

ESSAY  
BA course year 1 no. 5  
"Philosophy"

*Assess THREE of the proofs of the existence of God in the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas. In what sense are they described as "converging and convincing arguments which allow us to attain certainty about the truth" (CCC 31)?*

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## Introduction

Before looking at the proofs of the existence of God, we have to define the word “God” itself. It’s originally a Germanic word for the divine realm. Aquinas defines “God” as “necessary being”, who is eternal, above all, cause of all. This is what should be proved by the arguments.

In the book “Proof of God’s Existence” Fr. Paul Hendrick describes two ways of arguing the existence of things:

- On the basis of observation
- Or on the basis of a concept or definition (St. Anselm’s or Descartes’ ontological argument would be an example of this).

The Church teaches that we can come to know that God exists by reason alone, although God chose to reveal Himself further to mankind through revelation. There are two ways to come to know of the existence of God (see CCC 32 – 33):

- By natural means:  
Starting from movement, becoming, contingency, and the world’s order and beauty, one can come to a knowledge of God as the origin and the end of the universe.
- By cosmological means:  
With his openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his conscience, with his longings for the infinite and happiness, man questions himself about God’s existence. In all this he discerns signs of his spiritual soul. The soul, “the sees of eternity we bear in ourselves”, irreducible to the merely material, can have its origins only in God.

In answer to the formally placed question „Does God exist?“ the sole and unique answer given by St. Thomas Aquinas is “That God exists can be proven in five ways” (Summa Theologiae I, 2,3,c).

All five ways, which are posteriori arguments, of the Summa Theologiae, then, are found introduced in works that preceded this Summa, as arguments evolved by other thinkers (e.g. Aristotle). They are not presented as Aquinas’s own formulations. The five ways have to be regarded both as the arguments of Aquinas himself and as the arguments of other thinkers.

### “Prima via” – the first way

*“Some things in the world are certainly in process of change: this we plainly see. Now anything in process of change is being changed by something else. This is so*

*because it is characteristic of things in process of change that they do not yet have the perfection towards which they move, though able to have it; whereas it is characteristic of something causing change to have that perfection already. For to cause change is to bring into being what was previously only able to be, and this can only be done by something that already is; thus fire, which is actually hot, causes wood, which is able to be hot, to become actually hot, and in this way causes change in the wood. Now the same thing cannot at the same time be both actually x and potentially x, though it can be actually x and potentially y: the actually hot cannot at the same time be potentially hot, though it can be potentially cold.*

*Consequently, a thing in process of change cannot itself cause that same change; it cannot change itself. Of necessity therefore anything in process of change is being changed by something else. Moreover, this something else, if in process of change, is itself being changed by yet another thing; and this last by another. Now we must stop somewhere, otherwise there will be no first cause of the change, and, as a result, no subsequent causes. For it is only when acted upon by the first cause that the intermediate causes will not move anything else. Hence one is bound to arrive at some first cause of change not itself being changed by anything, and this is what everybody understands by God.”<sup>1</sup>*

First of all we need a definition of the word MOTUS, which means “motion” or “change” and includes not only movement from one place to another (local motion) but also a change of size, as when a tree grows bigger, and a change of state (alteration), as when a green leaf becomes brown. The latter is for St. Thomas Aquinas the fundamental mode of change.

Its starting point is located in things of the sensible world, things which are evidently perceived through sensation to be in movement. The examples given are of fire heating wood and the hand moving the stick which pushes something else. From an analysis of this movement of sensible things two propositions successively emerge. The first is that whatever is being moved is being moved by another. The second is that an indefinite series of movers that are being moved cannot account for this motion. The conclusion from the analysis of the movement seen in sensible things is

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<sup>1</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas

therefore that there is a first movent which is not being moved by anything, is constructed as follows:

1. start point: some things in the world are being moved.
2. propositions: a. Whatever is being moved is being moved by something else.  
b. An indefinite series of moved movents cannot account for motion.
3. conclusion: There is a first movent which is not being moved by anything at all, and this all understand to be God.

The starting point – which is that things in the world are in movement – is looked upon as evident through sensation and as needing no further elucidation.

St. Thomas Aquinas reasons with an evident example before his mind. A piece of wood which is cold is being heated by fire. The movement in this case is alteration, change in quality. Insofar as the wood is being moved from cold to heat, it is in potency to being hot. This is at once seen to be the necessary condition for being moved. So nothing can moved itself. If it is being moved, it is being moved by something else.

The second proposition follows from a continuation of this study of sensible movement. If that which is imparting the motion is thereby being moved itself, it also is necessarily being moved by another. If this third is also a movent that is being moved, it likewise is being moved by still another. But one cannot proceed in this way indefinitely, for there would be no first movent. Therefore there must be a first movent which is not being moved by anything; and this all understand to be God.

Let us take a short look at another example for this first way “motion”:

Astronomical scientists try to explain the creation of the universe with the “Big Bang”, which means the starting of all material in the “nothing” and a huge explosion; from which event on the whole universe expanded and does still expand (we are not sure by now, if this expanding motion will get the reverse motion some time). But if any material hasn’t existed before the “bang”, where should it have come from, who did initiate this explosion? This motion given to the elements has to be given by God, he can be the only “one”, who has existed before the creation of the universe.

From the earliest days of the Church this “natural” argument for the existence of God was common, although it was more clearly expressed by later philosophers like

Aquinas. One early proof – the effects of God’s deeds in creation as pointers to himself – can be seen in Paul’s letter to the Romans, 1:20:

“Ever since the creation of the world, the invisible existence of God and his everlasting power have been clearly seen by the mind’s understanding of created things.”

Result: A change presupposes an operating cause. The regress must terminate in an “unmoved mover”, an original source of movement / of change, whose activity does not presuppose a yet prior mover but who possesses the power to produce change.

### **“Secunda via” – the second way**

*“The second way is based on the nature of causation. In the observable world causes are found to be ordered in series; we never observe, nor ever could, something causing itself, for this would mean it preceded itself, and this is not possible. Such a series of causes must however stop somewhere; for in it an earlier member causes an intermediate and the intermediate a last (whether the intermediate be one or many). Now if you eliminate a cause you also eliminate its effects, so that you cannot have a last cause, nor an intermediate one, unless you have a first. Given therefore no stop in the series of causes, and hence no first cause, there would be no intermediate cause either, and hence no last effect, and this would be an open mistake. One is therefore forced to supposed some first cause, to which everyone gives the name “God”.<sup>2</sup>*

St. Thomas Aquinas argues here that a present effect must have had a prior cause, which must in turn have had a prior cause, and so backwards either in an infinite regress or to the point at which the temporal series was launched by an uncaused cause, who is God.

But this statement of Aquinas is not completely plausible. The Latin word “prius” does not really mean temporally prior, it can also mean logically prior.

So this second way can be seen as a variation of the first way, but now concerning the non-temporal terms.

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<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas

F.C. Copleston offers in his writing "Aquinas" an illustration that a person's present activity is causally dependent upon the existence of the air which he is breathing and this in turn is causally dependent upon other wider physical conditions and these upon others.

In this interpretation the motive power of the argument is the need to explain the universe. Copleston says of the series of movers / causes: "Unless there is a "first" member, a mover which is not itself moved or a cause which does not itself depend on the causal activity of a higher course, it is not possible to explain the "motion" or the causal activity of the lowest member."<sup>3</sup>

Result: If reality is not to ultimately inexplicable, it must include a being whose existence is self-explanatory, in relation to which the existence of everything else can be understood.

### **"Tertia via" – the third way**

*"Some of the things we come across can be but need not be, for we find them springing up and dying away, thus sometimes in being and sometimes not. Now everything cannot be like this, for a thing that need not be, once was not; and if everything need not be, once upon a time there was nothing. But if that were true there would be nothing even now, because something that does not exist can only be brought into being by something already existing. So that if nothing was in being nothing could be brought into being, and nothing would be in being now, which contradicts observation. Not everything therefore is the sort of thing that need not be; there has got to be something that must be. Now a thing that must be, may or may not owe this necessity to something else. But just as we must stop somewhere in a series of causes, so also in the series of things which must be and owe this to other things. One is forced therefore to suppose something which must be, and owes this to no other thing than itself; indeed it itself is the cause that other things must be."<sup>4</sup>*

The third way starts from the observable fact that some things come into being and perish, it points to the fact of contingency. The existence of such things does not

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<sup>3</sup> Aquinas, F.C. Copleston

<sup>4</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas

constitute a self-explanatory fact. But to find it “intelligible” under the principle of sufficient reason we have to look beyond it, for example how its existence is explained.

Let’s take a look at an example:

The existence of a football on the street is explained by the facts that there is a football pitch nearby and the ball has been hit too hard and it has landed on the road. But this existence of the ball and the football game are likewise contingent facts. To explain the existence of the football pitch we have to refer to the people who built it, whose existence was in turn dependent on that of their parents and so on back down the generations, back down the whole evolution. To explain the site and the materials we have to refer to the structure of the earth, to its formation, to the formation of our solar system, the formation of our galaxy. If you think far enough, you meet in the complex fact of the universe as a whole. But this is not a self-explanatory phenomenon. The existence of the physical universe with its particular structure, although so enormously vaster, is as much in need of explanation as was the existence of the football on the road. As astronomical theories state that the universe is both spatially and temporally unlimited and has had no beginning, its existence with its own concrete character is still not explained. It is merely pointed to as a uniquely comprehensive fact. There is no evident reason why the universe – that is, the existence of space-time structured as it is – is a sheer given “brute” fact. It’s a contingent fact.

If then the existence of the universe is an ultimately intelligible fact, it has to be in this way by reference to a reality whose existence and character is self-explanatory. And this is what we mean by God – as St. Thomas Aquinas says.

Aquinas adds in this third way “Now a thing that must be, may or may not owe this necessity to something else. But just as we must stop somewhere in a series of causes, so also in the series of things which must be and owe this to other things.”, which means that there has to be a necessary being. St. Thomas thinks of angels and human souls, which are immortal, but although they haven’t got an end, they need a beginning, they depend upon a creator, who himself is necessary in the absolute sense of existing without beginning or end. This has to be God.

## **Catechism of the Catholic Church 31 “Ways of Coming to Know God”**

*“Created in God’s image and called to know and love him, the person who seeks God discovers certain ways of coming to know him. These are also called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of ‘converging and convincing arguments’, which allow us to attain certainty about the truth. These ‘ways’ of approaching God from creation have a twofold point of departure: the physical world, and the human person.”*

First of all it had to be said that neither Aquinas’ nor any one else’s proofs for the existence of God could be purely scientific due to the nature of the divine realm. But Aquinas did not believe in the “intuition of being”; nor did he believe that the existence of God was self-evident, and he consequently employed quite an empirical approach in his method of argument. As F.C. Copleston states in Aquinas “Any knowledge which we have of being or beings transcending the visible world is attained by reflection on the data of experience. And it is this process of reflection, when carried through systematically, that constitutes the proofs of the proposition that God exists. The five proofs together converge and do not contradict and together lead to a convincing argument...”

Fr. Paul Hendrick states that each proof of God’s existence looks at the world from a different point of view and arrives at a different idea of God as a necessary cause of the aspect of the world.

As God is greater and beyond all our thinking, as we can’t explain him with our words, there’s no chance for us to prove his existence via sciences, as they are simply a product of our minds, of our thinking. The only chance for us is to converge or to come nearer to the truth by seeking him, by believing, without reaching the whole truth ever (maybe in heaven...?!?).

If a human person is open to the truth and the voice of his conscience, he will find ways to search for God, his own soul will show him the way, as it’s created by God.

But what will happen to people who don’t believe in God?

I don't think that the five proofs of the existence of God by St. Thomas Aquinas would convince a non-believer. They are only "intelligible" for people with faith in God. Especially "materialistic" people would need scientific proofs, arguments, which can be proved by facts. As long as they haven't started the search for God, they can't be open to His revelation and won't be able to follow this arguments of His existence.

But it isn't actually an obstacle to be a scientist with a logical thought and to believe in arguments of the existence of God. For myself – as an amateur astronomer – there are always borders in science, where you can't think or explain further beyond theories, that's when the two "two points of departure" come together. You start to think of the world and it's creation physically, creating astrophysical and astronomical theories, year by year you get more knowledge in this area, but whatever you try to discover, there's always one point of your scientific research, when you can't create anymore theories.

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