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Aquinas' Five Ways: A Pastoral Interpretation

ABSTRACT: The famous 'five ways' to demonstrate the existence of God, which Aquinas presents at the outset of his magisterial *Summa Theologiae*, represent one of the most revisited and researched topics in the history of philosophy and theology. Yet the question as to how to interpret them remains heavily contested. In this article, I will shed some new light on the purpose and significance of the five ways, by interpreting them with reference to some other key articles in the *Summa* on the nature of knowledge of God, and indeed, with reference to the broader context of this text. This interpretation will draw attention to the pastoral or pedagogical function the proofs can be understood to perform, a function which has not been highlighted sufficiently in the past.

KEYWORDS: Thomas Aquinas, Five Ways, Theistic Proofs, Pastoral, Moral Virtue

The famous 'five ways' to demonstrate the existence of God, which Aquinas presents at the outset of his magisterial *Summa Theologiae* (I.2.3), could well be described as his signature contribution to discussions of faith and reason, and even to theology and philosophy. These proofs, as they are often called, represent one of the most revisited, researched, and contested topics in the history of these two disciplines. In that sense, one might wonder whether they merit further consideration.

In the course of the present discussion, however, I hope to shed some new light on the purpose and significance of the five ways, by interpreting them with reference to some other key articles in the *Summa* on the nature of knowledge of God, and indeed, with reference to the broader context of this text. This interpretation will draw attention to the pastoral or pedagogical function the proofs can be understood to perform, a function which has not been highlighted sufficiently in the past.

At the outset of this discussion, I will characterize the standard or 'textbook' reading of Aquinas' five ways which is often communicated in theology and philosophy courses, before detailing the ways themselves, which are derived from works by Aristotle and Plato (Kerr, 2002). According to the common reading, the five ways are instances of what is known as natural theology. In natural theology, the existence of God is supposedly proved through what is accessible to ordinary human beings, whether through the world of their experience or their own knowing powers, unaided by faith in God or his revelation through Scripture or the Church, and above all, through his Son.

So construed, the proofs allegedly allow those who do not as yet believe in God to be persuaded of his existence. Although a variety of such natural theological proofs exist, Aquinas' are primarily cosmological or in one case teleological. Thus, they respectively infer God's existence from the very existence of the world or things within it, like a beautiful bird or a sunset, or from evidence of design or purpose that can be found in the natural order or in natural things, such as the changing seasons.

The first proof, for example, argues from natural entities like a bird or the world itself that are 'in motion', as it were, to a first mover who places and sustains all things in motion, namely, God. The second, related, proof, moves from created effects to a divine efficient or 'initiating' cause of those effects; the third argues from contingent beings and circumstances—or things which did not have to exist, such as all objects of human experience are—to the existence of one being who is the

necessary source of all contingent realities. The fourth argues from the gradation of beings to a highest being. This gradation may refer to the ascending levels of truth and goodness that can be identified in various ideas, for example, or to the increasing degrees of complexity we observe in rocks, plants, animals, humans and angels. According to Aquinas, these degrees presuppose a maximal being that is the source of all things and cannot be ‘outranked’ by anything. The fifth way, which is more of a teleological than a cosmological argument, posits the existence of a divine being on the basis of the order or purpose which natural beings and the natural world exhibit.

Although the aforementioned interpretation of these five ways has prevailed for quite some time, it has been called into question more recently by numerous scholars of Aquinas’ thought (Kerr, 2002; McDermott, 2006; Preller, 1967; Rodgers, 1999; te Velde, 2006). Such scholars have drawn attention to the fact that the textbook interpretation seems irreconcilable with the first article of the *Summa*, which stresses that unaided human reason cannot attain to the knowledge of God’s essence, or ‘what he is’. While Aquinas does allow that human beings can infer ‘that’ God is a kind of being that is above our knowledge—a ‘known unknown’, as it were—on the basis of the cosmological and teleological factors mentioned above, he insists that this inference is normally only drawn by a few particularly insightful persons, such as Plato and Aristotle, and then, after a long time, with many errors mixed in with the idea of God in question (I.1.1).

Since only God himself can know himself fully, Aquinas contends, his revelation of himself ‘from above’, as it were, is a necessary supplement to such knowledge of him as can be induced ‘from below’, at least if that knowledge is to be pure and certain (I.1.1). For this purpose, however, Aquinas acknowledges elsewhere in the *Summa* that we need God to reveal himself in a personal manner with which we as human persons can identify (III.26). As Aquinas suggests, God did this through the Incarnation of his Son, who expressed the Spirit that glorifies the Father through every act of his human life on earth, and thereby revealed that God is a personal being precisely because he subsists in three Persons.

On the grounds that Son’s revelation of God, not least as Triune, is essential to definite knowledge that the otherwise unknowable God is real, therefore, scholars have contested the notion that the five ways can be reduced to natural theological proofs for the existence of a detached and impersonal First Mover, which they may well be in the works of those that originally envisaged them. In the distinctly Christian theological context into which Aquinas has evidently imported them, the proofs have been transformed to aid those who have already received the revelation of the Christian God in faith actually to understand their world and everything in it as his effects. That is to say, they “are reasoned ways which open out the prospect of a world caused by God” (McDermott, 2006: 188).

In that sense, the proofs as Aquinas understands them are designed to help people who believe in God think of the world and all things in it in terms of him as the cause of all there is (Sokolowski, 1995). What it means to do this can however be interpreted in a variety of ways. On one level, as already mentioned, it can be construed with reference to the way that natural objects or phenomena, like a beautiful bird or a sunset, can inspire in us an awareness of their creator. While it is certainly possible for a believer to experience God in nature along these lines, this interpretation does not arguably capture the nuance or fullness of Aquinas’ understanding of what it means to ‘see God in his effects’ with the help of the five ways.

Thus, I will aim in what follows to press recent efforts to re-think the intent

behind Aquinas' ways further by reading them not only in light of the first article of the *Summa*, which has been much cited in these efforts, but also with reference to the twelfth and thirteenth articles of the *Summa's* first part, on knowing and naming God. These articles follow an intervening inquiry on the general nature of God, which establishes the utter disparity between the kind of being God is and the kinds of things we can know, which are limited in terms of the lengths of time and ways in which they exist. By contrast, Aquinas posits, God is not limited in any way: he always completely is what he is, which is to be, and be the source of, all that is good (I.3-11).

As I noted above, such an idea of God as wholly other to all the things we can know—a known unknown—is one that Aquinas believes can be inferred by natural reason and so even by those who lack faith. This inference may be drawn through a simple effort to imagine the kind of being that would need to be postulated in order to account for the very possibility of the existence of finite things, that is, a being without the limitations of finite beings. In ideal circumstances, however, this idea comes through God's own revelation of himself. For only then does it attain absolute certainty and allow further for a more precise, indeed, personal understanding of the kind of being God is, namely, Incarnate and Triune.

On the previously established assumption that God is a being that is neither like nor unlike anything we can know, articles twelve and thirteen go on to re-iterate that we cannot obtain knowledge of what he is like in the fullness of his essence. Even so, they seem to suggest that we can and should evaluate all the things we actually can know in the light of the knowledge of the unknown God, which we have received through the Incarnate Son (I.12.12). In other words, we should consider the objects of our knowledge under the 'formality' or influence of our belief in God as the highest being and good there is (te Velde, 2006). As access to a light enables us to see things we would not see in the darkness, and to see them better in brighter rays of light, so Aquinas hints that we are in the best position to understand our world rightly when we think about it in view of the fact that nothing in it is the highest good that God is, as the creator of all things that are good (I.93). This, in fact, is the main way Aquinas thinks we can know God in this life, namely, by seeing things in light of faith in him.

On account of sin, however, it is far from a given that even human beings who believe in God could do this. For sin depletes our awareness of the unknown God, such that we cannot help but ascribe absolute significance which is rightly attributable to him alone to the only things with which we can engage directly, namely, temporal objects and circumstances. Indeed, we no longer have a rationale for doing otherwise, that is, for navigating our lives in the world on the assumption that the things we know and name here are not absolutely significant like God and cannot therefore make or break our happiness, even for a particular purpose or in a specific respect. These respects might include our relationships, career, education, or any other human activity or attainment that holds significance in our estimation. Though all these things may be goods in their own right, nevertheless, they can come to occupy a problematic and even harmful place in our lives when we see them as the be-all or end-all of our happiness.

Ironically, the sinful human tendency to seek happiness in temporal things sets us up for disappointment, insofar as it enslaves us to aversions and desires for finite and fleeting things that cannot always be avoided or obtained, respectively. It also creates potential for conflict amongst those who have different ideas about what should be pursued or avoided. The difference it would make for us to try to evaluate our circumstances under the formality of belief in God as the sole object of absolute significance is considerable, consequently. For in doing so, we would acquire the

conceptual resource we need to check our tendency to over or under-estimate the significance of our circumstances and see them for what they really are and thus see them in continuity with others.

Although article thirteen stresses again that we acquire no direct knowledge of God by bringing belief in him to bear on our assessment of the world along these lines, it testifies nonetheless to Aquinas' belief that we do thereby acquire an understanding of the world that is shaped by our belief in him. This is the indirect or analogous knowledge of God we can acquire through the mediation of circumstances we consider through the lens of our belief that he alone is the highest good (I.13.6). This indeed is what it means on my reading to see God in his effects, namely, to see things in a way that is affected by belief in him—and so to see that they do not give us anything as worthy of pursuit or praise as him.

With these reflections in view, I will proceed now to bolster the claim that Aquinas' five ways to 'see God in his effects' or demonstrate his existence can be interpreted as five ways or resources we can employ in the effort to try to unlearn our sinful habit of giving temporal circumstances the significance God alone can have in our lives and to learn instead to regard them in a way that is more consistent with the finite significance they actually possess, indeed to learn to be sound of mind, or rational.

The first and second arguments from motion and efficient causality, for example, might respectively be employed to remind us that the objects of our experience are made possible, actualized, or caused, by a being who is not subject to causation: that they are finite rather than unlimited goods which should be regarded as such, for the sake of the one that is not constrained as they are. The argument from necessity and contingency can serve to remind us that everything we have is a gift, which we should not take for granted and to which we should not become so attached as to be unable to live without it. The fourth way, found in the gradation of things, can teach us to marvel at the manner in which God's unchanging goodness seems to increase as we improve at the art of thinking about things in light of it, and it may motivate us to improve in this way.

The argument from final causality makes it possible for us to consider any situation that may arise in light of the fact that it can be used to accomplish God's ultimate purposes for us, assuming we assess it in light of the fact that it is not the be-all or end-all of our existence, even in one respect, which God alone can be. This is arguably true even of difficult circumstances or sufferings. Although these are in no way part of God's plan for us and represent strictly speaking meaningless instances of loss and pain, they can become valuable not in themselves but in terms of God's purposes for us when they are navigated with a view to the fact that they cannot ultimately or eternally break us: only the loss of a connection with God could do that. Indeed, they are as finite and fleeting as the goods we sometimes over-enthusiastically seek out.

Through the ongoing application of the five ways to the consideration of ordinary circumstances, consequently, it becomes possible gradually to cultivate a habit of seeing all things in the light of faith in God and so of seeing God indirectly in all things. Since these things point up the total otherness of God, the use of the proofs ironically does not render God increasingly comprehensible to natural reason so much as it enhances our appreciation of the absolute transcendence and mystery of the divine (Kerr, 2002: 58). Yet it is exactly this pervasive consciousness of God's supremacy that the proofs instill, and that is acquired through the indirect vision of all things in God's light, which predisposes us in Aquinas' account to the direct vision of

the light or God himself, in much the same way that vision at brighter levels of light prepare us to see the world in the full brilliance of the sun (I.93.4).

This transformation scarcely takes place solely with reference to the way we think about things, however. For the difference faith makes to our patterns of conceiving of the world cannot help but alter the way we go about living in it. On this basis, one could go so far as to say that human rationality or the soundness of knowledge is only fully consummated when reason performs its proper function of ordering a whole human life towards its flourishing by means of moral virtue. In other words, rationality in Aquinas' understanding is only initially a question of right thinking; it is ultimately a question of right living, or ethics.

This would explain why Aquinas spends so much time on questions of moral virtue in the *Summa*, far more than any thinker before him. In particular, he devotes the whole of the second part of the *Summa*'s second part to a treatment of the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, and the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love. In brief, I could summarize his discussion by describing prudence as the virtue that puts our minds in touch with reality—both the real nature of the realities we encounter in the world and the preliminary reality of ourselves, preventing us from over or under-estimating the worth of both. On the basis of this assessment and indeed self-assessment, justice, a property of the will, that is, the arbiter of our desires, motivates us to make the most of the abilities and resources we have for the sake of contributing to the flourishing of others. While fortitude gives us the strength to overcome challenges we might encounter in the process of exercising prudence through justice, temperance gives us the discipline or faithfulness to press on daily in this regard (Pieper, 1966).

These cardinal virtues, which govern our natural or ordinary lives, are complemented in Aquinas' scheme by the three theological virtues, which effectively put us in the optimal position to be morally virtuous (Pieper, 1997; Pinsent, 2012; Porter, 1992). Faith plays its part in this respect by leading us to acknowledge God as the sole object of absolute significance; hope by applying that knowledge in thinking about ordinary objects and circumstances, including our very selves; and love by treating or dealing with all these things accordingly. In that sense, the three theological virtues accomplish the same purpose as Aquinas' five ways. They lead us to think hopefully or rightly and act lovingly or morally in ordinary circumstances, on account of faith in God; in that sense, they fill out part of the project Aquinas initiates when he articulates the proofs and the *Summa* overall.

Though I cannot go into any more of the details of his moral theology in this context, it is well worth studying them, particularly in the light of the larger aims of the *Summa* (Porter, 1990). These aims, as Mark Jordan has helpfully elaborated, are largely pedagogical or therapeutic (Jordan, 2002). In fact, Aquinas composed the *Summa* for novices in the Dominican order, in an effort to help them integrate their theological studies with their own moral or spiritual development (Bauerschmidt, 2013). In other words, his aim in writing was to help ordinands grasp the principle that doctrines about, say, a Triune, Incarnate God, are not merely speculative, but have a practical application in the Christian life, which consists in nothing more than thinking and living in light of the knowledge of this God. Provided the interpretation I have been developing is presupposed, consequently, the locus of this pedagogical and therapeutic, or better, pastoral, project might actually consist in the five proofs that appear in the second article.

As I have suggested, the proofs can be interpreted pastorally insofar as they help us undergo the intellectual and ultimately moral transformation, which is

facilitated by bringing belief in God to bear in all our ordinary activities. This transformation, evidenced in such activities, might in turn be regarded as the ultimate proof for the existence of God that Aquinas purports to provide or encourage his readers to provide. Thus, the proof he has in mind, on my interpretation, is not some natural theological ‘paper proof’. It is the ‘personal proof’ that consists in a life transformed by the application of belief in God.

By this account, therefore, faith in God is established as rational—and faith and reason are reconciled—not because it can be rendered intelligible on the terms of human knowledge—as if God could be analyzed like any other object—but because faith in the Triune God that is known through Christ to be beyond knowledge makes us rational with regard to both our thinking about and ultimately our living in the world.

While the life we live by the light of belief in God—Triune, Incarnate—may provide evidence to those who do not believe of the power of this belief and thus the reality of its object, I have implied that it also successfully integrates our ordinary lives and our spiritual lives in God. These elements of our existence—the natural and the ‘graced’, the rational and the faithful—are not dichotomized or in competition by this account (Tanner, 2005). For the substance of our life in God is interchangeable with the normal human life of intellectual and moral virtue we lead on account of belief in him.

Although Aquinas articulated his five ways in the thirteenth century, without reference to the problems faced by Christian believers and the church today, it is hard to imagine a resource more relevant to us at present. For the five ways not only give us a tool for integrating our ordinary and spiritual lives, which are too often separated in our fractured society. At the same time, they provide a resource for highlighting the significance of faith in a world that is increasingly turning to disbelief and doubt.

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