

## AN EXPLANATION OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS' THIRD WAY

SR. MARY CECILIA NIEWIADOMSKA, O.P.

*DVDT 661: Christian Theology of God*

*July 1, 2011*

*Revised May 20, 2015*

In Question 2 of the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas considers the existence of God in three articles. After concluding in the first article that the existence of God is not self-evident to us, and in the second that it can be demonstrated that God exists, he proceeds in the third to do just this. After voicing two possible objections and a counterargument from Scripture, he answers with a description of Five Ways in which we can arrive at the conclusion that God exists. He then answers the two objections. The Five Ways are arguments from motion, efficient causality, possibility and necessity, gradation, and governance.<sup>1</sup> It is the third of these Five Ways that is the focus of this paper.

Before examining the Third Way in particular it is appropriate to consider the Five Ways in general. What are the Five Ways and why does St. Thomas propose them? At first glance, they appear to be demonstrations, based on natural reason, that God exists. “Bracketing out religion and morality, it seems, suspending any appeal to Christian revelation, and certainly ignoring the human subject, Thomas expects to be able to demonstrate the existence of something which everyone would call ‘God’.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the Five Ways are often treated as if they could be considered in a purely philosophical manner: “We may easily remove such discussions from the general theological context of the writings in which they appear ... and use

---

<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1981), I, q. 2, a. 3

<sup>2</sup> Fergus Kerr, “Theology in philosophy: Revisiting the Five Ways,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 50, no. 1/3 (December, 2001): 115. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40020986>.

them as important sources in reconstructing Thomas's metaphysical thought."<sup>3</sup> Robert Maydole does this in his analysis of the Third Way according to modal logic. He repeatedly speaks of things occurring in "possible worlds"<sup>4</sup> instead of just the actual world, and objects to Thomas's assumption that "there must be a reason or cause for why things begin to exist"<sup>5</sup> and the fact that he "never attempts to prove in any of the five ways that there is at most one supreme being,"<sup>6</sup> which would be necessary if his arguments were based on pure logic alone.

Fergus Kerr, however, reminds us that the Five Ways are situated in a *Summa of theology*, and that "instead of concentrating on reconstructing the arguments to judge their validity, the interesting question is what function they are intended to play in the second question of Aquinas's exposition of 'sacred doctrine' for 'beginners'."<sup>7</sup> He considers them in their context and notes that already in the first two articles of question 2 St. Thomas alludes to the doctrine of divine simplicity, which he does not demonstrate until question 3, and refers to the natural things we know and by which we can come to know God as "effects", taking for granted the doctrine of creation.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, even his argument for the demonstrability of the existence of God is a theological one, based on interpretation of Romans 1:20. St. Thomas "believes that he has Paul, and thus divine revelation, on his side, in contending that the existence of God can be demonstrated by argument from the existence and structure of the world."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), xxi, quoted in Matthew Levering, "Contemplating God: YHWH and Being in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 67, (2002): 17. <http://itq.sagepub.com/content/67/1/17>.

<sup>4</sup> Robert E. Maydole, "The Modal Third Way," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47, no. 1 (February, 2000): 1,2,6,14,15,16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40036432>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Kerr, "Theology in philosophy," 117.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

Consequently, in considering the Five Ways, it is important to keep two things in mind. The first is that natural reason without appeal to Christian revelation cannot demonstrate everything that Christians believe about God and Thomas does not expect it to do so; the second is that despite this, Thomas does maintain that the God discovered by the ancient philosophers through the light of natural reason is the same as “the true God who was revealed to the people of the Old Testament... the very same God whom Jesus Christ taught his disciples to call ‘Father’, and who was thus revealed as Trinity.”<sup>10</sup> Thomas uses these arguments from natural reason as a foundation; he “proceeds to use the conclusions of the ways to work out his own positive theology,”<sup>11</sup> which certainly does appeal to revelation, while “saying as much as he can on reason and its knowledge of God.”<sup>12</sup> In doing so, he stresses “the genuine accord existing between faith and reason, between revelation and philosophy even when deprived of the direction of faith.”<sup>13</sup>

And so, the Five Ways of St. Thomas Aquinas are not original to him; he does not present them as something new but rather “as arguments that already *have* worked.”<sup>14</sup> They go back to Aristotle, as he came to Thomas through Avicenna, and though Thomas does not always credit Aristotle explicitly in his presentation of them in the *Summa Theologica*, he does so when he presents the same or similar arguments in his other works.<sup>15</sup> Fr. Aidan Nichols, O.P., notes an interesting correspondence between the first, second, fourth, and fifth Ways and the four kinds of

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Owens, “Aquinas and the Five Ways,” In *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, ed. John R. Catan. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 133.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Sillem, *Ways of Thinking about God: Thomas Aquinas and the Modern Mind*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 98.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>14</sup> Kerr, “Theology in philosophy,” 116. Emphasis in original.

<sup>15</sup> Owens, “Aquinas and the Five Ways,” 133.

causality in Aristotelian philosophy: material, efficient, formal, and final causality respectively.<sup>16</sup> He finds it significant that the Third Way, which does not correspond to any of these, is given the central place, and argues that it is the most important because it “concludes to God as the foundation and source not of this or that aspect of things... but of the very being of things.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it seems that, of the Five Ways, the Third Way comes the closest to arriving at God’s revelation of Himself in Exodus 3:14 as “I am Who am.”

It would be useful at this point to quote the Third Way in full, as a reference for further explanations. Here is the translation of the English Dominican Fathers:

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence — which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.<sup>18</sup>

The argument can logically be divided into two parts. The first part concludes that, though there are many things that are not necessary, “there must exist something the existence of which is necessary” and the second that there must be some necessary thing that has “of itself its own

---

<sup>16</sup> Aidan Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to His Life, Work, and Influence*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 45.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-7.

<sup>18</sup> *STh* I, q. 2, a. 3.

necessity.” However, since the whole argument of the third way “is taken from possibility and necessity”, we must first define what is meant by these two terms.

St. Thomas gives us a good idea of what he means by “possibility” in the second sentence of the Third Way. He says that “we find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated and to corrupt.” The key here is the idea of generation and corruption. Fr. Brian Davies, O.P., explains that “in Aquinas’s scheme of things, a ‘possible’ (able to be or not to be) being is something in the world... which has a parent or parents (a producer or producers) of some sort.”<sup>19</sup> This is what is meant by generation. Corruption means that these ‘possible’ beings can also perish, that is, die or be destroyed.<sup>20</sup> So daisies, deer, and men are all possible beings because they are generated by parents and, in due course, die. Maydole objects that “it fails to follow from this that things which can-not-be-at-some-time are things which in fact fail to exist at some time. They might fail to exist at some time in some possible world but always exist in the actual world.”<sup>21</sup> St. Thomas, however, is not talking about “some possible world” and hypothetical beings which might fail to exist; he is talking about the actual world, in which we know actual things which are generated and corrupted. A being in the actual world which always exists would not fall into Thomas’s definition of a possible being, even if it “might fail to exist at some time in some possible world.”

Beings which Thomas calls “possible” are sometimes called “contingent” because they receive their being from outside of themselves.<sup>22</sup> However, it is important not to confuse St. Thomas’ use of these terms with the idea of some philosophers that “necessary” and

---

<sup>19</sup> Brian Davies, “Aquinas’s Third Way,” *New Blackfriars* 82, no. 968 (2001): 452.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Maydole, “Modal Third Way,” 3.

<sup>22</sup> Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas*, 46.

“contingent” should be used to denote only logical necessity and contingency.<sup>23</sup> That is, that “a necessary being is a being such that the supposition of its non-existence entails a contradiction” while a contingent being’s non-existence does not entail a logical contradiction.<sup>24</sup> In fact, St. Thomas does not use the word “contingent” in the Third Way; he distinguishes between the “necessary” and the “possible”. We have seen that he uses “possible” to mean that which can be generated and then die or be destroyed. It follows that he means by “necessary” beings those which are not generated and are “naturally incapable of ceasing to exist,” such as angels, human souls, and, for Thomas, the heavenly bodies.<sup>25</sup> Now it would not be a logical contradiction to for a certain angel not to exist; in this sense the angel is a “contingent” being – he need not exist and receives his being from outside himself. But St. Thomas would call an angel a necessary being; not because it is absolutely necessary for angels to exist, but because angels are incorporeal and as such are not generated and do not perish.<sup>26</sup> So in the Third Way, what is meant by a possible being is one which is generated and corrupts and what is meant by a necessary being is one which is not generated and does not corrupt.

Now that we have defined our terms, let us look at the first part of the Third Way. St. Thomas begins with the statement that “we find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be,” that is, possible beings as explained above. This is obviously true (“and if it is not,” says Davies, “then what do we know about anything?”<sup>27</sup>). But already in the next sentence, we come to our first difficulty. It reads “but it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not.” The difficulty lies with the word “always”. Some Latin

---

<sup>23</sup> Brian Davies, *Aquinas*, (London: Continuum Books, 2002), 54.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways: St. Thomas Aquinas’ Proofs of God’s Existence* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 47.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>26</sup> Davies, “Aquinas’s Third Way,” 452.

<sup>27</sup> Davies, *Aquinas*, 57.

editions do not have “semper” in this sentence, making it possible to translate as “now everything cannot be like this, for a thing that need not be was once not.”<sup>28</sup> Lubor Velecky insists that the latter makes more sense, because “Aquinas is not arguing that ‘things that can be-and-not-be’ cannot exist forever. He is arguing that ‘what there is’ cannot consist only of such beings.”<sup>29</sup> Davies, however, does not foresee a solution to the problem in the near future.<sup>30</sup> In either case, the main idea is that for any “possible” thing, there is a time when it is not. As we have seen, this is part of Thomas’s definition of a “possible” being; a being which by definition is generated and corrupted must at some time not be.

This leads to the next sentence, which states that “if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence.” It is this step that causes many philosophers to accuse St. Thomas of a fallacy, called a quantifier-shift fallacy, that renders his argument invalid. This is because they see St. Thomas stepping from saying of one “possible” thing that there was a time when it did not exist, to saying that if all things are only “possible”, then there was a time when they all did not exist. Anthony Kenny, for example, states that it is parallel to the argument that “since every road leads somewhere, there is somewhere (e.g. Rome) to which every road leads.”<sup>31</sup> Again, Maydole asserts that “the Third Way is not valid per se” and sets out to put forward a variation of it that is.<sup>32</sup> But others defend St. Thomas from these accusations. Martin De Nys has perhaps the most understandable explanation.<sup>33</sup> He argues that

---

<sup>28</sup> Davies, “Aquinas’s Third Way,” 450.

<sup>29</sup> Lubor Velecky, *Aquinas’ Five Arguments in the Summa Theologiae Ia 2,3*, (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1994), 83.

<sup>30</sup> Davies, “Aquinas’s Third Way,” 450.

<sup>31</sup> Kenny, *The Five Ways*, 56.

<sup>32</sup> Maydole, “Modal Third Way,” 1.

<sup>33</sup> Martin J. De Nys, “If Everything Can Not-Be There Would Be Nothing: Another Look at the Third Way,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 56, no. 1 (September, 2002): 115.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20111786>.

while it does not follow from saying that all its parts are well-made that a machine is well-made, it does follow that if all its parts are made from steel the machine is made from steel. In a similar way, if all beings in the universe are such that they can not-be, then the whole universe, at every moment in time, is something that can not-be, because those are the only kind of parts it is made of. Thus the universe, since it is something that can not-be, at one time is not, and therefore it is not wrong to say that “at one time there could have been nothing in existence.”

Once this has been established, the rest of the first part flows naturally. If there was at one time nothing in existence, then nothing would exist now, “because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing.” A thing cannot cause itself to exist, because in order to do so, it must pre-exist itself, and that is impossible.<sup>34</sup> Here we see St. Thomas’s implicit appeal to the doctrine of creation: he “sees no need to argue or even explain that the things with which we are familiar in the world are *effects*.”<sup>35</sup> Maydole objects that “it might be the case that some things just pop into existence for no good reason, as it were”<sup>36</sup> but acknowledges that, for Thomas, “every thing, event and condition is caused.”<sup>37</sup> So if at some time nothing were in existence, nothing could have begun to exist. And if nothing had begun to exist, there would be nothing now. It is obviously false that there is nothing now, so the supposition that everything is a “possible” being must be false, and there must exist some “necessary” being. This brings us to the end of the first part of the argument.

The second part of the Third Way is much less difficult to explain. Note that by the end of the first part, St. Thomas has shown that there must be a necessary being, but that his idea of a necessary being extends to angels, human souls, and heavenly bodies; these are still a far cry

---

<sup>34</sup> Brian Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 32.

<sup>35</sup> Kerr, “Theology in philosophy,” 119. Emphasis in original.

<sup>36</sup> Maydole, “Modal Third Way,” 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



from God. He begins the second part by saying that the necessity of a necessary thing can either be caused by another or not. This means to say that even though a necessary thing is not generated by others like itself, it may still have a cause, that is, it “might exist because something else accounts for its existing.”<sup>38</sup> But all necessary things cannot be like this, because if they were, there would have to be an infinite series of them, each causing the necessity of the next. Thomas says that this is impossible; he has already proved it in the Second Way with regard to efficient causes. Once again, there is an objection from Maydole, who argues that Thomas’s proof of this rests on “the assumption that there must be a first cause of every effect. That could be not be established without rejecting an infinity of causes.”<sup>39</sup> But this seems to be a perfectly reasonable rejection to make. Fr. Brian Davies explains it this way: “If each cause of A’s existence were itself in need of a cause of its existence, then no cause of A could exist, and A itself could not exist.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore there must be some necessary thing which has no cause for its necessity, but rather has it of itself and causes necessity in others. “This all men speak of as God.”

St. Thomas Aquinas’ Third Way can be summarized as follows:

1. We see in nature things that are possible to be or not-be.
2. Possible things such as this at some time are not.
3. If the universe were made up of only these kinds of things, then the universe would be something that could be or not-be, and so at some time it would not-be, and there would be nothing.

---

<sup>38</sup> Davies, “Aquinas’s Third Way,” 461.

<sup>39</sup> Maydole, “Modal Third Way,” 6.

<sup>40</sup> Davies, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 32.

4. If this were so, even now there would be nothing, because a thing cannot cause itself to exist; but this is false, so there must be some necessary thing.
5. Necessary things may have their necessity from something else or not.
6. There cannot be an infinite series of necessary things that have their necessity from something else, so there must be something that has its necessity of itself and causes it in others, and this we call God.

If we accept this explanation, there are a few things we ought to keep in mind. The first is that the Third way is not a proof of God's existence, because God's existence is the same as His essence, and this we cannot know. Rather, "we should recognize that the Ways are concerned to make clear, not God's existence exactly, but that 'God exists' (that *Deus est*) is true."<sup>41</sup> Next, even though it is based on natural reason, the Third Way is not aimed primarily at non-believers;<sup>42</sup> it does not "stand at the beginning of the tradition that concludes with 'purely philosophical' ('natural theological') attempts to prove the existence of some generalized deity."<sup>43</sup> Rather, "Aquinas may be approached as a culminating point in the long tradition of uniting the God of the Septuagint with the Existent that dates back at least to Philo."<sup>44</sup> The Five Ways are the starting point and foundation of Thomas' statements about God based on revelation, which he expounds in the rest of the *Summa*. St. Thomas will show in later questions that what we learn about God through the application of natural theology we learn about the God revealed in Scripture. This is made clear when he uses for the *sed contra* of the article in which the Five Ways are found Exodus 3:14, in which God reveals Himself to the Israelites as "I am Who am." This name "can be seen as both an indication of God's free covenantal relationship

---

<sup>41</sup> Davies, *Aquinas*, 47.

<sup>42</sup> Velecky, *Aquinas' Five Arguments*, 36.

<sup>43</sup> Kerr, "Theology in philosophy," 129.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

with and for Israel ... and a metaphysical truth about God's essence or nature."<sup>45</sup> In the Third Way, St. Thomas Aquinas reasons to God as a necessary being having its necessity of itself and causing necessity in others; this is in perfect harmony with God's revelation of Himself as "pure existence, the one who *is* and who thus has the power to redeem Israel."<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Levering, "Contemplating God," 25.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

## Bibliography

- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1981.
- . *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Translated by the English Dominican Fathers. London: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1924. <http://www.archive.org/stream/summacontragenti01thomuoft>.
- Davies, Brian. *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.
- . "Aquinas's Third Way." *New Blackfriars* 82, no. 968 (October 2001): 450-66.
- . *Aquinas*. London: Continuum Books, 2002.
- De Nys, Martin J. "If Everything Can Not-Be There Would Be Nothing: Another Look at the Third Way." *The Review of Metaphysics* 56, no. 1 (September, 2002): 99-122. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20111786>.
- Kelly, Thomas. "Ex Possibili et Necessario: A Re-Examination of Aquinas's Third Way." *The Thomist* 61, no. 1 (1997): 63. <http://www.thomist.org/journal/1997/971AKell.htm>.
- Kenny, Anthony. *The Five Ways: St. Thomas Aquinas' Proofs of God's Existence*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Kerr, Fergus. "Theology in philosophy: Revisiting the Five Ways." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 50, no. 1/3 (December, 2001): 115-30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40020986>.
- Levering, Matthew. "Contemplating God: YHWH and Being in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas." *Irish Theological Quarterly* 67, (2002): 17-31. <http://itq.sagepub.com/content/67/1/17>.
- Maydole, Robert E. "The Modal Third Way." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47, no. 1 (February, 2000): 1-28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40036432>.
- Nichols, Aidan. *Discovering Aquinas: An Introduction to His Life, Work, and Influence*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003.
- Owens, Joseph. "Aquinas and the Five Ways." In *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God: The Collected Papers of Joseph Owens*, 132-141. Edited by John R. Catan. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980.
- Sillem, Edward. *Ways of Thinking about God: Thomas Aquinas and the Modern Mind*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961.

Velecky, Lubor. *Aquinas' Five Arguments in the Summa Theologiae 1a 2, 3*. Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1994.

Young, William W. "From Describing to Naming God: Correlating the Five Ways with Aquinas' Doctrine of the Trinity." *New Blackfriars* 85, no. 999 (September 2004): 527-41.