

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) on the Existence of God

Summa Theologiae I, Question 2, Articles 1-3.

Question 2 of Aquinas' *Summary of Theology* (written between 1265 and 1273) is devoted to the question of the existence of God and is divided into three sub-questions called articles. Articles 1 and 2 consider whether it is possible to prove the existence of God and if so, how. Article 3 contains one of the most famous of all sets of arguments from the middle ages, The Five Ways — five arguments for the existence of God.

Article 1: Is the existence of God self-evident? This article is aimed at Anselm's *Proslogion* proof. It asks whether the claim that 'God exists' is such that someone properly understanding it could not deny it to be true. Or better, perhaps, whether someone who understands the concepts employed in the claim will understand that it is true. Remember that in ch. 3 of the *Proslogion* Anselm argues that one cannot coherently think the thought 'God does not exist'.

Aquinas considers three arguments claiming to show that the existence of God is self-evident:

1. Self-evident knowledge is knowledge which is in some way built into our minds. We have the knowledge in virtue of having minds. The reference to 'first principles' is to principles like the Law of Non-Contradiction: 'it is not possible for an unambiguous claim to be both true and false at the same time'. The next step is an appeal to the authority of the Greek philosopher John of Damascus (Damascene) that the knowledge of God is implanted in our minds. Therefore that God exists is self-evident. Note here the non-Aristotelian claim that some knowledge is built into the mind, that is to say it is innate. Aristotle holds that all knowledge is acquired through the senses, nothing is built in to the mind.
2. Anselm's argument with some extra details from Aristotle (called by Aquinas 'the Philosopher'). A true claim is self-evident if it is known to be true as soon as the terms are understood. The example of a first principle here is the principle 'every whole is greater than its parts'. The claim is that anyone who understands what 'part' means and what 'whole' means will immediately accept that the whole is greater than its parts. But 'God exists' is known to be true as soon as the terms are understood - by Anselm's argument¹.
3. An argument mixing logic and theology. Truth exists since either 'truth exists' is true or else 'truth does not exist' is true; but if 'truth exists' is true, then truth exists; and if 'truth does not exist' is true, then truth exists. Therefore truth exists. But God is truth; therefore God exists.

Argument for the opposite, the existence of God is not self-evident: It is not possible to deny what is self-evident, but the Fool denies that God exists; therefore that God exists is not self-evident.

Aquinas' reply. Make a distinction: A claim '*X is Y*' may be (a) *self-evident in itself* — if the concept *X* includes the concept *Y*, then whether or not anyone has the concepts *X*, and *Y*, '*X is Y*' is *self-evident in itself*; (b) *self-evident for us* — if '*X is Y*' is self-evident in itself and everyone possess the concepts of *X* and *Y*, then '*X is Y*' is *self-evident for us*. For example we cannot meaningfully use the word 'bachelor' without knowing that if something is a bachelor, it is male. So 'a bachelor is male' is self-evident for us. On other hand people can meaningfully use the word 'platypus', and once did, without knowing that a platypus is a mammal. Aquinas would have held that being mammal is part of the meaning of 'platypus' so 'a platy-

¹Note the translation is a bit misleading, the last sentence should be 'as soon as the name 'God' is understood, that than which no greater can be thought exists in the understanding etc.'

pus is a mammal' is necessarily true, and self-evident in itself, but self-evident in itself and not for us.

Aquinas claims that 'God exists' is self-evident in itself since existence is included in the meaning of 'God', humans, however, do not have direct access to God and for that reason do not possess the appropriate concept of God. **So for us 'God exists' is not self-evident.**

Aquinas' reply to argument 1 argues that *none of us have a proper concept of God*. Rather what we have is the desire for happiness without realising that it is God who provides the ultimate happiness for humans.

The reply to argument 2, is Aquinas' reply to Anselm. Aquinas allows that everyone understands that 'God' means *that than which no greater can be thought* but claims that this does not give Anselm what he wants since we would have to first concede that such a being exists. That is, he seems to argue, like Gaunilo, that Anselm has first to prove that there is something which is *that than which no greater can be thought*. This, however, seems to misunderstand Anselm's argument.

The reply to argument 3 is that it does not follow from the fact that it is self-evident that a truth exists that it is self-evident that the first truth, i.e. God, exists.

Article 2: Takes up the question of whether God's existence can be proved and introduces Aquinas' method of proof.

Three arguments that the existence of God cannot be proved:

1. That God exists is something he hold as a matter of faith. Faith is something we believe on the basis of divine revelation and which cannot be proved to be true by the methods of philosophy.
2. The point of the second argument is that God's existence cannot be proved by what Aristotle would regard as *scientific demonstration*. For such a demonstration we would have know the definition of God (the definition expresses the *essence* of God, i. e. what it is to be God, in words). Since we cannot know what that definition is we cannot produce a demonstration. Roughly speaking an Aristotelian demonstration has the form: 'Every *S* is *M*, every *M* is *P*; therefore every *S* is *P*'. The term *M* is called the *middle term*. For example 'All humans are mortal rational animals, all mortal rational animals are able to laugh; therefore all humans are able to laugh'. Here the middle term is the definition of human — a human is a mortal rational animal. In this case the argument would be Every thing which is defined by *D* exists, God is defined by *D*; therefore God exists. Since we don't know what 'D' is we cannot prove in this way that God exists.
3. The third argument is that in general we can argue from the existence of what we recognise to be its effects to the existence of the cause of those effects. However, since all the effects of which we are aware are finite and limited we cannot infer from them the existence of something infinite and unlimited. So we cannot argue for the existence of God by arguing from effect to cause.

Argument for the opposite, the existence of God can be proved: Scripture in Romans 1.20 provides an authority for the possibility of proving the existence of God from his effects.

Aquinas' Reply

Aquinas following Aristotle make a distinction between a demonstration which just shows *that something is so, or that something exists* — known as a demonstration '*quia*' in Latin (*quia* is the Latin for 'that') and demonstration of *why something is so, or why something exists* — called a demonstration '*propter quid*' in Latin ('*propter quid*' is the Latin for 'on account of what').

Examples:

- (a) A demonstration *that* the moon is near the earth:

A heavenly body which does not twinkle is near the earth
 The Moon does not twinkle

Therefore the moon is near the Earth

This demonstrates that the moon is near the Earth but does not explain why this is so - non-twinkling doesn't explain closeness. The demonstration argues from the effect to the cause.

(b) A demonstration of *why* the moon does not twinkle:

A heavenly body which is near the earth does not twinkle
 The moon is near the earth

Therefore the moon does not twinkle

This demonstrates that the the moon does not twinkle and shows why this is so. It argues from cause to effect – being near the earth is the cause of the moon's not twinkling.

Aquinas' solution, and his reply to the arguments is that the existence of God can be proved with an argument like (a) starting from facts about the world — the effects of God's causal power — *and arguing back to the best explanation of these facts* — the existence of God as their cause .

Reply to 1. Aquinas denies the claim. The proposition 'God exists' is not strictly speaking an article of faith since it can be proved by natural reasoning.

Reply to 2. Aquinas says that when we argue from effect to cause we do not require the definition of the cause but rather a name for the cause. This is not very clear. What I think he means is that we can make do with a description of the cause without knowing what it's definition is. We have a number of descriptions of God - *the omnipotent being*, *the omniscient being* etc - but do not know the definition of God. So long as we argue as follows we will be o.k. Certain kinds of effects exists, the cause of these effects is properly described with the description D^* , everyone agrees that D^* is a description of God. Therefore, God exists. So the required argument with D^* , the meaning of the name 'God', as its middle term is: D^* exists, (everyone agrees that) D^* is (a description of) God; therefore God exists

Reply to 3. Again we can demonstrate the existence of God by arguing from effects to cause though this does not provide us with knowledge of the nature of God as expressed in a definition.

Note that arguments from facts about the world — the effects — to the cause are *arguments to the best explanation*. We seek to show what best explains certain facts about the world.

Article 3: Aquinas' Five Ways to prove the existence of God.

(a) Arguments claiming to prove that God does not exist:

(NB Aquinas has to show why these fail)

(1) **The Argument from Evil.** Aquinas' reply (at the end of the article) is that evil is part of the divine plan.

(2) We can explain everything without appealing to God. This is a version of 'Ockham's Razor' - Never appeal to more than you need to in explaining something. Aquinas' reply (at the end of the article) is that we cannot explain the 'directedness' of the world without God.

Argument for the opposite - God exists: Scriptural authority tells us that God said '*I am who I am*' — i.e. he is who exists

(b) Aquinas' proofs of the existence of God:**The First Way:** The clearer way - from change.

[Change here is accidental change in quantity, quality or place]

1.1. It is certain, and confirmed by sense, that things in the world change.

1.2. Whatever is changed is changed by something else.

Proof:

a. Something changes by becoming actually what it is potentially.

b. Something changes something else in so far as it, the changer, is actually what the changed thing is potentially.

c. To change something is simply to cause it to pass from potentiality to actuality.

d. Something can be caused to pass from potentiality to actuality only by something which is already actual.

e. It is not possible for something to be potentially and actually something in the same respect at the same time.

E.g. what is actually hot cannot be potentially hot, but only potentially cold.

Therefore: It is impossible that the same thing is with respect to the same change, both the changer and the changed — that is it is impossible for something to change itself.

Therefore: Whatever is changed is changed by something else.

1.3. If the changer is itself changed, it must be changed by something else.

1.4. The sequence of changed changers cannot go on to infinity.

Proof: If it did, then there would be no first changer, and consequently no other changer.

Proof: Second changers change only because they are changed by a first changer.

E.g. the stick moves only because it is moved by the hand.

1.5. Therefore there must be a first cause of change which is itself changed by nothing.

Such a being everyone calls God. That is, everyone agrees that 'the first cause of change which is itself changed by nothing' is a description of God.

The Second Way: From the nature of efficient causation.

The notion of an efficient cause is more general than that of a changing, or moving, cause. It includes bringing something into existence — e.g. the father is the efficient cause of the child — and maintaining something in existence.

2.1. We observe an order of prior and posterior in efficient causes.

2.2. Nothing is the efficient cause of itself.

2.3. The series of efficient causes cannot be infinite.

Proof: The argument again is that if the first cause is removed then so is the effect.

2.4. Therefore there must be a first efficient cause.

Such a being everyone calls God.

Third Way: From the possible and necessary.

[This proof is particularly important since it shows that, like Aristotle, Aquinas believes that something is possible only if it will occur within a finite time.]

[Note also that Aquinas' here assumes that time is infinitely extended in the past. He does not believe that this is true but he does not start with his belief that the world was created only a finite time in the past by God since although this would immediately give him a proof that God exists, the premiss is not accepted by everyone.]

3.1 There are in the world things whose non-existence is possible.

Proof: It is obvious that most things are generated and corrupted.

3.2 Not all things can be possible in this sense — i. e. have a merely contingent existence.

Proof:

- (a) anything whose non-existence is possible does not exist at all times,
- (b) if all things were such that their non-existence is possible, then at some time nothing at all would have existed,
- (c) but if nothing existed, it would have been impossible for something to come into existence,
- (d) so nothing would now exist — which is obviously false,
- (e) therefore there must be something whose existence is necessary — there is no time at which it does not exist.

3.3 The existence of something whose existence is necessary is either (a) caused by something else or (b) not caused by something else.

[3.4 If (b), then there exists a being whose existence is necessary and not caused by something else.]

3.5 If (a), since, as shown in The First Way, there cannot be an infinite series of caused beings, there must be a necessary being whose existence is not caused by something else.

3.5 Therefore there is something whose existence is necessary *per se*, i.e. of itself — the cause of its necessity is not distinct from it, but rather it is the cause of the existence of all other necessary and possible being.

Such a being everyone calls God.

Fourth Way: From the gradations found among things.

[This is very like the proof proposed by Anselm in his *Monologion*.]

4.1. We observe that some things are more or less good, true, noble, etc., than other things.

4.2. Things are said to be more or less *X* in so far as they approach that which is *X* to the greatest degree.

Example: something is more hot as it approaches the maximal degree of heat.

4.3. Therefore there is something which is, truest and best and most noble, and consequently the maximal being.

Proof — by the authority of Aristotle: Aristotle says the maximally true are the maximal beings. (*Metaphysics* II, 1, 993b30).

4.4. Whatever is maximal of a kind is the cause of everything else of that kind (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, II.1, 993b25).

Example: The maximal heat is the cause of all other heat.

4.5. Therefore there is something which is the cause of all being, goodness, and any perfection.

Such a being everyone calls God.

The Fifth Way: From the government of things.

[This proof is still very popular today.]

5.1 We see that things which lack the power of thought act on account of a goal.

Proof: They are observed always or often to act in the same way — and what follows is what is best.

So it is clear that it is due to intention rather than chance that they arrive at their goal.

5.2 Things which lacked the power of thought could not tend to a goal unless they were directed by something aware, and intelligent.

Example: an arrow is *directed* to its goal by an archer.

5.3 Therefore there is something by which all natural things are directed to a goal.

Such a being everyone calls God.