

The Five Ways

THOMAS AQUINAS (1225-1274)

Aquinas was an Italian theologian and philosopher who spent his life in the Dominican Order, teaching and writing. His writings set forth in a systematic form a complete theory of God, humanity, and the universe. He is generally regarded as the greatest scholastic thinker. Aquinas combined the revelation and interpretation of holy scripture with the secular metaphysical doctrines of Aristotle and the post-Aristotelian Greek and Roman philosophers.

Aquinas' philosophical synthesis of philosophy and theology became the accepted teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. It is known today as Thomism. It continues to exercise a profound intellectual influence both on Church doctrine and the philosophical works of Catholic and non-Catholic thinkers. Aquinas' two major works are *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologica* from which the following excerpt is taken.

Aquinas' famous "Five Ways" of proving the existence of God is the best known of his works. The first way argues that the fact of change or motion provides proof for the existence of an unmoved mover that originates change or motion. The second way argues from the fact that some things are caused to infer the existence of a first cause. The third way argues from the fact that some things are contingent to the existence of that which exists necessarily. The fourth way argues from the fact that there are degrees of excellence to infer the existence of a perfect being. The fifth way argues from the alleged fact that because natural objects behave purposefully, this infers the existence of an intelligence that directs the activities of natural objects.

Vocabulary

Potentiality:	that which is possible; possibility
Actuality:	that which exists in reality; that which is
Efficient cause:	the immediate cause of something
Contingent:	that which does not have to exist
Necessary:	that which must exist

Concepts

Change or motion:
Infinite regression:
First cause:
Necessary existence:
Perfect being:
Natural harmony:
Potentiality:
Actuality:
Efficient Cause:
Contingent:
Necessary:

Questions:

- 1. Explain in your own words Aquinas' five ways.*
- 2. What are the main ideas in each of his arguments?*
- 3. What are some criticisms of Aquinas' arguments?*
- 4. How do you think Aquinas would respond to those criticisms?*

**THE FIRST WAY:
THE ARGUMENT FROM
CHANGE**

The first and clearest way is taken from the idea of motion. (1) Now it is certain, and our senses corroborate it, that some things in this world are in motion. (2) But everything which is in motion is moved by something else. (3) For nothing is in motion except in so far as it is in potentiality in relation to that towards which it is in motion. (4) Now a thing causes movement in so far as it is in actuality. For to cause movement is nothing else than to bring something from potentiality to actuality; but a thing cannot be brought from potentiality to actuality except by something which exists in actuality, as, for example, that which is hot in actuality, like fire, makes wood, which is only hot in potentiality, to be hot in actuality, and thereby causes movement in it and alters it. (5) But it is not possible that the same thing should be at the same time in actuality and potentiality in relation to the same thing, but only in relation to different things; for what is hot in actuality cannot at the same time be hot in potentiality, though it is at the same time cold in potentiality. (6) It is impossible, therefore, that in relation to the same thing and in the same way anything should both cause movement and be caused, or that it should

cause itself to move. (7) Everything, therefore, that is in motion must be moved by something else. If, therefore, the thing which causes it to move be in motion, this too must be moved by something else, and so on. (8) But we cannot proceed to infinity in this way, because in that cause there would be no first mover, and in consequence, neither would there be any other mover; for secondary movers do not cause movement except they be moved by a first mover, as, for example, a stick cannot cause movement unless it is moved by the hand. Therefore, it is necessary to stop at some first mover which is moved by nothing else. And this is what we all understand God to be.

**THE SECOND WAY:
THE ARGUMENT FROM
CAUSATION**

The Second Way is taken from the idea of the efficient cause. (1) We find that there is among material things a regular order of efficient causes. (2) But we do not find, nor indeed is it possible, that anything is the efficient cause of itself, for in that case it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. (3) Now it is not possible to proceed to infinity in efficient causes. (4) For if we arrange in order all efficient causes, the first is the cause of the intermediate, and the intermediate the

cause of the last, whether the intermediate be many or only one. (5) But if we remove a cause the effect is removed; therefore, if there is no first among efficient causes, neither will there be a last or an intermediate. (6) But if we proceed to infinity in efficient causes there will be no first efficient cause, and thus there will be no ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes, which is clearly false. Therefore, it is necessary to suppose the existence of some first efficient cause, and this men call God.

THE THIRD WAY: THE ARGUMENT FROM CONTINGENCY

The Third Way rests on the idea of the “contingent” and the “necessary” and is as follows: (1) We find that there are certain things in the Universe which are capable of existing and of not existing, for we find that some things are brought into existence and then destroyed, and consequently are capable of being or not being. (2) But it is impossible for all things which exist to be of this kind, because anything which is capable of not existing, at some time or other does not exist. (3) If, therefore, all things are capable of not existing, there was a time when nothing existed in the Universe. (4) But if this is true there would also be nothing in existence now; because anything that does not

exist cannot begin to exist except by the agency of something which has existence. If, therefore, there was once nothing which existed, it would have been impossible for anything to begin to exist, and so nothing would exist now. (5) This is clearly false. Therefore, all things are not contingent, and there must be something which is necessary in the Universe. (6) But everything which is necessary either has or has not the cause of its necessity from an outside source. Now it is not possible to proceed to infinity in necessary things which have a cause of their necessity, as has been proved in the case of efficient causes. Therefore it is necessary to suppose the existence of something which is necessary in itself, not having the cause of its necessity from any outside source, but which is the cause of necessity in others. And this “something” we call God.

THE FOURTH WAY: THE ARGUMENT FROM DEGREES OF EXCELLENCE

The Fourth Way is taken from the degrees which are found in things. (1) For among different things we find that one is more or less good or true or noble; and likewise in the case of other things of this kind. (2) But the words “more” and “less” are used of different things in proportion as they approximate in their different

ways to something which has the particular quality in the highest degree — e.g., we call a thing hotter when it approximates more nearly to that which is hot in the highest degree. There is, therefore, something which is true in the highest degree, good in the highest degree and noble in the highest degree; (3) and consequently there must be also something which has being in the highest degree. For things which are true in the highest degree also have being in the highest degree. (4) But anything which has a certain quality of any kind in the highest degree is also the cause of all the things of that kind, as, for example, fire, which is hot in the highest degree, is the cause of all hot things (as is said in the book). (5) Therefore, there exists something which is the cause of being, and goodness, and of every perfection in all existing things; and this we call God.

THE FIFTH WAY: THE ARGUMENT FROM HARMONY

The Fifth Way is taken from the way in which nature is governed. (1) For we observe that certain things which lack knowledge, such as natural bodies, work for an End. This is obvious, because they always, or at any rate very frequently, operate in the same way so as to attain the best possible result. (2) Hence it is clear

that they do not arrive at their goal by chance, but by purpose. (3) But those things which have no knowledge do not move towards a goal unless they are guided by someone or something which does possess knowledge and intelligence — e.g., an arrow by an archer. Therefore, there does exist something which possesses intelligence by which all natural things are directed to their goal; and this we call God.

From Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Laurence Shapcote, 1911.