

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) and Classical Theism

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I. Two Basic Dangers in Trying to Understand God

A. Anthropomorphism: The position according to which God is a being who has perfections proportionate to those of creatures, only to a much higher degree.

B. Obscurantism: The position according to which God is so utterly different from creatures that none of the perfections belonging to creatures in any way resembles any perfection belonging to God. (e.g. Maimonides)

Aquinas sought a middle ground between the extremes of anthropomorphism and obscurantism. This middle ground depends on tracing out the implications of Aquinas' alleged demonstrations of the existence of God.

II. God Can Be Known From His Effects

A. Human Knowledge and the Knowledge of God

Like other medieval philosophers, Aquinas believed that all knowledge arises from sense experience. It follows that we can have no direct knowledge of God (at least not in this life). If God is known, He must be mediately or inferentially known.

While God is not an object of sense experience, God can be known from His *effects* because effects resemble their causes.

B. Aquinas opposes those who deny that God's existence can be demonstrated

In arguing that the existence of God can be logically demonstrated (a common medieval viewpoint), Aquinas sets himself against those religious people of his day who contended that God's existence cannot be demonstrated because (i) it is self-evident or (ii) demonstrating God's existence would require knowledge of the essence of God, which no human possesses. Against those who claim (i) Aquinas argues that God's existence is self-evident to God but not to us. Against those who claim (ii) Aquinas argues that a demonstration of the existence of something x may proceed from effects to x as the cause, where this does not require knowing that essence of x. This is called a *demonstratio quia*, as opposed to a *demonstratio propter quid* (demonstration from the essence of something).

Nor does Aquinas agree with those who argue that God's existence cannot be demonstrated because it is a matter of faith. Aquinas agrees that people can accept the existence of God by faith, but he believes the claim "God exists" can be proved by human reason. While Aquinas thinks that many of the items of Christian belief are not capable of being logically demonstrated (e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity, incarnation), the existence of God and his basic attributes are

susceptible to demonstration. These truths can in principle be known (i.e., demonstrated) by human reason.

For Aquinas's responses to objections to demonstrating the existence of God, see the following selections from Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*.

<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100201.htm>

<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100202.htm>

III. The Five Ways

According to Thomas, human reason can demonstrate (*demonstratio quia*, from effects) that there exists a first existent - a uniquely necessary, immutable, sustaining (efficient and final) cause of the world, which is the ultimate explanatory being. The relevant effects are change, the order of cause and effect, contingency, degrees of perfection, and the governance of the world. These constitute the starting points of Aquinas' five famous proofs for the existence of God.

A. Illustration: the Argument from Motion (Change)

- (1) Some things are in motion.
- (2) Everything that is moved is moved by something else.
- (3) There cannot be an infinite series of movers.

(4) Therefore, there is some unmoved mover.

The unmoved mover must be pure actuality (*actus purus*) with no potentiality. The regress of explanation can only terminate in a being that does not raise the very causal questions He is adduced to answer. The ultimate explanation for any aspect of human experience must transcend human experience.

Note: Aquinas's denial of an infinite regress of causes or movers is not a denial an infinite series of movers or causes stretching back into the past. His argument does not assume that the universe had a beginning. Aquinas is concerned with a presently existing series of movers. It is a vertical series of movers that map out concurrent causes or movers, not a horizontal series of movers that form a temporal sequence into the past.

For a more complete account of Aquinas' Five Ways, see [Thomas Aquinas' Five Ways](#).

For Aquinas' own presentation, See [Aquinas, Summa theologiae, Prima Pars, Question 2](#).

See also, [Sudduth, Question 2 of the Summa](#).

B. Generic Structure of the Five Ways

1. Observational starting points: features of the world known to us through sensory experience. (e.g., it is evident to the senses that some things are in motion)
2. Observational features of the world entail the existence of some other thing(s) that accounts for what we observe. (e.g., *omne quod movetur ab alio movetur*).
3. There can no infinite regression of things that account for any particular datum of experience.

4. To explain the existence of the features presented to us in empirical observation, we are led to a First Existent that lies beyond the mundane realm.

In short, the features of the world we come to know through sensory experience cannot be accounted for in ordinary mundane terms, in terms of those very features of the world or some other features of the world.

5. This First Existent is legitimately called God (*Deus*), a label that is respectively justified by the detailed elaboration of the attributes of the first cause in subsequent portions of Aquinas' text. Aquinas does not take himself to have proven that God – in the fullest meaning of that term – exists. What does follow immediately from the proofs is that the First Existent must be wholly actual, that is lacking all passive potency, *sine ulla potentialitate*. Accordingly, the first cause is immaterial, eternal, and wholly immutable (not subject to either substantial or accidental change). It is Pure Act - there is nothing it could be which it isn't. And given the fifth way, this pure act must be intelligent.

C. The Sixth Way: Argument from Existence

In addition to the Five Ways, Thomas presents an argument from the act of existence or existing which leads to the conclusion that there is a God. Bearing in mind that by "explanation" we mean "causal" explanation, the following seems to be the case:

- (1) Things exist.
- (2) An existing thing, X, is not identical its essence.
- (3) Neither X's essence nor X's existence explains X's existence.

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- (4) Therefore, the explanation of a thing's existence must be something external to the thing.
 - (5) For any existing thing X, there cannot be an infinite series of external causes of X's existence.

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- (6) There must be one external cause of existence for every existing thing.

III. Way of Negation (*Via Negationis*): Essential in Our Thinking about God

A. From the Five Ways to the *Via Negationis*

The Five Ways purport to prove the existence of some first term Existent as the ultimate explanatory principle of the Universe, pure unlimited act of existence – *esse subsistens*. Having established that there is a First Existent (*an est*), Thomas turns to the question of the way in which the First Existent exists so that an understanding may be gained of what the First Existent is (*quid est*). Here Thomas follows the common Aristotelian method of scientific treatment, first *an est* then *quid est*. However, the *minimal* positive determination (sanctioned solely by the principle of causality) reached by the five ways immediately sets logical constraints on any further discourse or knowledge about this being that will govern our attempt to say anything about what it is.

"Having recognized that a certain thing exists, we still have to investigate the way in which it exists, that we may come to understand what it is that exists. Now we cannot know what God is, but only what he is not; we must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist, rather than the ways in which he does (*De deo scire non possumus quid sit, sed quid non sit*)."

(Aquinas, ST, Ia. 2)

The primary constraint governing knowledge of God, then, is the *via negationis*, way of negation (also called the *via remotionis*, way of remotion). This refers to the knowledge of God derived from removing the "imperfections" of the creature for our understanding of God. Consequently, the task of the theologian will be first to consider the *ways* in which God does *not* exist.

In claiming that we cannot know what God is, we must not misread Aquinas. He does not mean to say that we can make no positive true assertions about the First Existent, but only that we cannot have any defining or comprehensive knowledge of him on the scientific model of genus and species - no "quidditative" (essence) knowledge. There are two reasons for this. First, all our knowledge is derived from and limited to sensory experience, but God is not an object of sensory experience. Secondly, as the immutable and uniquely necessary sustaining cause of the world, it will not be appropriate (or intelligible) to place the First Existent in a category, as the First Existent transcends all human conceptual schemes. This is evident from the idea that God is a wholly simple being.

B. Divine Simplicity: The Formal Development of the *Via Negationis*

The core of the *via negationis* is the doctrine of divine simplicity, for the fundamental imperfection in created things is their being a composition of some sort. This must be denied of God. The being to whom the conclusion of the Five Ways refers is not a composition of any sort. Hence, rather than being a positive teaching about God it is simply a formal, shorthand way of referring to the removal of imperfections from our thought with reference to God.

- No composition of physical or extended parts, for this would conflict with being pure actuality. That which is composed of extended parts is potentially divisible.
- No composition of form and matter, for matter is a principle of potentiality. Moreover since matter is the principle of individuation, it follows that God cannot be an individual thing.
- No composition of nature and *suppositum* (individuality). Finite things can be distinct individuals and yet share a common nature. Not so with God. What God is and who God is are the same.
- No composition of essence and existence. All finite things are distinct from their act of existence. *What* a person is does not entail *that* a person is. For this reason, all finite things are capable of not existing. A purely actual being, though, lacks all potency, and this includes the potentiality of not existing. So a purely actual being will be identical with its act of existing.

For further details on the Aristotelian metaphysics Aquinas is assuming, see [Sudduth, Aquinas on Simplicity](#).

IV. Positive Knowledge of God

It will follow from God's simplicity that God is an immaterial, eternal, immutable, necessary being. Unlike Maimonides, though, Aquinas believed that we can make true positive statements about God. We can have positive knowledge of God. Aquinas does not limit our knowledge of God to negative knowledge. Whereas Maimonides used the way of negation to deny that we can have any positive knowledge of God, Aquinas uses the way of negation as a constraint on our positive knowledge of God. The *via negationis* does not limit us to negative knowledge of God, but it does limit our positive knowledge of God.

A. The Way of Causality (*via causalitatis*): there is a positive knowledge of God derived from the creature as the effect of God as first cause: (i) We know that God exists and (ii) we know that God has all the perfections present in the created order. The ground for (i) and (ii) is the metaphysical principle that effects resemble their causes.

B. Way of Negation sets a constraint on how God has all the perfections in the created order, so *via negationis* limits (ii) above. God must possess *in a wholly simple manner* all the perfections found in created things.

C. The Way of Eminence (*via eminentiae*): there is a knowledge of God derived from predicating the creature's perfections of God in the most perfection and supreme fashion.

Since the creature is an effect of God and therefore resembles the Creator by containing some of his perfections, we may come to understand something of the nature of God by predicating of Him those perfections first discovered to be in the creature. God's transcendent perfection is recognized by affirming of him all the perfections of the creature in a super-eminent way. We do not come to know God as he is *in himself*, but we are not wholly ignorant about him either. As the creator he must transcend all creatures, but since we are his effects whatever perfections are found in us (howbeit imperfectly) must be in him in the highest degree, for the effects resemble their causes as an out flowing from them.

IV. The Doctrine of Analogical Predication

A. The Relationship between Knowledge and Talk about God.

The ways of causality, negation, and eminence are all operational in talk about God.

According to Aquinas all our talk about God is analogical, since when we talk about God we predicate things of him in a manner similar to the way in which we predicate them of creatures. A consequence of the *via negationis* is that talk about God is not univocal--words used of God will not have the same meaning as they do when used of creatures. But the way of causality (and the principle that effects resemble their causes) entails that talk about God will not be equivocal. Words used of God will not have a different meaning than the meaning they have when used of

creatures. Therefore, Aquinas makes several positive statements about God after the way of analogy: God is cause, eternal, perfect, good, everywhere present, etc.

Consider: "God is good"

- (1) Causality: God is the ultimate cause of goodness in his creatures.
- (2) Negation: God is not evil and not good in a limited fashion as are we.
- (3) Eminence: God is good in a surpassing way.

Although all 3 are involved in every statement about God, some statements are grounded in one more than the others.

- (a) God is creator - (1)
- (b) God is immaterial - (2)
- (c) God is good - (3)

In (3) things are predicated of God substantially (though analogically), either proper predication or metaphorical predication.

B. The Doctrine of Analogy Explicated

1. The univocal use of a term involves a convergence of the *modus significandi* (the mode of signification) and *res significata* (the thing signified); e.g., the grass is green - the house is green. Here "greenness" is the same predicated of two different things in the same sense.

2. The equivocal use of a term involves a divergence of the *modus significandi* and the *res significata*; e.g., John is boiling - the water is boiling. Here what is signified by "boiling" in the two sentences is different as is the mode in which it is true of each subject.

3. The analogical use of a term involves a divergence of the *modus significandi* and a convergence of the *res significata*; i.e., God is good - John is good. Here the same thing "goodness" holds true of two subjects, though the manner in which it is true of each is different. Another example: faithfulness. "The dog is faithful to his master" and "the man is faithful to his wife". Faithfulness in each case is exemplified in different ways. The faithfulness of a dog is one thing, the faithfulness of a husband is another--both are instances of faithfulness. Faithfulness will be exhibited in different ways depending on whom it is that is faithful.

Thomas writes "We have to consider two things...in the words we use to attribute perfections to God, firstly the perfections themselves that are signified--goodness, life, and the like--and secondly the way in which they are signified." (1a. 13. 3).

Divine simplicity precludes univocal predication of God, since all univocal predication entails that the subject can be differentiated by genus and species (scientific classification), but this is not true of God as the First Existent.