

FIVE WAYS OF PROVING THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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The existence of God can be proved in five ways.

The first and most obvious way is the argument from motion.² It is certain and evident to our senses that, in the world, some things are moving. Now whatever is moving is moved by something else, for nothing can change unless it has the potential to be what it's changing into; whereas it is insofar as a thing is actual that it effects changes [in other things]. For change is nothing other than the elevation of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be elevated from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot (for example, fire), makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby changes and alters it.³ Now it is not possible for the same thing to be simultaneously in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously [actually hot and] potentially cold. It is, therefore, impossible for something to be, in the same respect and in the same way, both the thing that effects a change and the thing that gets changed. That is, it is impossible for a thing to move itself.⁴ Therefore, whatever is moving must be moved by something else.⁵ If the thing that

¹ The Dominican Fathers' translation is very literal, following the Latin so closely as to read quite awkwardly in English, and it uses some outdated expressions and syntax. I have revised it considerably to make it more modern and easier to read. I have also added explanatory notes.

² The word translated "motion" here is "*motus*," and Thomas' use of it is broader than our typical use of "motion." It extends to any sort of change. Think of what we call motion as a special sort of change—changing place. It is one of several sorts of change enumerated by Aristotle (who was a profound influence on Thomas). Some of the other types of change are *growing* or *shrinking* (i.e., changing size) and *alteration*. This last is what it is most natural for us to call "change". It consists of going from having one quality to having a contrary quality—for example, a hot thing's cooling off, a soft thing's hardening, or a person's skin tanning in the sun.

For at least much of this argument Thomas does seem to be thinking about change of place rather than about change in general, and some of his examples don't come across properly if we translate "*motus*" as "change", so I am translating the word "motion" here and in the last few sentences of the paragraph. But in the intervening sentences, he makes a more general point about change and gives an example of an alteration, so it's necessary to translate the word "change" in those sentences. For our purposes, we can think of him as making a general point about change and then applying it to the case of motion.

³ According to Aristotle for something to change—say, to become hot—it has to have the *potential* to be hot. Not everything does. For example, a sound cannot become hot, and nor can ice (without ceasing to be ice). If something does have the potential to be a certain way, it can be made that way only by something that is actually that way. For example wood, which is potentially on fire, can be set on fire by something that is actually on fire.

⁴ Here's where we can think of Thomas as going back from talking about change in general to talking specifically about motion. He probably still means his point to apply more generally as well, but he is focused on cases of motion. The idea is that if something were moving itself, then it would have to be both potentially at its destination and actually there, which is a contradiction.

⁵ The case of a person or animal might immediately come to mind as a counter-example. Don't we move ourselves? When someone walks, his feet are moved by other parts of his body which are moved by yet others, etc. The motion

moves it is itself being moved, then this thing also has to be moved by something else, and [if that thing is also being moved] then [it also has to be moved] by yet another thing. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; since the subsequent movers only move [anything] to the extent that they are moved by the first mover, as a staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore, it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.⁶

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause.⁷ In the perceptible world we find that there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself. This isn't even possible: for if something were the efficient cause of itself, it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now, in efficient causes, it is not possible to go on to infinity. This is because, whenever efficient causes follow in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the last cause (whether there are several intermediate causes or only one). Now, to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if none of the efficient causes is the first, then there won't be any last cause, nor any intermediate causes. But, if it were possible with efficient causes to go on to infinity, then there would be no first efficient cause, nor any ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes, all of which is clearly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause. This is what everyone calls God.

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and goes like this: We find things in nature for which existing is possible and not existing is possible, since we find that they come into existence and pass away. Consequently, they are able to exist and not to exist. It is impossible for these things to always exist, for anything that can possibly not exist, has some time at which it doesn't exist. Therefore, if everything is possible not to exist, then there could have been a time when there was nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because something that does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence — which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must be

begins with his *soul* (or, if you prefer, his *mind*), and a soul isn't the sort of thing that moves around in space. So it is something that does not change locations itself, but causes other things (the various parts of the body) to change their locations. It is, as Aristotle puts it, an "unmoved mover". Now, in another respect, we might want to say that the soul does move around in space. Everything about you, including your soul, your hairstyle and your sense of humor is wherever you are, and if you move from one side of the room to the other surely in some sense all these things go with you. But they do not move in the way that the parts of your body do. They don't go up and down like your feet when you walk, or expand and contract like your muscles. It is by moving in this sort of way that your feet and muscles move your whole body across the room, but it's not by doing anything like this that your soul causes your muscles and feet to move. Or, at any rare, this is the idea that it motivating Thomas' argument here. He would acknowledge that your soul (along with your sense of humor hairstyle) is moved by your body, in a way, but not in the same way or respect as the one in which your soul moves your body. This is part of the reason why Thomas mentions different "respects" earlier in the paragraph.

⁶ The idea is that God stands to all the movement in the whole universe in the way that your soul stands to your movement. This is a variation of an argument that Aristotle uses. He thinks that there must be an unmoved mover causing the stars to go around, and that the motion from them trickles down into the rest of the world.

⁷ Aristotle distinguished four respects in which one thing can be said to cause another. For our purposes here we only need to consider two, which have come to be called the "final cause" and the "efficient cause". Suppose a friend was losing weight and you asked him why? Here are two possible answers he might give: (1) "In order to be healthy." (2) "Because I've taken up exercising." The first answer gives the *final cause*. Being healthy is the *end* or goal for the sake of which he is losing the weight. The second gives the *efficient cause*. Exercising is the thing that *effects* the change in weight. To take another example, a builder is the efficient cause of a house, whereas sheltering people and possessions is the final cause of a house (that's what the house is *for*). The efficient cause of a plant is its seed; whereas if the plant has a final cause it will be some end or goal that the plant develops in order to attain. (Not everything, according to Aristotle, at least, has a final cause, though he thinks that plants do.)

something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot avoid postulating the existence of some being that has its own necessity in itself and does not receive it from anything else, but rather causes their necessity. All men call this God.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But “more” and “less” are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaphysics* II.⁸ Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and we call this God.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that [some] things that lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end.⁹ This is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result.¹⁰ Hence it is clear that they achieve their ends not accidentally but on purpose.¹¹ Now anything that lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it is directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence (as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer). Therefore, some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their ends; and we call this being God.

⁸ That is in Book II of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

⁹ A body is any three dimensional object. And a natural body is a body that comes to be by nature, rather than being made by human beings. So the natural bodies are plants and animals (along with all their various parts), and all the inanimate objects and materials in the world that are not man-made. In thinking about this argument it is easiest to focus on the case of plants.

¹⁰ Think of the way that plants grow: their leaves always (or almost always) grow up towards the sunlight and their roots down towards the water. This is the best result in that the plant needs to have its leaves in the sun and its roots in the water in order to live.

¹¹ Using the terms we discussed earlier, Thomas is saying that (at least some) unintelligent natural bodies exhibit *final causation*—they act *for the sake of an end*.