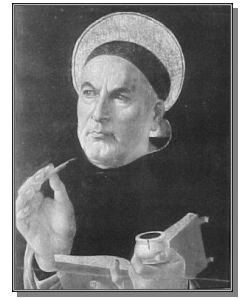


Thomas Aquinas, The 'Five Ways'

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) summed up his ideas at the end of his life in his *Summa Theologica* (also known as the *Summa Theologiae*). His demonstrations of God's existence are found near the beginning of the book and known collectively as the *Five Ways*.



1. *A priori* and *a posteriori* arguments

An *a priori* argument is based on a general principle before (prior) any evidence is produced. An *a posteriori* argument is made only after (post) something has actually been experienced.

Aquinas rejected *a priori* arguments for God's existence arguing that God himself is beyond all direct human experience. The cosmological argument claims that from examining the fact that the universe exists, you can work out the cause of the universe's existence.

2. Ways 1-3: The Cosmological Argument

'Cosmological' is a name given to a group of arguments for the existence of God, or some other underlying cause of the universe, which are based on the simple fact that there is a universe.

Way 1: Argument for an unmoved mover

- i) We can observe that things in the world are in a state of motion;
- ii) Everything that is in a state of motion must be put into this state by another thing;
- iii) But the chain of movers 'cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover; and, consequently no other mover.'
- iv) *Conclusion:* 'It is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.'

Way 2: Argument for an uncaused causer

- i) Nothing is an efficient cause of itself;
- ii) Efficient causes follow in order: a first cause causes a second, a second a third and so on;
- iii) It is not possible for efficient causes to go back to infinity, because if there is no efficient first cause, there will not be any following causes;
- iv) *Conclusion:* 'It is necessary to admit a first efficient cause to which everyone gives the name of God.'

Important note: What Aquinas isn't saying



Philosophers understand Aquinas not only to be saying what caused motion and causation in the past, but why there *continues* to be motion and causation. Frederick Copleston (in *Thomas Aquinas*) explains this point by distinguishing between winding up a watch at night (which then continues on its own) and writing on a piece of paper (which ceases when you stop writing).

Copleston says that Aquinas' arguments are making a point more like the second than the first. Aquinas is talking about a 'first mover' or 'first efficient cause' that is the reason for there being motion or causation *now*. In his view, God is something other than the universe that keeps it in existence from moment to moment. Richard Swinburne explains this idea as follows:

'... the issue is whether a personal cause acting from outside the universe causes the causes within the universe to cause what they do. More precisely, the issue is whether the power of the universe to continue its existence into the next moment, and its liability to exercise that power, have no explanation at the time in question, or whether their existence and operation depend on a person who keeps them in existence and operating. ... [T]here is the possibility of a person G being the ultimate cause of there being a universe at all; and being the complete cause of its existence at any particular moment' (*The Existence of God*, pp. 144-5).

Way 3: Argument from contingency

- i) Things which exist in nature at one time did not exist and in the future will not exist. These things at any time may or may not exist (they are contingent);
- ii) If this is so, given infinite time, at some time there was nothing in existence (since in infinite time, all possibilities are realised);
- iii) If this were true, then there would be nothing in existence, because there would be nothing to bring anything into existence;
- iv) **[Interim conclusion]:** Given that things do exist, '*there must exist something the existence of which is necessary.*'
- v) Everything necessary must be caused or uncaused;
- vi) There cannot be an infinite regress of necessary things, as there would then be no explanation for the series;
- vii) **[Final conclusion]:** There exists '*some being having of itself its own necessity ... causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.*'

For Aquinas, Ways 1 to 3 demonstrate that there is an efficient cause and prime mover of the universe that is pure actuality and not potentiality. This being's existence is necessary. Note that at this point in the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas has not demonstrated the existence of the *Christian* God.

Perhaps the strangest part of Aquinas' third argument is his view that there can be caused necessary beings. Aquinas was thinking in terms of angelic beings which, while being created beings (and which are therefore dependent on God), do not go out of existence. They are necessary because once they come into existence, there is nothing internal or external to themselves - apart from God - which would make them cease to exist. Copleston eliminated this stage of the argument from contingency, and thereby made the argument simpler.

3. Ways 4 and 5

Briefly put, they state:

Way 4: Argument from degree, or gradation

There are degrees of goodness in the world and there must be something that constitutes perfect goodness, which causes goodness in all else. Of the Five Ways, this has been least influential in the development of Religious Philosophy.

Way 5: Argument from design (a form of teleological argument)

The fifth way is based on the guidedness of nature:

- i) Some things lacking awareness seek a goal - which is apparent from the fact that always or most usually they behave in the same way which leads to the best result.
- ii) From this it is evident that it is not by chance but by intention that they reach their goal.
- iii) Nothing, however, that lacks awareness tends to a goal, except under the direction of someone with awareness and with understanding; the arrow, for example, requires an archer.
- iv) **Conclusion:** Everything in nature therefore is directed to its goal by someone with understanding and this we call 'God'.