

Chapter I

THE FIFTH WAY: ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN IN ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

St. Thomas Aquinas (225-274A.D.) was an Italian philosopher - theologian, the most influential thinker of the medieval period. He produced a powerful philosophical synthesis that combined Aristotelian and Neo-platonic elements within a Christian context in an original and ingenious way.

Acquinas was both a philosopher and a theologian. The greater part of his writings are theological, but there are many strictly philosophical works within this corpus. Also important are large sections of strictly philosophical writings incorporated into theological works. Aquinas clearly distinguishes between strictly philosophical investigations and theological investigations. If philosophy is based on the light of natural reason, theology (*Sacra doctrina*) presupposes faith in divine revelations. While the natural light of reason is insufficient to discover things that can be made known to human beings only through revelation, e.g., belief in the Trinity, St. Thomas holds that it is impossible for those things revealed to us by God through faith to be opposed to those we can discover by using human reason. For then one or the other would have to be false; and since both come to us from God, God himself would be the author of falsity, something St. Thomas rejects as abhorrent. Hence it is appropriate for the theologian to use philosophical reasoning in theologizing.

Acquinas also distinguishes between the orders to be followed by the theologian and by the philosopher. In theology one reasons from belief in God and his revelations to the implications of this for created reality. In philosophy one begins with an investigation of created reality in so far as this can be understood by human reason, and then seeks some knowledge of desired reality viewed as the cause of created reality and the end or goal of one's philosophical enquiry.

We shall now turn directly to the way in which St. Thomas considers the argument from design. St. Thomas' discussion may be conveniently indicated under the heading: the existence of God and the "five ways."

St. Thomas holds that unaided human reason, i.e. philosophical reason can demonstrate that God exists, that He is one, etc., by reasoning from effect to cause. Best known among his many presentations of argumentation for God's existence are the five ways. In one of his first writings, *On Being and Essence*, St. Thomas wishes to determine how essence is realised in separate substances like the soul, angels of the Christian tradition and the first cause, God. He criticises the view that created separate substances are composed of matter and form. Aquinas counters that they are not entirely free from composition. They are composed of a form or essence and an act of existing (*esse*). We can present the development of St. Thomas' complex argument in the following manner.

(I) We can think of an essence without knowing whether or not it actually exists. Therefore, in such entities essences and acts of existing differ unless (II) there is a thing whose essence and act of existences are identical. At best there can be only such beings (III) Since *esse* in all other entities is distinct from essence, existence is communicated to such beings by something else, i.e., they are caused. Since that which existing through something else must be traced back to that which exists of itself, there must be something that causes the existence of everything else and that is identical with its act of existing. Otherwise one would regress to infinity as caused, causes of existence, which St. Thomas dismisses as unacceptable.

It should be noted that the problem of divine existence and its proof is taken up by Aquinas both in "*Summa Contra Gentiles*" as well as "*Summa Theologica*". But the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is less widely known and much less widely read than the later longer and more famous *Summa Theologica*. It is held that by comparison the *Contra Gentiles* is more philosophical as its author intended and as its title implies. Perhaps the *Summa Theologica*

has gained its fame through its widespread use in Church dogmatics, since it is that *Summa* which contains most of the detailed arguments in doctrinal issues. However, we shall try, in an humble manner, of course, to look at both the *Summas* in the context of the argument from design.

I

The *Contra Gentiles* defines the wise man as one who deals with the first beginning and the last end of the Universe. One of the principal ideas advanced in the first *Summa* is that Truth is the final end and the divine nature must first of all be considered if one is to understand first and last things. St. Thomas addresses himself to establishing the mode of possible proof where God is concerned. It is one of the contentions of St. Thomas that reason and faith must agree. It is impossible for the truth of faith to be contrary to principles known by natural reason. Although as human beings our knowledge begins with sense-objects, these retain in themselves some trace of the imitation of God. Here is both Plato and Bonaventura. Bonaventura held that the natural world is seen as a sense-world but it is also one containing traces within itself of its supernatural origin as recreation of God. Thomas also affirms the use of negative method. We have some sort of knowledge of the divine nature by knowing what it is not.

The famous proofs for God's existence appear in the "*Contra Gentiles*" in briefer form than in the other "*Summa*". It does not take much vision to see the *Contra Gentiles* as the framework upon which the *Summa Theologica* was finally built.

According to Aquinas philosophy considers man and the natural order as these things are in themselves. Philosophy makes no necessary reference to God, but the Christian faith considers natural things, not in themselves but in as much as they represent the majesty of God. The philosopher takes his stand on the immediate and natural causes of things; but the Christian argues from God as first cause, indicating what things are revealed and what we

can learn about the divine nature. Philosophically we begin with the creatures and then may be led to a knowledge of God. Faith studies creatures only in relation to God and so studies God first and creatures after that.

The *Contra Gentiles* does not make more use of the proofs as the later *Summa*. The proofs received less stress and St. Thomas moves directly into a discussion of the divine attributes. He discusses God's eternity, his freedom from potentiality, his lack of composition, and his incorporeality. In short, God understands not temporarily but eternally; He understands all things not directly but by understanding their intelligible counterparts, he knows individuals as well as universals. Further, God's will is free, having no cause but his own wisdom. In God there is active power, but no potentiality. He is essentially infinite, and his knowledge and understanding are infinite.

II

We may now have a quick and brief look at the principal ideas advanced in "*Summa Theologica*". They may, with hazards of course, be put as under : Man requires more than a philosophy in his search for truth, Certain truths are beyond human reason and are available only because of divine revelation. Theology which depends upon revealed knowledge supplements natural knowledge.

The existence of God can be proved in five ways by reference to motion and the necessity of a first mover, by reference to possibility and necessity, by reference to the gradations of perfection in the world, and by reference to the order and harmony of nature which suggests an ordering being who gives purpose to the created world.

God alone is the being whose nature is such that by reference to him one can account for the fact of motion, efficient cause, necessity, perfection and order.

God's principal attributes are simplicity, (for he is non-corporeal, and without genus),

actuality, perfection, goodness, infinitude, immutability, unity and immanence. But the created intellect can know God only by God's grace and only through apprehension.

We may now go in for a little detailed consideration of the five ways with special reference to the argument from design. As compared with other classical theologians St. Thomas believed in a fairly straightforward approach to questions about God. However, St. Thomas did admit the necessity of the familiar negative method, since where God is concerned what he is not is clearer to us than what he is. The proposition, "God exists" is not self-evident to us, although it may be itself. The contradictory of the proposition "God is" can be conceived. In this case Thomas seems to oppose Anselm's Ontological argument, although the opposition is not quite as straightforward as it seems. St. Anselm formulated the Idea of God as that of "something than which nothing greater can be conceived" (*Proslogium II*). He then argues that something that exists in reality (*in re*) must be greater than something that exists in the mind only (*in intellectu*). So God must exist outside as well as in the mind, for if he existed in the mind only and not in reality he would not be "something than which nothing greater can be conceived." [*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest*].

The Thomistic objection seems to allow the basic principle that the proposition 'God does not exist' is self-contradictory, while distinguishing what is self-evident in itself from what may or may not be self-evident to this or that person. It may be remembered in this connection that St. Anselm had at the back of his mind the line of the Psalm; "the fool said in his heart there is no God." Anselm however proceeds almost at once to insist on a distinction between what exists in reality and what exists only in thought. St. Thomas denies that we can know God's essence directly, even though such vision would reveal that God's essence and existence are identical and thus support St. Anselm's contention. But the ontological argument, he reasons, is built upon a kind of direct access to the divine which human reason does not have.

The existence of God, then needs to be demonstrated from those of his effects which are known to us. St.Thomas readily admits that some will prefer to account for all natural phenomenon by referring everything to one principle which is nature herself. In opposition he asserts that God's existence can be proved in five ways. (1) The argument from motion; (2) The argument from the nature of efficient cause; (3) The argument from possibility and necessity; (4) The argument from the gradations of perfections to be found in things; and finally (5) the argument from the order of the world. We shall not analyse these arguments individually. We shall take up the fifth way later in greater detail. But presently several things can be noted about the five ways as a group. First, all are based on the principle that reason needs a final stopping point in any chain of explanation. Second, such a point of final rest cannot be itself within the series to be accounted for, but it must be outside it and different in kind. Third, in each case it is a principle which arrives at, not God himself, but these principles (for example a first efficient cause) are shown to be essential parts of the nature of God. God's existence is agreed to by showing reason's need for one of his attributes in the attempt to explain natural phenomenon.

It is probably true that St.Thomas' five proofs have been given a disproportionate amount of attention, for following them he goes into elaborate detail in a discussion of the divine nature and its primary attributes, like simplicity, goodness, infinity and perfection. Taken together these passages of discussion form one of the most elaborate and complete discussions of God's nature by a major Christian theologian. St.Thomas' philosophy has encouraged arguments more about the nature and primary attributes of God, rather than about the more formal and brief five proofs.

III

We shall now undertake a consideration of the fifth of the five ways, the *Argument from Design*; In this part we may be critical and suggest an evaluation of the argument as formulated by St.Thomas.

Critical Comments :

It must be noted that St. Thomas does not admit innate ideas, nor does he have recourse to any intuitive knowledge of God. He appears to apply the Aristotelean principle that there is nothing in the intellect which was not before in the senses. It follows then that the human intellect is confined to knowledge of corporeal objects and cannot transcend them. Objects, whether spiritual or corporeal are knowable only in so far as they partake of being, or in act and the intellect as such is the faculty of apprehending being. The intellect has as its object all being. The human intellect is embodied and is dependent on sense for its operation. It must start from the things of sense for its operation. It can come to know an object which transcends the things of sense only in so far as sensible objects bear a relation to that object and manifest it. If corporeal objects bear a discernible relation to an object which transcends them, the intellect can know that such an object exists. Moreover, in so far as material objects reveal the character of the Transcendent, the intellect can attain some knowledge of its nature. But such a knowledge cannot be adequate or perfect, since sense-objects cannot reveal adequately the nature of the Transcendent. The corporeal object is the natural object of the human intellect. What Aquinas means is that the human intellect is oriented towards the essence of the corporeal object. It is also true that, the human intellect, even embodied, retains its primary character of orientation towards being in general. It can, therefore, attain to some natural knowledge of God in so far corporeal objects are related to Him and reveal Him. But this knowledge is necessarily imperfect and inadequate and cannot be intuitive in character.

St. Thomas distinguishes between two propositions. In one case the predicate is included in the subject, 'Animal' is included in 'man' in the proposition that man is an animal, since man is a rational animal. But the proposition that God exists is a proposition of different order. God's essence is His existence and one cannot know God's nature, what God is, without knowing God's existence, that He is, Man has no *a priori* knowledge of

God's nature and only arrives at knowledge of the fact that God's essence is His existence after he has come to know God's existence. St. Thomas' objections to the ontological argument is easily understandable. It involves an illicit process of transition from the ideal to the real order. Granted that God is conceived as the Being than which no greater can be thought, it does not follow necessarily that such a Being exists, apart from its being conceived, that is, outside the mind. Owing to the weakness of the human intellect we cannot discuss *a priori* the positive possibility of the supremely perfect Being, the Being the essence of which is existence. We come to a knowledge of the fact that such a Being exists not through an analysis or consideration of the idea of such a Being, but through arguments from its effects, *a posteriori*.

If God's existence is to be proved *a posteriori* i.e. through an examination of God's effects, there are problems on that way too. God's effects are finite, while God is infinite. So there is no proportion between the effects and the cause. The conclusion of this reasoning will contain infinitely more than the premises. The reasoning starts with sensible objects and should end with a sensible object. It cannot proceed to an object infinitely transcending all sensible objects. This will be the tenor of Kant's critique of metaphysics. St. Thomas of course points out that we can argue from an effect to the existence of a cause, and if the effect is of such a kind that it can proceed only from a certain kind of cause, we can legitimately argue to the existence of a cause of that kind. St. Thomas argues from certain facts concerning the world and argues that these facts require a sufficient ontological explanation. He presupposes that the principle of causality is not purely subjective or applicable only within the sphere of 'phenomena' in the Kantian sense. He is well aware that it has to be shown that sensible objects are effects, in the sense that they do not contain in themselves their own sufficient ontological explanation.

St. Thomas' fifth way is the teleological proof, for which Kant had a considerable respect on account of its antiquity, clarity and persuasiveness. But in accordance with

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the principles of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he refused to recognise its demonstrative character.

St. Thomas argues that we behold inorganic objects operating for an end. As this happens, it cannot proceed from chance, but must be the result of intention. Inorganic objects are without knowledge, they cannot tend towards an end unless they are directed by someone who is intelligent and possessed of knowledge, as the arrow is directed by the archer. Therefore, there exists an intelligent Being, by whom all natural things are directed to an end : *et hoc dicimus Deum*.

There is a slight difference between the versions of the proof in the first and the second *Summa*. In the first *Summa* it is argued that when many things with different and even contrary qualities cooperate towards the realisation of one order, this must proceed from an intelligent Cause or Providence. The second *Summa* emphasises the internal finality of the inorganic object, while the first *Summa* emphasises the cooperation of many objects in the realisation of the one world order or harmony.

Kant is right in holding that by itself the proof leads to a Designer or Governor or Architect of the universe. And further reasoning is required in order to show that this Architect is not only a 'Demiurge', but a Creator.

If one chooses to argue in the manner of St. Thomas, one must take account of recent theories which prefer to render intelligible the genesis of the order and finality in the universe without recourse to the hypothesis of any spiritual agent distinct from the universe.

Of the five ways St. Thomas gives a certain preference to the first, and calls it the *via manifestior*. Yet it is possible to say that the fundamental proof is really the third proof or 'way', that forms contingency. In the first proof the argument from contingency is applied to the special fact of motion or change, in the second proof to the order of causality, in the fourth to degrees of perfection, and in the fifth proof to finality. The argument from contingency itself is based on the fact that everything must have its sufficient reason, the

reason why it exists. Change or motion has its sufficient reason in an unmoved mover, the series of secondary causes in an uncaused cause, limited perfection in absolute perfection, and finality and order in nature in an Intelligence or Designer.

One might feel that *interiority* of the proofs of God's existence as given by St. Augustine or St. Bonaventura are not available in St. Thomas' proofs, though one could apply the general principles to the self, if one so wished. We learn from St. Augustine and St. Bonaventura that a man may contemplate creatures, the world without and the world within, and discern their natures, but his knowledge is of little worth unless he discerns in nature the *Vestigium Dei* and in himself the *imago Dei*, unless he can detect the operation of God in his soul, an operation which is itself hidden but is rendered visible in its effects in its power. There is yet no watershed between St. Augustine and St. Bonaventura on the one hand and St. Thomas on the other, even though the problems which they discussed were in large measure set by theology. When Aristotle argues to the existence of an unmoved mover, he is answering a problem set by metaphysics and by physics. But when St. Anselm, St. Bonaventura and St. Thomas proved God's existence, they were showing the rational foundation for the acceptance of a revelation in which they already believed. St. Bonaventura was concerned to show God's immanent activity within the soul, and even though St. Thomas employs Aristotle's own argument he is not simply interested in showing that there is an unmoved mover, he is interested in proving the existence of God, a Being who meant a great deal more to him than an unmoved mover. It is true that St. Thomas defines philosophy as a study of Being in general, yet for him, philosophy is so much a study of God, God's activity and God's effects, so far as the natural reason will take us.

Before we round off our discussion of the argument from design or the fifth way of St. Thomas, we may point to the Christian sources of the argument. The *Book of Wisdom* Chapter 13 contains the essentials of the teleological argument. Again, St. Paul in his epistle to the *Romans* writes that God can be known from His works, as transcending His works. St. Thomas has explicated the words of these sources.

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