

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP SUPPLEMENTAL READING

Thomas Aquinas, The *Summa Theologiae* and “The Principle of the First Cause”

by David Burr

Thomas Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas is perhaps the greatest and certainly the most famous example of that intellectual movement which we call medieval scholasticism[†]. Born into a noble Italian family in ca. 1225, Thomas was earmarked by his parents to pursue a respectable ecclesiastical career as abbot of the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino, thus improving both the family fortunes and his own.

Thomas had other ideas. In 1244 he joined the Dominican order. Like The Franciscans, the Dominicans were a mendicant order. Their original function was the control of heresy through preaching. By the middle of the thirteenth century they were gaining a reputation for learning and piety, but neither of these qualities was precisely what the noble house of Aquino had in mind when they thought of Thomas' future.



Depiction of St. Thomas Aquinas from the Demidoff Altarpiece by Carlo Crivelli, Public Domain

Their response to Thomas' decision was swift and direct. They kidnapped him back from the Dominicans and held him captive for about a year, meanwhile plying him with various temptations including a naked woman. Thomas persevered, however, and they finally acquiesced. Shortly thereafter, the Dominicans sent their newly recovered recruit off to Paris.

Paris was an exciting place to be in 1245. Scholars were rediscovering Aristotle, asking if and how his philosophy could be reconciled with Christian revelation. Thomas was destined to produce one great answer to that question [*Summa Theologiae*].

Summa Theologiae

Thomas' most significant work is his *Summa Theologiae* or ‘summary of Theology’, a gigantic work which attempts to present all of Christian theology as systematically as possible. Thomas worked on it from 1266 through 1273. Then, when he was nearly finished, he underwent an experience so intense that, as he himself explained, everything he had written seemed like straw. He completely stopped writing and died three months later. Thomas was canonized in 1323.

The *Summa Theologiae* is written in a form common to treatises of that age. All of theology is divided into its major topics. These, in turn, are divided into subtopics described by Thomas as

“questions”. The first “question” in the *Summa Theologiae* deals with the nature of Theology itself, the second with God's existence.

The “questions” are in turn divided into what Thomas calls “articles”, specific queries concerning the topic being explored in that particular “question”. (Thus, confusingly enough, what Thomas calls “questions” are actually general topics, whereas what he calls “articles” are really what we would mean by the word “questions”.) These “articles” form the basic unit of the *Summa theologiae*, and they proceed according to an invariable form. A specific query is made, then a section beginning with the word *videtur* (“it seems that”) offers arguments for what will later turn out to be the wrong answer to that query. Next, a brief section beginning with the words *sed contra* (“but on the contrary”) introduces a different answer. A section labeled *responsio* (“response”) finally presents arguments for what Thomas considers the correct view. The question then closes with a refutation of the arguments presented in the *videtur* section.

Below is a famous excerpt from *Summa Theologiae*, the *Quinque viae* (Latin: *five ways*), five arguments for the existence of God. The *Quinque viae* is the response section of Question 2, Article 3: “Whether God Exists”. “The Principle of the First Cause” is outlined in second of the Five Ways.

Response: It must be said that God's existence can be proved in five ways. The first and most obvious way is based on the existence of motion. It is certain and in fact evident to our senses that some things in the world are moved. Everything that is moved, however, is moved by something else, for a thing cannot be moved unless that movement is potentially within it. A thing moves something else insofar as it actually exists, for to move something is simply to actualize what is potentially within that thing. Something can be led thus from potentiality to actuality only by something else which is already actualized. For example, a fire, which is actually hot, causes the change or motion whereby wood, which is potentially hot, becomes actually hot. Now it is impossible that something should be potentially and actually the same thing at the same time, although it could be potentially and actually different things. For example, what is actually hot cannot at the same moment be actually cold, although it can be actually hot and potentially cold. Therefore it is impossible that a thing could move itself, for that would involve simultaneously moving and being moved in the same respect. Thus whatever is moved must be moved by something, else, etc. This cannot go on to infinity, however, for if it did there would be no first mover and consequently no other movers, because these other movers are such only insofar as they are moved by a first mover. For example, a stick moves only because it is moved by the hand. Thus it is necessary to proceed back to some prime mover, which is moved by nothing else, and this is what everyone means by “God”.

The second way is based on the existence of efficient causality. We see in the world around us that there is an order of efficient causes. Nor is it ever found (in fact it is impossible) that something is its own efficient cause. If it were, it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Nevertheless, the order of efficient causes cannot proceed to infinity, for in any such order the first is cause of the middle (whether one or many) and the middle of the last. Without the cause, the effect does not follow. Thus, if the first cause did not exist, neither would the middle and last causes in the sequence. If, however, there were an infinite regression of efficient causes, there would be no first efficient cause and therefore no middle causes or final effects, which is obviously not the case. **Thus it is necessary to posit some first efficient cause, which everyone calls “God”.**

The third way is based on possibility and necessity. We find that some things can either exist or not exist, for we find them springing up and then disappearing, thus sometimes existing and sometimes not. It is impossible, however, that everything should be such, for what can possibly not exist does not do so at some time. If it is possible for every particular thing not to exist, there must have been a time when nothing at all existed. If this were true, however, then nothing would exist now, for something that does not exist can begin to do so only through something that already exists. If, therefore, there had been a time when nothing existed, then nothing could ever have begun to exist, and thus there would be nothing now, which is clearly false. Therefore all beings cannot be merely possible. There must be one being which is necessary. Any necessary being, however, either has or does not have something else as the cause of its necessity. If the former, then there cannot be an infinite series of such causes, any more than there can be an infinite series of efficient causes, as we have seen. Thus we must posit the existence of something, which is necessary and owes its necessity to no cause outside itself. That is what everyone calls "God".

The fourth way is based on the gradations found in things. We find that things are more or less good, true, noble, etc.; yet when we apply terms like "more" and "less" to things we imply that they are closer to or farther from some maximum. For example, a thing is said to be hotter than something else because it comes closer to that which is hottest. Therefore something exists which is truest, greatest, noblest, and consequently most fully in being; for, as Aristotle says, the truest things are most fully in being. That which is considered greatest in any genus is the cause of everything in that genus, just as fire, the hottest thing, is the cause of all hot things, as Aristotle says. Thus there is something, which is the cause of being, goodness, and every other perfection in all things, and we call that something "God".

The fifth way is based on the governance of things. We see that some things lacking cognition, such as natural bodies, work toward an end, as is seen from the fact that they always (or at least usually) act the same way and not accidentally, but by design. Things without knowledge tend toward a goal, however, only if they are guided in that direction by some knowing, understanding being, as is the case with an arrow and archer. Therefore, there is some intelligent being by whom all natural things are ordered to their end, and we call this being "God".

Source:

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Burr, David. "Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologiae*." *Medieval Sourcebook*. January 1996. Paul Halsall, Fordham University. Accessed March 2010.

<<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/aquinas1.html>>

[†] Thomas Aquinas, an influential Catholic apologist, presented five arguments for God's existence in the *Summa Theologiae*. Christian **apologetics** is a field of Christian theology that aims to present a rational basis for the Christian faith and defend the faith against objections. The term "apologetic" comes from the Greek word *apologia* (ἀπολογία), which means in defense of. Therefore, a person involved in Christian apologetics is a defender of Christianity or Christian apologist. Source: Wikipedia contributors. "Christian apologetics." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 7 Mar. 2010. Web. 10 Mar. 2010.