

The First Way



An A Posterior Route to God?

Proven and Believed

- ❖ Aquinas supposes that some truths about God cannot be known by natural reason alone.
- ❖ Still, he claims that a wide range of others can be so known:
 - ❖ There are some truths that natural reason can also reach, such as that God exists, that he is one, and others of this sort. Even the [ancient] philosophers have demonstratively proved these truths about God, led by the light of natural reason (*SCG* I.3.2/14).
- ❖ He thinks, in short, that God's existence is *provable*.

The Character of his Proofs

- ❖ Aquinas thinks that all who are willing to exercise their rational capacities can come to appreciate the truth of Catholic theism.
- ❖ How?
 - ❖ He recognizes that in this project he cannot rely on divine revelation—if there is such a thing.
 - ❖ He sees plainly that pagans do not accept the authority of scripture or countenance the (putative) truths of revelation.
 - ❖ ‘We must, therefore,’ he contends, ‘have recourse to natural reason, to which everyone must give assent’ (*SCG* I.2.3/11).
 - ❖ So, he turns himself to arguments rooted in *first principles*, which he believes any sane person must accept.
- ❖ He proceeds in two importantly distinct phases:
 - ❖ Phase One: He seeks to prove the existence of a first cause, which ‘everyone understands to be God.’
 - ❖ Phase Two: Having proven the existence of this first cause, he begins to derive its attributes, which turn out to be the attributes accepted by orthodox Catholic theism: omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence.

First Proof: an Argument from Motion

- ❖ The first and clearest way derives from facts about change. Surely, as our sense show, some things in the world do change [or move]. But everything that changes is made to change by something else. For a thing only undergoes a change inasmuch as it has a *potentiality* for being that into which it changes, while a thing only causes change inasmuch as it is *actual*. To cause change is just to draw something out of potentiality into actuality, and this can only be done by something that is in actuality. (Thus, something actually hot, like fire, makes wood which is potentially hot become actually hot, thereby changing and altering that wood.) But, while a single thing can simultaneously be in actuality with respect to one property and in potentiality with respect to another, it cannot simultaneously be in actuality and potentiality with respect one and the same property. . . It is therefore impossible for a thing that undergoes a change to cause that change, or for something to change itself. Therefore, whatever undergoes a change must be changed by another thing. And, if this other thing undergoes change, it also must be changed by something else, and so on. But this cannot go back to infinity. If it did, there would be no first cause of change and, consequently, no other causes of change—for something can be a secondary cause only if it is changed by a primary cause (as a stick moves something only if a hand moves that stick). We must therefore posit a first cause of change which is not itself changed by anything. And this everyone understands to be God. (*ST* I q. 2. resp.; IPCC, 42)

First Proof: the Argument

1. Something is in motion.
2. Whatever is in motion is moved by another.
3. So, that which is in motion is moved by another.
4. This mover is itself either (a) moved by another, or (b) not moved by another.
5. If (4b), there exists an unmoved mover.
6. If (4a), then (i) we proceed to infinity, or (ii) we arrive at an unmoved mover.
7. It is impossible that we proceed to infinity.
8. So, if (4a), there is an unmoved mover.
9. Therefore, there exists an unmoved mover. ('This everyone understands to be God.')

Some Observations I

- ❖ (1) is meant to be *a posteriori*: it is just a fact of experience that we observe change and motion.
- ❖ Is it *possible* that this is false?
 - ❖ Perhaps—but it's not the least little bit credible.
- ❖ (Plus, as Aquinas notes elsewhere, even a mental change is a change. . .)

Some Observations II

- ❖ To understand (2), we need to draw attention to some uses of the verb ‘to move’:
 - ❖ It can be used transitively, as in: ‘Perry moved the chair just as Hendrik was about to sit on it.’
 - ❖ Here ‘moves’ is used *transitively*. So, moves_T.
 - ❖ It can be used intransitively, as in: ‘No-one moves like Mikhail Baryshnikov.’
 - ❖ Here ‘moves’ is used *intransitively*. So, moves_I.
 - ❖ Finally, it admits of a progressive and non-progressive use.
 - ❖ The progressive use, when the verb is used intransitively, is usually rendered as ‘. . . is moving’ or ‘. . . is in motion.’
 - ❖ So, e.g., ‘A ball rolling down a hill will continue moving (or remain in motion) until it reaches the bottom or something obstructs it.’
- ❖ With those distinctions in mind, we can rewrite (2) as:
 1. Whatever is in motion_I is moved_T by another.

Two Consequences of Observation II

- ❖ First, the final conclusion ((9) There exists an unmoved mover) is not, as unlearned critics sometimes suggest, self-contradictory.
 - ❖ It does not mean:
 - ❖ There exists something in motion_I which is not in motion_I.
 - ❖ But rather:
 - ❖ There exists something which moves_T which is not in motion_I.
- ❖ Second, and more importantly, ((2) Whatever is in motion is moved by another) now comes into clear focus. It means:
 - ❖ Whatever is in motion_I is moved_T by another.
 - ❖ Here too the claim is not (or not obviously) necessarily true, but it too seems highly credible.

Observations III

- ❖ The real action centers on (7) (It is impossible that we proceed to infinity.)
- ❖ Consider, though, the backward counting angel. . .