by creation. Now, God alone can create.” Aquinas then presents his position succinctly that the existence of the rational soul (e.g., the part of the soul in human reason) is necessarily created directly by God and not by means of intelligence (Aquinas 2007, p. 327).

How, then, does Aquinas himself interpret the First Cause creating the existence of the soul “through the mediation of Intelligence” in the *LDC*? Aquinas clarifies in his *Commentary on the Book of Causes* that, on one hand, the First Cause alone created the essence of the soul, while on the other hand, the soul is intellectual due to the activity of



the Intelligence, and “that this is what he [sc. the author of the *LDC*] means”. Aquinas then cites the text of *LDC* III, 33: “Therefore, he says, after the First Cause created the being of the soul, it placed it as something subject to an intelligence, i.e., it made it subject to the activity of an intelligence, for the intelligence to perform its activity in it, giving it its intellectual character” (Aquinas 1955, p. 22; 1996, p. 25, n81–82, my note).

Here, we can observe that, unlike Avicenna, Aquinas reads the view in the *LDC* as that the First Cause creates the existence of the soul directly rather than indirectly by means of the intelligence. What the text calls the creation of the soul by means of intelligence is an imprecise formulation; it means nothing more than that reasonableness is an essential attribute of the soul and, thus, intelligence can operate upon it.

If we try to refute Aquinas by Avicenna’s grounds that the simplicity of the First Cause necessarily requires the simplicity of His creation, Aquinas replies that there is no such necessity here:

Moreover, if the good of the universe which consists in the distinction and order of its parts, does come from the intention of the first and universal agent, then it is necessary that the very distinction and order of the parts of the universe preexist in the intellect of the First Principle. And because things proceed from Him as from a principle with an intellect, which acts in accordance with conceived forms, we may not posit that from the First Principle—granting that it is simple in Its essence—there proceeds only one effect; and that it is from another being, according to the mode of its composition and power, there proceeds a multitude, and so on. (Aquinas 1959, p. 90; 1968, pp. 43–53, 59)

Clearly, Aquinas argues here against Avicenna’s position above that the First Cause does not need an intermediary through which he bestows existence to creatures. His argument in this regard is analogical: just as a formal principle does not need an intermediary to provide a single form to a plurality of entities, the First Cause naturally does not need an intermediary to bestow existence on a plurality of entities. It is hence natural that the simplicity of the First Cause’s existence does not prevent Him from conferring the plurality of existence on created beings.

In this way, we have clarified the two different paths interpreting the proposition that the First Cause creates being and essence as formulated in the *LDC* from Aquinas and Avicenna: for Avicenna, because of the simplicity with which the First Cause exists and operates, His direct creation must be simple; thus, the existence and essence that he bestows through creation must also be singular. The bestowed being and essence must also be singular, and compound multiplicity can only spring from this created singularity. Aquinas, however, argues that the soul’s existence is a direct creation of God and that other rational entities do not bestow existence on the soul but act only as proximate causes to drive it into operation.

Undoubtedly, this defense of “orthodox” monotheistic beliefs by Aquinas is not simply a boring fundamentalist’s simple exclusion of other views. To verify this, we only need to look at Aquinas’s “Critique of Heresy”, which is mentioned at the beginning of this section. This critique appears in the *Summa Theologica*, I q. 90 a. 2, whose title is “whether the soul is produced by creation (*Utrum anima sit producta in esse per creationem*)”. What Aquinas talks about here is the human soul. Aquinas clearly does this to emphasize the character of the individual human soul as God’s direct creation to demonstrate and emphasize the dignity of the individual soul and its individual relationship with God, avoiding the sola rationis of the Averroists.

## 5. Conclusions

This study shows that Proclus’s thought tends to strengthen the distinction between the One and other beings and the direct relation of the One to all beings. The *LDC* greatly develops and enriches these tendencies, which is reflected in the delimitation of existence and essence by stating that both derive from the creation of the First Cause and in following the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation, which holds that the First Cause creates the

existence and essence of intelligence and endows the lower beings with the two through intelligence. Everything is thus a complex of *esse*–*essentia*, and only the First Cause is the Pure Being.

By emphasizing the two separate perspectives of the creation of the First Cause—to endow existence and to endow essence—the *LDC* sets up the First Cause’s relation to creation as a parallel dualistic structure: the creation of existence and the granting of formal completeness. The theoretical consequence of this is a sharp separation of “being” from “essence”. This existence–essence distinction eventually became the classic paradigm of medieval metaphysics. Avicenna inherits this dualistic division and emanation’s structure and defends it through the simplicity of the First Cause and first-cause actions. Thus, Avicenna does not want to abandon the sequence of realizations (*Wirklichkeitsordnung*), the “golden chain” (*catena aurea*) of Neoplatonism (Schäfer 2017, p. 192). Aquinas, in contrast, thoroughly implemented the doctrine of monotheism, interpreting the creative activity of the First Cause in the *LDC* as the direct endowing of existence to the individual soul by the First Cause (God), an interpretation that benefits his debate against Averroists.

The *LDC* is the fruit of the fusion of Neoplatonism and monotheistic beliefs. It is in the transitional place of different civilizations and is an excellent attempt at mutual understanding and exchange among different civilizations and an attempt to eliminate philosophical tensions, laying a foundation for the development and prosperity of medieval philosophy.

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