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The Five Ways.

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Part I

Philosophy of Religion



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Aquinas' Five Ways

Timothy J. Pawl

All quotations from Aquinas are taken from Alfred Freddoso's translation of the *Summa theologiae*, available online at www.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC-part1.htm

Baisnee, Jules. "St. Thomas Aquinas's Proofs of the Existence of God Presented in Their Chronological Order," in *Philosophical Studies in Honor of the Very Reverend Ignatius Smith, O.P.*, edited by John K. Ryan, 29–64. Westminster: The Newman Press, 1952.

Bochenski, Joseph M. "The Five Ways," in *The Rationality of Theism*, edited by Adolfo García de la Sienra, 61–92. Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2000.

Kenny, Anthony. *The Five Ways: Saint Thomas Aquinas' Proofs of God's Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.

Pawl, Timothy. "The Five Ways," in *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Aquinas*, edited by Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–74) offered his Five Ways, or five proofs for the existence of God, near the beginning of his *magnum opus*, the *Summa theologiae* (Part 1, Question 2, Article 3, the response). The *Summa* (ST), as it is often called, was written as a textbook for men in their priestly formation. It is well over 2,500 pages in a standard English translation from the Latin, but the Five Ways take up only slightly more than one page.

Just the Arguments: 100 of the Most Important Arguments in Western Philosophy, First Edition. Edited by Michael Bruce and Steven Barbone.
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Nevertheless, they are almost assuredly the most commented on section of the *Summa* and some of the most well-known arguments for the existence of God.

One should note that while each Way concludes with some variation of “and this we call God,” Aquinas did not intend the Five Ways to be demonstrations of a uniquely Christian God. In fact, he warns against attempts to prove, for instance, that God is triune (three persons but one being, as Christians affirm), since such arguments, he explains, will fall short and lead unbelievers to scoff (see his *Summa contra gentiles*, Book 1, Chapter 9, paragraph 2). Furthermore, Aquinas did not take the Five Ways to show that this thing we call “God” is perfect, good, immutable, eternal, powerful, knowledgeable, or even that there is just one such thing. As a consequence, some common criticisms of the Ways – for instance, that they do not demonstrate an omnipotent being – clearly miss the mark. Aquinas goes on later to devote many pages to whether the thing we call “God” in the Five Ways is omnipotent. And the same is true for the other abovementioned attributes. Rather, Aquinas’ intent in the Five Ways is to show that there is something-or-other that, for instance, causes things but is itself uncaused, or something that is necessary and does not have that necessary existence from another. In fact, he does not argue that the Five Ways conclude to the same thing – rather than five different things – until later in the *Summa* (Part 1, Question 11, Article 3, the response).

Finally, it is important to note that while the Five Ways are Aquinas’ most often cited arguments for the existence of God, they are not his most detailed or nuanced. The *Summa*, as said above, is a textbook of sorts, and written for an audience of common men in formation for the priesthood – not academics, scholars, atheists, or agnostics. To judge Aquinas’ best and most powerful arguments for the existence of God, one would do better to look at the parallel passages from his other works rather than at his *Summa* (see Baisnee for a helpful list of these passages). That said, it is the arguments in the *Summa* that have received the most attention and have become, by any reasonable standard, some of the most important arguments in the Western intellectual tradition.

The First Way – The Argument from Motion

The First Way focuses on motion. By “motion,” Aquinas means the three sorts of accidental change that Aristotle differentiates: change of location (e.g., moving across the room), change in quality (e.g., heating up), and change in quantity (e.g., getting fatter). The general thrust of the argument is that anything changed in one of these ways is changed by something else. That something else, in changing the first thing, either is itself changed or

remains changeless. A series of changing changers cannot proceed infinitely. So there must be some first, unchanging being. That being we call "God."

The argument below uses 'F' as a variable governing end states of being correlated with the three sorts of motion mentioned above. For instance, one could substitute "across the room," "hot," or "fat" for F. Aquinas provides three detailed defenses of C3 in the *Summa contra gentiles*, Part 1, Chapter 13. He considers the common objection that a thing can move itself (e.g., the runner moves himself when sprinting from the starting line) by saying that such cases are instances of a part moving a whole and not a thing moving itself. In P3, Aquinas says that the mover must be in a state of actuality relevant to F in order to make something F. The argument would be more forceful if Aquinas could say that the mover must be actually F, but he cannot say that, at least not with perfect generality. For Aquinas thinks that God can move things in many ways that God is not actually: God can fatten a man without himself being fat. In that case, God is said to be virtually F, where something is "virtually F" if it is not itself F but it has the power to make others F. One may say, then, that something is in a state of actuality relevant to F when it is either actually F or virtually F.

It is certain, and obvious to the senses, that in this world some things are moved. But everything that is moved is moved by another. For nothing is moved except insofar as it is in potentiality with respect to that actuality toward which it is moved, whereas something effects motion insofar as it is in actuality in a relevant respect. After all, to effect motion is just to lead something from potentiality into actuality. But a thing cannot be led from potentiality into actuality except through some being that is in actuality in a relevant respect; for example, something that is hot in actuality – say, a fire – makes a piece of wood, which is hot in potentiality, to be hot in actuality, and it thereby moves and alters the piece of wood. But it is impossible for something to be simultaneously in potentiality and in actuality with respect to same thing; rather, it can be in potentiality and in actuality only with respect to different things. For what is hot in actuality cannot simultaneously be hot in potentiality; rather, it is cold in potentiality. Therefore, it is impossible that something should be both mover and moved in the same way and with respect to the same thing, or, in other words, that something should move itself. Therefore, everything that is moved must be moved by another.

If, then, that by which something is moved is itself moved, then it, too, must be moved by another, and that other by still another. But this does not go on to infinity. For if it did, then there would not be any first mover and, as a result, none of the others would effect motion, either. For secondary movers effect motion only because they are being moved by a first mover, just as a stick does not effect motion except because it is being moved by a hand. Therefore, one has to arrive at some first mover that is not being moved by anything. And this is what everyone takes to be God. (ST I, q2, a3, response)

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- P1. Some things are moved.
- P2. If something is moved to being F, then it is potentially but not actually F.
- P3. If something moves a thing to be F, then it (the mover) is in a state of actuality relevant to F.
- C1. If something were to move itself to be F (e.g., be both moved and its own mover), then it would be both potentially but not actually F and also in a state of actuality relevant to F (conjunction, and *modus ponens*, P1, P2, P3).
- P4. But it is not possible for something to be both potentially but not actually F and also in a state of actuality relevant to F.
- C2. It is not possible for something to move itself to be F (*modus tollens*, C1, P4).
- P5. If it is not possible for something to move itself to be F, then if something is moved, it is moved by something else.
- C3. If something is moved, it is moved by something else (*modus ponens*, C2, P5).
- P5. If B moves A and B is moved, then B must be moved by some other thing, C. And if C is moved, then C must be moved by still some other thing, D. And so on.
- P6. If the series of movers were to go on to infinity, then there would be no first mover.
- P7. If there were no first mover, then there would be no motion.
- C4. There is a first mover (*modus tollens*, P1, P7).
- C5. That first mover is the thing that everyone takes to be God (definition).

The Second Way – The Argument from Causation

Whereas the First Way focused on accidental changes, the Second Way focuses on ordered series of efficient causation. An efficient cause is that which produces something or an alteration in something. The composer is the efficient cause of the sonata; the fire is the efficient cause of the heating of the kettle. An ordered series is a series in which the causal work of later members in the series depends on the simultaneous causal work of earlier members in the series. If the fire heats the kettle and the kettle heats the water, it is an ordered series, since the kettle's heating the water depends upon the causal activity of the earlier cause, the fire. Likewise, a system of gears is an ordered causal series, since the causal action of one intermediate gear spinning another, later gear depends upon the causal activity of previous gears in the system. Aquinas argues in the Second Way, to continue with the gear image, that the system cannot be gears all the way back. An

infinite series of gears, without a first cause of their spinning, would not be in motion.

We find that among sensible things there is an ordering of efficient causes, and yet we do not find – nor is it possible to find – anything that is an efficient cause of its own self. For if something were an efficient cause of itself, then it would be prior to itself – which is impossible.

But it is impossible to go on to infinity among efficient causes. For in every case of ordered efficient causes, the first is a cause of the intermediate and the intermediate is a cause of the last – and this regardless of whether the intermediate is constituted by many causes or by just one. But when a cause is removed, its effect is removed. Therefore, if there were no first among the efficient causes, then neither would there be a last or an intermediate. But if the efficient causes went on to infinity, there would not be a first efficient cause, and so there would not be a last effect or any intermediate efficient causes, either – which is obviously false. Therefore, one must posit some first efficient cause – which everyone calls God. (ST I, q2, a3, response)

- P1. There is an ordered series of efficient causes.
- P2. Necessarily, if X is an efficient cause of Y, then X is prior to Y.
 - C1. Necessarily, if X is an efficient cause of X, then X is prior to X (instantiation, P2).
- P3. It is not possible for X to be prior to X.
 - C2. It is not possible for X to be an efficient cause of itself (*modus tollens*, C1, P3).
- P4. If something is an ordered series of efficient causes, then the first cause causes the intermediate cause(s), and the intermediate cause(s) cause(s) the last effect.
- P5. If a cause is removed from an ordered series of efficient causes, then the effects after that cause are removed as well.
 - C3. If there were no first cause, then there would be no subsequent effects (instantiation, P4, P5).
- P6. If an ordered series of efficient causes could precede infinitely, then there would be no first cause.
 - C4. If an ordered series of efficient causes could precede infinitely, then there would be no subsequent effects (hypothetical syllogism, C3, P6).
- P7. But there are subsequent effects.
 - C5. An ordered series of efficient causes cannot precede infinitely (*modus tollens*, C4, P7).
- P8. An ordered series of efficient causes either precedes infinitely, terminates in a cause that causes itself, or terminates in an uncaused cause.
 - C6. An ordered series of efficient causation terminates in an uncaused cause (disjunctive syllogism, C2, C5, P8).
 - C7. We call that uncaused cause “God” (definition).

The Third Way – The Argument from Possibility and Necessity

Aquinas has a specific understanding of possibility and necessity in mind in the Third Way, and it is not the common understanding in today's philosophical discussions. When Aquinas calls something "necessary," in this argument, he means that it is not subject to generation or corruption. A necessary being exists, but it does not come into existence by composition, and it cannot cease existing by way of decomposition. Similarly, a possible being, in this context, exists, but it does or could have come into existence by way of composition, and it can cease to exist by way of decomposition. The most debated inference in this argument is the inference from P3 to C2. Most commentators who attempt to justify it do so by arguing that Aquinas had in mind an implicit premise which, together with P3, entails C2. As it stands, without the help of an implicit premise, the inference is invalid and commits the fallacy of composition.

Certain of the things we find in the world are able to exist and able not to exist; for some things are found to be generated and corrupted and, as a result, they are able to exist and able not to exist.

But it is impossible that everything should be like this; for that which is able not to exist is such that at some time it does not exist. Therefore, if everything is such that it is able not to exist, then at some time nothing existed in the world. But if this were true, then nothing would exist even now. For what does not exist begins to exist only through something that does exist; therefore, if there were no beings, then it was impossible that anything should have begun to exist, and so nothing would exist now – which is obviously false. Therefore, not all beings are able to exist [and able not to exist]; rather, it must be that there is something necessary in the world.

Now every necessary being either has a cause of its necessity from outside itself or it does not. But it is impossible to go on to infinity among necessary beings that have a cause of their necessity – in the same way, as was proved above, that it is impossible to go on to infinity among efficient causes. Therefore, one must posit something that is necessary *per se*, which does not have a cause of its necessity from outside itself but is instead a cause of necessity for the other [necessary] things. But this everyone calls God. (ST I, q2, a3, response)

- P1. Some things are able to be generated or corrupted.
- P2. If some things are able to be generated or corrupted, then it is possible for those things either to exist or not to exist.
- C1. It is possible for some things to exist or not to exist (*modus ponens*, P1, P2).

- P3. If, for each thing, it is possible that it not exist, then at some time it does not exist.
 C2. If, for each thing, at some time it does not exist, then at some time nothing exists (universal generalization, P3).
- P4. If at some time nothing exists, then there would have been nothing to cause another thing to exist.
- P5. If there had been nothing to cause another being to exist, then nothing could have come into existence.
- P6. If nothing could have come into existence, then nothing would exist even now.
- P7. But something does exist now.
 C3. Something could have come into existence (*modus tollens*, P6, P7).
 C4. There had to have been something to cause another thing to exist (*modus tollens*, P5, C3).
 C5. At no time did nothing exist (*modus tollens*, P4, C4).
 C6. It is not true that, for each thing, at some time it does not exist (*modus tollens*, C2, C5).
 C7. There must be something that is not possible not to exist – that is, there must be a necessary being (*modus tollens*, P3, C6).
- P8. A necessary being has a cause for its necessity from something else or it does not.
- P9. It is not possible for there to be an infinite series of beings with their necessity from something else.
 C8. There must be some necessary being with its necessity not from something else (disjunctive syllogism, P8, P9).
 C9. We call that necessary being whose necessity comes from nothing else “God” (definition).

The Fourth Way – The Argument from Gradation

In the Fourth Way, Aquinas relies on two arguments from Aristotle, which he does not provide in the text, to justify two of his premises (P3 and P4). P1 is observably true. P2 requires a scope restriction. Aquinas seems to be saying that any comparative predications of a property entail that there exists something that is maximally that property. If this were true, then if Bob is fatter than Tom, then there must be something that is maximally fat. Worse still, from P4, it would follow that this fattest thing would be the cause of all other fat things. It seems better to restrict P2 to perfections and then take heat (his example) to be a form of perfection (note that this is just an example; one can grant his point while denying that heat is a perfection). C4 seems to commit the fallacy of composition. Even if it were proven

that there is a thing that is most good, and a thing that is most noble, and a thing that is most true, it has yet to be shown why this must be the same thing. Aquinas perhaps had in mind a principle requiring the cause of a thing's being also to be the cause of its other positive attributes or the cause of its perfections. If so, such a premise would need to be inserted into the argument before C4.

In the world some things are found to be more and less good, more and less true, more and less noble, etc. But *more* and *less* are predicated of diverse things insofar as they approach in diverse ways that which is maximal in a given respect. For instance, the hotter something is, the closer it approaches that which is maximally hot. Therefore, there is something that is maximally true, maximally good, and maximally noble, and, as a result, is a maximal being; for according to the Philosopher in *Metaphysics* 2, things that are maximally true are maximally beings.

But, as is claimed in the same book, that which is maximal in a given genus is a cause of all the things that belong to that genus; for instance, fire, which is maximally hot, is a cause of all hot things. Therefore, there is something that is a cause for all beings of their *esse*, their goodness, and each of their perfections – and this we call God. (ST I, q2, a3, response)

- P1. There are some things that are more or less good, more or less true, or more or less noble.
- P2. If something is more or less F, then there is something maximally F.
 - C1. There is something maximally good, something maximally true, and something maximally noble (substitution, and *modus ponens*, P1, P2).
 - C2. There is something maximally true (simplification, C1).
- P3. If something is maximally true, then it is maximally being.
 - C3. Something is maximally being (*modus ponens*, C2, P3).
- P4. If something is maximally F, then it is the cause of all things that are F.
 - C4. There is something that is the cause for all beings, their goodness, and each of their perfections (*modus ponens*, C1, P4).
 - C5. We call that thing which is the cause of the being, goodness, and perfection of all other things “God” (definition).

The Fifth Way – The Argument from the Governance

Aquinas argues in the Fifth Way that if things always or for the most part act for a particular end, that is evidence of their being directed at that end by an intelligent agent. In nature, most natural things act always or for the most part for a particular end, and so nature is directed by an intelligent agent. Note that, for Aquinas, to act for the sake of an end does not require intentionality. In Aquinas' way of speaking, fire acts for the sake of the end

when it burns upwards and the stone acts for the sake of the end when falling down to the earth. One might think that evolutionary biology allows a way out of the design or chance dilemma, since, given evolutionary biology, something could always or for the most part act for the sake of an end but not due to either design or chance but rather natural selection. Aquinas' argument, however, is not aimed solely at biological entities. An electron, for instance, attracts positively charged particles always or for the most part, but it did not acquire this property via some evolutionary process. So even if natural selection narrows the scope of Aquinas' argument, it alone does not defeat the argument.

We see that some things lacking cognition, viz., natural bodies, act for the sake of an end. This is apparent from the fact that they always or very frequently act in the same way in order to bring about that which is best, and from this it is clear that it is not by chance, but by design, that they attain the end.

But things lacking cognition tend toward an end only if they are directed by something that has cognition and intelligence, in the way that an arrow is directed by an archer. Therefore, there is something intelligent by which all natural things are ordered to an end – and this we call God. (ST I, q2, a3, response)

- P1. If something always or for the most part acts in the same way in order to bring about that which is best, then it acts for the sake of an end.
- P2. Beings in nature always or for the most part act in the same way in order to bring about that which is best.
 - C1. Beings in nature act for the sake of an end (*modus ponens*, P1, P2).
- P3. If beings in nature act for the sake of an end, then beings in nature are directed by something that has cognition and intelligence.
 - C2. Beings in nature are directed by something that has cognition and intelligence (*modus ponens*, C1, P3).
 - C3. We call that director of unthinking things “God” (definition).