



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Give us, O Lord a steadfast heart, which no unworthy affection may drag downwards;
give us an unconquered heart, which no tribulation may wear out;
give us an upright heart, which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside.

Bestow upon us also, O Lord our God, understanding to know you,
diligence to seek you,
wisdom to find you,

and a faithfulness that may finally embrace you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--St. Thomas Aquinas

Week #14a: Thomas Aquinas' Five Ways

Why Believe in the Existence of God? Some Clues from the Observation and Analysis of Natural Processes Which Can Help One to Know That God Exists

("Theistic Proofs"/"Proofs for the Existence of God"--Arguments aimed at demonstrating the necessity of God's existence; Aristotelian in origin but adapted by Jews, Christians and Muslims in various ways to combat Aristotle's belief in the eternity of the universe [=arguments against eternal regression of causes])

A. The Cosmological Argument (A necessary first cause exists)

When we look at the world and begin to investigate the natural processes of change, i.e.

- change in place [=local motion];
- change in quality;
- change in quantity,

we identify chains of causes and show how X caused or produced change in Y which caused or produced change in Z.

Changes, in other words, are not self-produced simply by virtue of what a thing is essentially; rather changes occur as a result of the influence or action of

- something external (one billiard ball hits another, causing local motion) or
- some physical entity which is separable from the whole of the animal (the heart of animal beats and causes blood to circulate—an internal form of local motion).

In both cases, something (the billiard ball or the blood) is affected by something external to itself, which brings about a change that would not have occurred had the external influence not been present. (Something other than X makes X the way it is and this change is not simply derivable from the definition of what X is.)

The first four ways concern efficient causes and their effects,

- effects being dependent upon causes (so that the effects cannot occur unless the causes already exist) and
- causes being known and traced back from their effects.

Definition of "Efficient Cause": Efficient causes are causes that operate in or on something else to produce or bring about a modification in that thing, e.g. placing a torch in contact with a pile of sticks produces fire, but it is the external cause and not what the sticks are in and of themselves apart from the external cause that produces the fire.

1. Motion (Aquinas' First Way): Everything which is in motion was set in motion by something else and dependent upon that other thing for its motion. Imagine I place a rock on the edge of the table; it has the potential to fall downward, but it does not actually do so until I push it off the table. By analyzing causal chains, we can see that one thing sets another thing in motion. For example, if I am playing pool and want to know how a certain ball came to be moved, I can say that it is moved because it was hit by another billiard ball (Y) which in turn was hit by the cue ball (X) which in turn was hit by the pool cue, etc. Its motion is caused by and dependent upon something else.

- A Traditional Criticism of the Cosmological Argument (Aquinas' First Way) The cosmological argument is intended to point back to a single First Cause or First Mover, but it doesn't do a wholly satisfactory job of showing there must be only one and not two first principles (as in Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism) or many first principles (as in polytheistic religions like Hinduism). (In fact, it was not intended to stand alone.) If one wants to argue that there is only one first principle, one will need to add a supplementary argument. Specifically, one will need to argue that the unity of order in the world requires a single first principle. In other words, if there were different first principles, they would give rise to different patterns of order that would ultimately conflict or compete with one another. This would lead to a much higher degree of disorder than we actually observe in the universe, where we observe that natural laws are relatively uniform across space and time.

2. Existence (Aquinas' Second Way): This involves a similar argument, substituting the idea of existence for that of motion. For example, if the earth came into existence, what were the states of affairs responsible for bringing it into existence? Once we have identified these causes, we ask how they came into existence (and so on). For example, if I want to know how this pen (Z) came into existence, I say that it was manufactured at a factory (Y) from plastics previously produced by another company (X). It is caused by and dependent upon something else (prior to itself) for its existence.

But what would happen if we asked not why this pen exists or why this billiard ball is moved, but why anything exists and why anything is moved? To answer this question we would have to keep going back along the causal chains to find something at the beginning that is ultimately responsible for bringing things into existence and setting them into motion. These causal chains can't be infinite (no eternal regression) or the series remains ungrounded and unexplained (a failure to grasp the intelligible in the world). Something has to stand at the beginning as a first cause and be responsible for the other things' existing and being in motion.

This first cause would have to cause everything else but not depend on anything else for its existence or its motion, i.e.,

- it must be the cause of its own existence
 - It is not brought into existence by something else.
 - It is not dependent upon something else for its (continued) existence.
- it must be the cause of its own motion
 - It is not moved or changed by something other than itself.
 - It is not moved or changed by something other than itself.

Unless we posit such a first cause, there will be no proper explanation of present motion or existence.

Why the notion of an infinite regression of causes is unsatisfactory: These cannot account for the effect in the right way.

(1) None of the antecedents for things having a particular nature can cause the existence of the nature as such (i.e. we can posit an infinite series of dogs, but where does dogness come from?)

(2) If the continued existence or activity of a given cause depends upon its being kept in existence or motion by its antecedent cause, then an infinite regress would mean that there is no first cause to keep things in motion and existence and this in turn would mean that existence and motion (as the effects produced by the cause) could not exist at all.

3. Necessary Existence (Aquinas' Third Way): Created things are subject to generation (once did not exist) and corruption (they will again in the future pass out of existence). They are thus able either to be or not to be (i.e. to exist or not to exist); to put it philosophically, their existence is *contingent* (=its coming into existence is dependent upon something else). But this cannot be true of the first cause, upon which other things depend for their existence. This first cause must exist *necessarily*; its existence is required in a way that mandates that

- it cannot be able either to be or not to be, i.e.
 - it cannot be brought into existence by something prior to itself and external to itself
 - it cannot be dependent upon something external to itself in order to remain in existence
 - it is self-caused so that its existence coincides with its nature (so that it exists through itself and does not exist through another thing, on which it depends)

It must exist *necessarily* (and, be beyond coming into existence or passing out of existence) or it could not be the first cause on which all later things remained dependent for their existence. And we see that there are things in existence (rather than nothing in existence). So there must be something that exists of itself and is the cause of all things that exist in dependence on it (and, not being self-existent, are perishable).

4. Cause of Things Being and Having Goodness or Perfection (Aquinas' Fourth Way):

The way that efficient causes explain things is that what the cause brings about (i.e. the effect) in itself shows the nature of the cause (=what the cause is) as active in something

else. (This is how one knows that the effect is related to *this* cause rather than some other cause; the nature of this particular cause explains that particular effect and renders it necessary. In this way the cause is proportioned to its effect.)

- a. We discern in the world things that have various degrees of perfection.
- b. Since these things are not self-existent, they must have gotten from something else the things that make them more or less perfect.
- c. In other words, the things that make them more or less perfect must be the effects of some prior efficient cause.
- d. To be able to communicate these qualities to others (produce them in others), the efficient cause must possess these qualities (e.g. goodness and truth) in itself to a higher degree and in a more complete way than can be found in the effects that it produces.

Aquinas' fifth way has to do not with efficient causes (what caused X?--establishing that a first cause exists), but with final causes (why did X do that?--establishing that this first cause is intelligent) that concern intention (i.e. changes are directed toward an end or goal that is seen as desirable or best,--one is not just moved about by external forces so that things happen by chance, but rather one is moved by internal reasons so that one aims purposively at a goal).

5. Movement of Natural Objects toward Goals to Which They Naturally Incline Suggests the Work of a Supernatural Director of Nature (Aquinas' Fifth Way):

"Things that lack knowledge [and therefore lack the capacity to be self-determining] do not strive for goals unless a being with knowledge and intelligence directs, as, for example, an archer aims an arrow."

"There is a being with intelligence who orders all the things of nature to their ends and we call this being God."

When an entity that is not self-determining is oriented toward a determinate goal, it must have received this orientation from something other than itself.

- Recent Criticism of Teleological Arguments (i.e. Arguments Concerning Final Causes, Including Aquinas' Fifth Way): Optimally, one should be able to claim more than that the parts were designed to fulfill the functions that they do fulfill. One should be able to claim that the world's order was fashioned in such a way as to realize not just certain goals but certain values. This is also one of the gaps theodicy (i.e. explaining why evil exists and how its existence can be reconciled with the goodness of God) tries to fill in.

Concluding Evaluation:

How useful are these proofs and how far can they take us? Some questions and criticisms:

- a. Pascal: Rational proofs of this kind cannot produce the kind of certainty that would compel unbelievers to adopt the faith; for believers such proofs are not necessary.
- b. Is acceptance of the proof either sufficient or necessary to induce faith? (Russell's acceptance of the ontological argument)
- c. At the end of these proofs do you end up with a first principle that resembles the Christian God? At the end of these proofs do you end up with the Christian

God? (Cf. Aquinas who ends his proofs with “and this we know to be God”). If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

Questions for Reflection:

- Which of these arguments do you find most interesting and compelling? Why?
- Which do you find least compelling? Why?
- What is the value of the proofs for the non-Christian?
- What is the value of these proofs for the Christian?