

Notes on St. Thomas Aquinas

I. *On Being and Essence*

This is a dense and important short work. For our purposes, what I want you to know is that, according to Thomas, there are three kinds of beings:

- (a) *Material creatures*: These beings have an *essence* which is composed of (prime) matter and (substantial) form. They also have an act of existence, or an *esse*.
- (b) *Spiritual creatures*: These beings also have an essence and an act of existence. But the essence is *not* composed of matter and form. Rather, there is only substantial form. The difficulty here is going to be how to distinguish or individuate forms, an issue that Thomas addresses but that I won't elaborate on.
- (c) *God*: God is *absolutely* simple. So, that means that there is no composition of matter and form. More importantly, for God, *essence* and *existence* are the same. In other words, God is nothing but a pure act of existing. (Compare Exodus 3:14: "I AM THAT I AM.")

"But every essence or quiddity can be known without anything being known concerning its being. For I can know what man is, or a phoenix, and still not know whether or not it has being in reality (*rerum natura*). Therefore it is obvious that being is other than essence or quiddity, unless perchance there is some thing whose quiddity is its being. There can only be one such being, the First." (p. 514)

II. *Summa Theologica*

A. *The Existence of God*

1. *Rejection of Anselm's Argument*

Despite what Thomas says in *On Being and Essence* about the identity of God's essence and existence, we find him in S.T. 1. q.2.a.1 rejecting Anselm's argument.

2. *Aquinas' Five Ways*

In contrast to Anselm's argument(s), the arguments for the existence of God in the *Summa Theologiae* (I, q. ii, a. 3) are *a posteriori*; that is, they are derived from experience. The first and second ways are similar and depend upon a common premise regarding the impossibility of an infinite causal chain.

First Way:

- (1) Some things are in motion. (Observation of the world)
- (2) Whatever is moved is moved by another. (Principle of physics)
- (3) No (inanimate) thing can bring about its own motion. (From (2).)
- (4) The chain of movers cannot be infinite.
- (5) There must be a first (non-moved) mover. This is God. (From (3) and (4).)

Second Way:

- (1) Each thing in the sensible world is caused by something else. (Observation?)
- (2) A cause precedes its effect. (Definition of causation)
- (3) No thing can be the cause of itself. (From (2).)
- (4) The chain of causes cannot be infinite.
- (5) There must be a first cause, which is self-caused (*causa sui*). This is God. (From (3) and (4).)

Naturally, if one rejects step (4) in these two arguments, one need not conclude that God, or a first mover or a first cause, exists.

The **third way** ultimately appeals to the Anselmian idea of necessary existence. The argument is nevertheless quite different. It could be sketched like this:

- (1) For all x 's, x is either a cause of itself (God) or caused by something else. (Premise. Cf. the Second Way.)
- (2) Suppose the existence of everything in the world is merely possible. (Supposition)
- (3) Some things in nature come to be and pass away. (Observation)
- (4) It is possible for these things to be and not to be. (From (3).)
- (5) Therefore, it is impossible for them to exist at all times. (From (4). That is, if it is possible for x not to exist, then there is a time at which x does not exist.)
- (6) If everything can not exist, then there was a time when nothing was in existence. (From (2) and (5)?! Perhaps Aquinas sneaks in the idea that there cannot be an infinite chain.)
- (7) If there was a time when nothing was in existence, then there would be nothing at all in the world now. (From (1) and (6).)
- (8) But this is absurd. (Look around you.)
- (9) Therefore, it is not the case that all beings are merely possible; there must be something the existence of which is necessary. This necessary being is God.

The **fourth way** assumes that God is the source of all perfection(s) in the world. It resembles the first and second ways in that God is taken to be, not the cause of the existence of beings, but the cause of their qualities.

- (1) There is a gradation of qualities among beings in the world. (Observation)
- (2) The gradation of qualities is a function of the resemblance to the maximum state of any particular quality. (Premise)
- (3) The maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus. (Premise)
- (4) All "perfections" – for example, being, goodness, justice, etc. – are different manifestations of the same quality. (Premise)
- (5) There must be something that is the maximum of the genera being, goodness, etc. This is what we call God. (From (3) and (4). Note that something like (4), though not stated, is required for the argument; otherwise, perfection P_1 could result in maximum M_1 , perfection P_2 in maximum M_2 , and so on; and M_1, M_2, \dots could nevertheless be independent things. That is, there could be a unique cause of being in the world, a unique cause of goodness, and so on.)

The **fifth way** (which has come to be known as the "Teleological Argument" or the "Argument from Design") has had a long history and is even now encountered in a slightly different form in debates between creationists and evolutionary biologists.

- (1) Things that lack knowledge always act in the same way and always act to obtain the best result. (Observation)
- (2) Whatever acts in a constant way and so as to obtain a particular result acts for an end. (Premise)
- (3) Things that lack knowledge act for an end. (From (1) and (2).)
- (4) Only intelligence or a knowing mind can direct the action for an end. (Premise)
- (5) Since the things that lack knowledge cannot themselves direct their actions for an end, there must be an intelligent being (distinct from nature) that directs their actions. This is what we call God. (From (3) and (4).)

B. The Will, Providence, and Foreknowledge

According to St. Thomas, the will of God is “perfectly efficacious,” that is, whatever God wills comes to be. But God wills some things to come to be necessarily, others contingently. In his theory, then, God wills that certain effects come about through contingent causes – causes that spring from the wills of finite, rational creatures. (p. 532)

Despite (or maybe because of) the fact that God wills that some things arise due to contingent causes, God’s providence and foreknowledge are infinite. (p. 533) Indeed, “everything happening from the exercise of free choice must be subject to divine providence.” (p. 534)

Further, St. Thomas distinguishes different forms of necessity: absolute or natural necessity; the necessity of the end or utility; and the necessity of coercion. It is only the necessity of coercion that is “repugnant to the will.” (p. 547)

C. The Soul and Body

While St. Thomas is a good Aristotelian insofar as he accepts that matter and form together compose substances, he does assert that, in the case of human beings, the soul is incorruptible (immortal) and can exist apart from the body. (p. 542) [Look at his arguments.]