

Aquinas

Summa Theologica, Part I, Question 2: The Existence of God¹

PHIL101

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updated: 10/1/13 12:26 PM

Section III: How do I know?

Reading III.1

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was a Dominican Priest who exerted enormous influence over the development of Christian doctrine. Aristotle's works having recently come again to light, Aquinas became a principal guide of their re-configuration along Christian lines. His writings are extensive in theology and philosophy; a mystical experience late in life prompted him to discontinue his work as "mere straw".²

Like Anselm before him, Aquinas believed that rational knowledge of God's existence is possible for humans. Note the orderly presentation of his thoughts. Our primary concern, in this section of the course, is with Aquinas's "five ways" – i.e., his arguments for the existence of God. These take the form of *cosmological* arguments for God's existence. Unlike an *ontological* argument, a cosmological argument makes some appeal to the empirical world about us. Specifically, these arguments call our attention to certain features of our world, such as the fact of motion or the appearance of purpose in certain events. The observation of such features represents a basis for argument to God's existence.

Aquinas's cosmological arguments are located in the Third Article, below; the First and Second Articles are interesting for their further expression of Aquinas's rationalist views on the nature of God and our knowledge of him. Unlike Anselm, Aquinas rejects the possibility of an ontological proof of God's existence – i.e., the existence of God is not "self-evident" to us, on Aquinas' account. This is the substance of the First Article. In the Second Article, Aquinas argues that nevertheless proof can be had of God's existence, which opens the way to the Third Article, where Aquinas presents his proofs.

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas. *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*. New York: Benziger Bros., 1911.

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² Ralph McInerny. Saint Thomas Aquinas. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2009.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas/>.

QUESTION II.
THE EXISTENCE OF GOD.
(In Three Articles.)

Because the chief aim of Sacred Doctrine is to teach the knowledge of God, not only as He is in Himself, but also as He is the beginning of things and their last end, and especially of rational creatures, as is clear from what has been already said; therefore, in our endeavour to expound this science: —

(1) We shall treat of God. (2) Of the rational creature's advance towards God. (3) Of Christ, Who as man, is our way to God. In treating of God there will be a threefold division: —

(1) For we shall consider whatever concerns the Divine Essence. (2) Whatever concerns the distinctions of Persons. (3) Whatever concerns the issue of creatures from Him. Concerning the Divine Essence, we must consider: —

(1) Whether God exists? (2) The manner of His existence, or, rather, what is *not* the manner of His existence. (3) Whatever concerns His operations — namely, His Knowledge, Will, Power. Concerning the first, three points are to be discussed: —

(1) Whether the proposition 'God exists' is self-evident? (2) Whether it is demonstrable? (3) Whether God exists?

First Article,
WHETHER THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IS SELF-EVIDENT?

We proceed thus to the First Article: —

Objection 1. It seems that the Existence of God is self-evident. Those things are said to be self-evident to us the knowledge of which is naturally implanted in us, as we can see in regard to first principles. But the Damascene³ says that, *the knowledge of God is naturally implanted in all*. Therefore the Existence of God is self-evident.

Obj. 2. Further, those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known, which the Philosopher⁴ says is true of the first principles of demonstration. Thus, when the nature of a whole and of a part is known, it is at once recognized that every whole is greater than its part. But as soon as the signification of the word 'God' is understood, it is at once seen that God exists. For by this word is signified that thing than which nothing greater can exist. But that which exists actually and mentally is greater than that which exists only mentally. Therefore, because as soon as the word 'God' is understood it exists mentally, it also follows that it exists actually. Therefore the proposition that God exists is self-evident.⁵

Obj. 3. Further, the existence of Truth is self-evident; for whoever denies the existence of Truth concedes that Truth does not exist. Now, if Truth does not exist, then the proposition 'Truth does not exist' is true. But if there is anything true, there must be Truth. God is Truth itself: *I am the way, the truth, and the life* (John xiv. 6). Therefore the proposition that God exists is self-evident.

On the contrary, No one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident; as is clear from the Philosopher, concerning the first principles of demonstration. The opposite of the proposition 'God is' can be mentally admitted: *The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God* (Ps. lii. 1). Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident.

I answer that, A thing can be self-evident in either of two ways; on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other, self-evident in itself, and to us. A proposition is self-evident because the predicate is included in the notion of the subject, as 'Man is an animal,' for animal is contained in the formal idea of man. If, therefore, the essence of the predicate and subject be known to all, the proposition will be self-evident to all; as is clear with regard to the first principles of demonstration, the terms of which are common things that no one is ignorant of, such as being and non-being, whole and part, and such like. If there are some to whom the essence of the predicate and subject are unknown, the proposition will be

³ I.e., St. Paul.

⁴ I.e., Aristotle. See in particular, *Metaphysics* IV.3, where Aristotle identifies the principle of non-contradiction as basic to all our formal reasoning.

⁵ Cf. St. Anselm's ontological argument for God's existence.

self-evident in itself, but not to those who do not know the meaning of the predicate and subject of the proposition. Therefore, it happens, as Boethius says, that there are some mental concepts self-evident only to the learned, as that incorporeal substances are not in space. Therefore I say that this proposition, 'God exists,' of itself is self-evident, for the predicate is the same as the subject; because God is His Own Existence. Forasmuch as we do not know the Essence of God, the proposition is not self-evident to us; but needs to be proved by such things as are more evident to us, though less evident in their nature — namely, by effects.⁶

Reply Obj. 1. To know that God exists in a general and indefinite way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by a man must be naturally known to him. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching; for many there are who imagine that man's perfect good (which is happiness) consists in riches, and others in pleasures, and others in something else.⁷

Reply Obj. 2. Perhaps not everyone who hears of this word 'God' may understand it to signify something than which nothing better can be imagined, seeing that some have believed God to be a body. Yet, granted that everyone understands that by this word 'God' is signified something than which nothing greater can be imagined, nevertheless, it does not therefore follow that he understands that what the word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally. Nor can it be argued logically that it actually exists, unless it be admitted that there exists something than which nothing greater can be imagined; and this precisely is not admitted by those who hold that God does not exist.

Reply Obj. 3. The existence of truth in a general way is self-evident, but the existence of a Primal Truth is not self-evident to us.

Second Article, WHETHER IT CAN BE DEMONSTRATED THAT GOD EXISTS ?

We proceed thus to the Second Article: —

Objection 1. It seems that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated; for it is an article of Faith that God exists. But what is of Faith cannot be demonstrated, because a demonstration produces knowledge; whereas Faith is of the unseen (Heb. xi. i). Therefore it cannot be demonstrated that God exists.

Obj. 2. Further, the essence is the middle term of demonstration. But we cannot know in what God's essence consists, but solely in what it does not consist; as the Damascene says. Therefore we cannot demonstrate that God exists.

Obj. 3. Further, if the existence of God were demonstrated, this could only be from His effects. But the effects are not proportionate to Him, since He is infinite and His effects are finite; and between the finite and infinite there is no proportion. Therefore, since a cause cannot be demonstrated by an effect not proportionate to it, it seems that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated.

On the contrary, The Apostle says: *The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made* (Rom. i. 20). But this would not be unless the existence of God could be demonstrated through the things that are made; for the first thing we must know of anything is, whether it exists.

I answer that, Demonstration can be made in two ways: One is through the cause, and is called *a priori*, and this is to argue from what is prior absolutely. The other is through the effect, and is called a demonstration *a posteriori*; this is to argue from what is prior relatively only to us. When an effect is better known to us than its cause, from the effect we proceed to the knowledge of the efficient cause. From every effect the existence of a proportionate cause can be demonstrated, so long as its effects are better known to us. Since every effect depends upon its cause, if the effect exists, the cause must have pre-existed. Hence the existence of God, in so far as it is not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated from those of His effects which are known to us.

Reply Obj. 1. The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of Faith, but are preambles to the articles; for Faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace presupposes nature, and perfection supposes something that can be perfected. Nevertheless,

⁶ Thus, that is, by cosmological argument.

⁷ Aquinas alludes here to Aristotle's discussion of happiness in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I.

there is nothing to prevent a man, who cannot grasp its proof, accepting, as a matter of Faith, something in itself capable of being known and demonstrated.

Reply Obj. 2. When the existence of a cause is demonstrated from an effect, this effect takes the place of the definition of the cause in proof of the cause's existence. This is especially the case in regard to God, because, in order to prove the existence of anything, it is necessary to accept as a middle term the meaning of the word, and not its essence, for the question of its essence follows on the question of its existence. The names given to God are derived from His effects; consequently, in demonstrating the existence of God from His effects, we may take for the middle term the meaning of the word 'God.'⁸

Reply Obj. 3. From effects not proportionate to the cause no perfect knowledge of that cause can be obtained. Yet from every effect the existence of the cause can be demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects; though from them we cannot perfectly know God as He is in His own Essence.

Third Article,
WHETHER GOD EXISTS?

We proceed thus to the Third Article: —

Objection 1. It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the word 'God' means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist.

Obj. 2. Further, it is superfluous to suppose that, what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything that appears in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle, which is nature; and all things that happen intentionally can be reduced to one principle, which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence.

On the contrary, It is said in the person of God: *I am Who am* (Exod. iii. 14).

I answer that, The existence of God can be proved in five ways.

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain and evident to our senses that some things are in motion. Whatever is in motion is moved by another, for nothing can be in motion except it have a potentiality for that towards which it is being moved; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. By 'motion' we mean nothing else than the reduction of something from a state of potentiality into a state of actuality.⁹ Nothing, however, can be reduced from a state of potentiality into a state of actuality, unless by something already in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. It is not possible that the same thing should be at once in a state of actuality and potentiality from the same point of view, but only from different points of view. What is actually hot cannot simultaneously be only potentially hot; still, it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that from the same point of view and in the same way anything should be both moved and mover, or that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. This cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover — seeing that subsequent movers only move inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff only moves because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a First Mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The second way is from the formality of efficient causation. In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causation. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. In efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or one only. To take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate cause, nor any intermediate. If in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be

⁸ The demonstration of God's existence by his effects will be a topic of Kierkegaard's discussion.

⁹ Defined thus broadly, Aquinas refers to changes of all sorts.

an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to put forward a First Efficient Cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that could either exist or not exist, since they are found to be generated, and then to corrupt; and, consequently, they can exist, and then not exist. It is impossible for these always to exist, for that which can one day cease to exist must at some time have not existed. Therefore, if everything could cease to exist, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. If this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence — which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. Every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. It is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

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. But 'more' and 'less' are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is in the degree of 'most,' 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 the truer things are, the more truly they exist. What is most complete in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the most complete form of heat, is the cause whereby all things are made hot. 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.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world; for we see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for some purpose, which fact is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their purpose. Whatever lacks intelligence cannot fulfill some purpose, unless it be directed by some being endowed with intelligence and knowledge; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are ordained towards a definite purpose; and this being we call God.

Reply Obj. 1. As Augustine says: Since God is wholly good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil. This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.

Reply Obj. 2. Since nature works out its determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must needs be traced back to God, as to its first cause. So also whatever is done designedly must also be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason or will, for these can suffer change and are defective; whereas things capable of motion and of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle.

Commentary

The term *cosmological* derives of course from *cosmos*, itself deriving from the Ancient Greek term *kosmos*, meaning “orderly being” – i.e., some existing thing or region exhibiting order. We speak of the whole of our “cosmos” – the universe in which we live – suggesting that the whole of the realm in which we live is an orderly realm. We can also speak of lesser portions of our world as exhibiting order, as does a solar system, a colony of bees, or an individual human body. Anything that has order may be thought of as a cosmos. It is revealing to note that the same term *kosmos* is also the root of our word, *cosmetic*, which illustrates another aspect of the original Greek term: a *kosmos* is also an *ornament*, something of pleasing aesthetic quality. In other words, order is beautiful to us humans.

The opposite of order is of course *chaos*, which also derives from an Ancient Greek word, namely, *kaos*. Chaos is being that lacks order, being out of order. We humans respond to chaos in the way opposite of our response to cosmos: we detest chaos and work to eliminate or avoid it to the extent possible. We seek orderly rooms, orderly desks, orderly cities, orderly, predictable lives.¹⁰

A reason for these responses lies perhaps in the fact that chaos cannot be manipulated by us in the way that an orderly set of things can. Note, then, the role of a further Ancient Greek concept, that of *logos*. *Logos* means “word”, “idea”, or “account” and gives our term *logic*. You will also notice it in the word ‘cosmology’. Consider then, the meaning of ‘cosmology’. This term is made up of *cosmos*, or ordered being, and *logos*, or word or account. That is, cosmology is the word or account of ordered being. That is, in other words, cosmology is the search for the logical principles of order in our universe.

A *cosmological argument*, then, will be one based on certain, observed principles of order in our universe. Given that the universe exhibits a certain kind of order, the argument goes, we must conclude that God exists as the source or explanation of that order. Thus, where Aquinas counts five ways of proving God’s existence, we may look for five different principles of order, each of which requires the existence of God to explain.

The first of the principles of order that Aquinas points to concerns motion and in particular the evident fact that nothing moves except that it is moved by something else. That is, as we observe the world about us, it appears that one or another thing moves – or, more broadly, undergoes some form of change – only if some further thing causes that motion. This is obviously the case with such things as billiard balls and bowling pins. And we know now too that the planets move not without cause but owing to the gravitational effect of the sun’s mass upon theirs. Indeed, the entire world about us appears to be in a constant state of motion: it’s well-nigh impossible to find something that isn’t in some state of motion or other.

For Aquinas, this raises the question of what explains all of this motion. Of course, at a local level, one object’s motion may be explained by the influence of some further object. But this leads immediately to a *regress*: the motion of one object may be explained by the motion of a prior object, and it by that of a prior one. What sets the whole of the series in motion? For Aquinas, it makes no sense to suggest that the series has no “first” or beginning motion; the series cannot regress infinitely, for we should then still lack an answer to the question where the whole of the series came from. The only way to avoid this regress, evidently, is to postulate the existence of some “first motion” or *primum mobile*, as Aquinas would have called it. This we otherwise refer to as God. Thus, from a certain, observed cosmological principle, we may infer the existence of God.

Aquinas’s second and third ways resemble this first. The second is in terms of cause and effect, while the third is in terms of contingency. The fourth principle of order used by Aquinas involves the varying degrees of “perfection” that we may perceive about us. You may work out for yourself the specific form that each of these arguments takes.

The fifth way focuses on “purpose” and has provoked a particularly large amount of discussion, including in our own time. Here, Aquinas observes that some things in our world appear to act with purpose, even though they lack the intellectual means of conceiving and executing purposive behavior. Presumably, Aquinas is thinking here of the behavior of plants, for example, and many animals, that act for a “best result” without the ability to know what a best result might be.

¹⁰ Note, too, however, the we also exhibit an opposite tendency for chaos. We may experience too much order in our lives as stifling. The opposition of rational order to a wilder abandon is a further hallmark of our human form of being.

Flowers, for instance, turn towards the sun as the sun moves across the sky. Insects and other seemingly mindless creatures mate and build elaborate structures without any planning or intent. Birds fly south for the winter. Salmon return to their creeks to spawn. Such purpose, if not conceived by the object in question can only otherwise have been conferred from without – thus a further argument for God's existence: God is the “purpose-giver” of these and other things. You should consider the extent to which you find these arguments convincing.

Ask Yourself:

1. What is the general form of a cosmological argument? What do such arguments have in common?
2. Why, exactly, does Aquinas think that an infinite regress of earlier causes or motions isn't adequate to explain the ongoing events and motions of the world?
3. What alternative explanation have we devised, now, for the purposive behavior of non-purposive beings?
4. Do Aquinas' arguments make belief in God epistemically rational, in your judgment?