A Proof from Motion

The First Way of
Thomas Aquinas

The Proof I

❖ The existence of God can be proved in five ways. The first and clearest way is based on motion. For it is certain, and confirmed by our senses, that some things in this world are moved. However, everything that is moved is moved by some other thing. For nothing is moved unless there is in it some potentiality for that toward which it is moved, whereas if a thing is a mover it is actually moving something. For to move something is nothing other than to bring it from potentiality to actuality. However, nothing can be brought from potentiality to actuality except through some being that is in actuality—just as something that is actually hot, like fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and in this way moves and changes it. Now it is not possible for the same thing to be in actuality and in potentiality at one time and in the same respect, but only in different respects; for what is actually hot cannot be at the same time potentially hot, but is at that time, potentially cold. Therefore, it is impossible that something is, in the same respect and in the same way, both mover and moved, or that it moves itself. Therefore, everything that is moved is moved by something else.

The Proof II

❖ If, therefore, a mover is itself being moved, it too must be moved by something else, and that by something else as well. But this cannot go on to infinity, since then there would not be some first mover; and consequently neither could anything move some other thing, since subsequent movers do not move unless they are moved by a first mover, just as a staff moves only because it is moved by a hand. Therefore, it is necessary to arrive finally at some first mover which is itself not moved by anything—

❖ —and this is everyone calls God.

—St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I q. 1 a 3 (*RR,* 47)

Prefatory

- Let us say that:

  - S knows $p =_{df}$ (i) p is true; (ii) S believes p; (iii) S is justified in believing p.

- In short let us say that:

  - K $=_{df}$ JTB

- Although questions might be asked about all elements of this definition, one main battleground concerns the nature of *justification*.

Two Types of Justification

❖ A core epistemic distinction: *a priori* and *a posteriori*

  ❖ S has *a priori* knowledge that *p iff* S knows *p* by reason or conceptual resources alone.

    ❖ If S knows *p a priori*, then sense perception plays no *justificatory* role in her knowing *p*.

      ❖ Typical examples: logic, mathematics, necessary truths more generally

  ❖ S has *a posteriori* knowledge that *p iff* S knows *p* by appeal to sense perception.

    ❖ If S knows *p a posteriori*, then sense perception plays an ineliminable *justificatory* role in her knowing *p*.

      ❖ Typical examples: quotidian claims about what is immediately present to sense perception (e.g. 'The lights are on.'); data observed in many scientific experiments; historical claims; contingent truths generally.

Three Important Observations

- This distinction is *exhaustive* and *exclusive*:

    - (i) every instance of justification is either *a priori* or *a posteriori*;

    - (ii) if an instance of justification is *a priori*, then it is not *a posteriori*, and if an instance of justification is *a posteriori*, then it is not *a priori*.

- This is a point about justification—and not genesis.

- It is natural to think that:

    - if *p* is justified *a priori*, then *p* is necessary

    - if *p* is justified *a posteriori*, then *p* is contingent

An *A Posteriori* Proof from Aquinas

(1) Something is in motion.

(2) Everything that is moved is moved by another.

(3) Hence, 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 (a) we proceed to infinity, or (b) we arrive at an unmoved mover.

(7) We cannot proceed to infinity.

(8) Therefore, if either (4a) or (4b), there exists an unmoved mover.

(9) Therefore, there exists an unmoved mover.

'This everyone calls God.'

One Point of Strategy

❖ Aquinas is fully aware that a proof of the existence of an unmoved mover is not a proof of the existence the God he worships—that God who is a living, intelligent being, omniscient in fact, as well as omnipotent and omnibenevolent.

❖ He conceives of his proof as a two-part strategy:

   ❖ First part: he seeks to prove the existence of a necessarily existing unmoved mover—a first cause.

   ❖ Second part: he seeks to prove that given this being's necessity, it is possible to derive all of the attributes of the Christian God.

      ❖ These may be divided into the *impersonal* attributes (simple, immaterial, wholly actual. . .). . .

      ❖ . . .and the personal attributes (omniscient, omnibenevolent, living, loving . . .)

❖ Here we encounter only the first part of his strategy.

One Point of Terminology

❖ The word 'moves' can be used transitively or intransitively.

    ❖ Transitive: 'Marcia moved her rook one square to the right, crushing her opponent by putting him into checkmate.'

    ❖ Intransitive: 'For a hefty man, he moves uncommonly well on the dance floor—elegantly even.'

❖ PM uses the word 'moves' transitively, which we designate thus: $moves_T$.

On Behalf of PM-2

(1) Nothing can be in both potentiality and actuality in the same respect.

(2) Everything being moved is in potentiality with respect to motion.

(3) Everything moving$_T$ is in actuality with respect to motion.

(4) Therefore, with respect to the same motion, nothing is both being moved and moving$_T$.

(5) Therefore, nothing moves itself.

(6) Therefore, everything that is moved is moved by another.

On Behalf of (PM-7)

(1) In an ordered sequence of motion, if a first mover is removed, then no other mover is moved. (That is, if *a* moves *b* and *b* moves *c*, then if *a* did not move, *c* would not move.)

(2) If the causal sequence of motion resulting in the motion we now perceive were infinite, there would be no first motion.

(3) If there were no first motion, what we now perceive to be in motion would not be in motion.

(4) What we now perceive to be in motion *is* in motion.

(5) Hence, the causal sequence of motion resulting in the motion we now perceive is not infinite.