

The Language of Analogy in the “Five Ways” of St. Thomas Aquinas

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The “Five Ways” of St. Thomas in proving the existence of God is, needless to say, a most important and significant part in his magisterial *Summa Theologiae*. I can still recall what my professor then during my studies in Philosophy told us about it. He said that the “Five Ways” is the very hinge of the *Summa*. His conclusion is logical – if the existence of God is not properly argued upon, then the whole discourse about the Divine Attributes, about Creation, about Divine Government, about Salvation and Redemption, about Grace and the Sacraments, all of these discourses will amount to nothing. This is the reason why St. Thomas himself placed his arguments about God’s existence immediately following his discussion about the nature and extent of Sacred Doctrine.

In this paper, it is not my intent to discuss and argue about Aquinas’ proof regarding the existence of God. The topic is so ubiquitous that a plethora of studies about this abound in every book about Aquinas.¹ My objective here is to look into the analogical nature of language concerning the Five Ways in proving the existence of God. Since there is an infinite distance between God and Man, between the Creator and the created, it necessitates that concepts involved in such a demonstration be analogical in character. Furthermore, it is also my intent here to show that the “Five Ways” is not only a monolithic intellectual articulation on the existence of God but also an argument that opens up the mind further to investigate a Being that is the object of faith.

At the very outset, St. Thomas asserts that God’s existence can be demonstrated in a rational manner. “The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles, for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even as grace

¹An excellent treatment on the Five Ways of St. Thomas Aquinas was discussed in John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being*. (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), p. 442-500.

presupposes nature, and perfection supposes something that can be perfected.”² Because of this, a rational demonstration will be able to come up with a conclusion that is so certain but only insofar as they belong to the same kind. However, Aquinas held that “there can be nothing caused in God, since He is the first cause.”³ It is in this regard that if God will be the object of a rational demonstration, He is unlike any other. Thus, “from effects not proportionate to the cause no perfect knowledge of that cause can be obtained. Yet from every effect the existence of the cause can be clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects; though from them we cannot perfectly know God as He is in His essence.”⁴

Aquinas argues that there can be no cause in God because His essence and existence are one and the same. “God is not only His own essence, ... but also His own existence. ... If the existence of a thing differs from its essence, this existence must be caused either by some exterior agent or by its essential principles. ... But this cannot be true of God; because we call God the first efficient cause.”⁵ This is the reason precisely why St. Thomas arrived at the conclusion that all talk about God is analogical. Now, since the Five Ways is a talk about God, analogy plays a pivotal role in the argument.

THE LANGUAGE OF ANALOGY

St. Thomas maintains that there is a resemblance, albeit imperfectly, between the Creator and the created because of His simplicity. Hence he argued that only by means of analogy can we really speak about God. He said that:

Univocal predication is impossible between God and creatures. The reason of this is that every effect which is not an adequate result of the power of the efficient cause, receives the similitude of the agent not in its full degree, but in a measure that falls short, so that what is divided and multiplied in the effects resides in the agent simply, and in the same manner. ... In the same way, as said in the previous article, all perfections existing in creatures divided and multiplied,

²Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 2, art. 2, ad 2.

³Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 3, art. 6.

⁴Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 2, art. 2, ad 3.

⁵Summa Theologiae, Ia. Q. 3, art. 4.

*pre-exist in God unitedly.*⁶

Analogy then should justify for the deficient and imperfect manner by which the created mimic the Creator. "For in analogies the idea is not, as it is in univocal, one and the same, yet it is not totally diverse as equivocals; but a term which is thus used in a multiple sense signifies various proportions to some one thing; thus healthy applied to urine signifies the sign of animal health, and applied to medicine signifies the cause of the same health."⁷ It is here that for Aquinas the names of God⁸ weigh more than his activity as a creator, because here, not only that every existing thing owes its very being to God, but also it possesses some perfection derived from God Himself. Hence, he concluded that "every creature represents Him, and is like Him so far as it possesses some perfection: yet it represents Him not as something of the same species or genus, but as the excelling principle of whose form the effects fall short, although they derive some kind of likeness thereto."⁹ This is the reason why Aquinas can say that "names applied to God signify his relationship towards creatures: thus in the words, God is good, we mean, God is the cause of goodness in things; the same rule applies to other names."¹⁰

On the contrary this manner of speaking about God is mitigated when Aquinas discusses about the futility of language in his negative theology. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas argues that: "the mode of supereminence in which the (perfections) are found in God can be signified by names used by us only through negation, as when we say that God is eternal and infinite, or also through a relation of God to other things, as when He is called the first cause or the highest good. For we cannot grasp what God is, but only what He is not and how other things are related to Him."¹¹ From the statement, we can immediately see how Aquinas argued the imperfect nature of human knowledge, and conversely, how we speak about God. Since human knowledge is fundamentally quidditive, that is, knowledge acquired through the process of abstraction, we can never know or speak about God according to

⁶Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 13, Art. 5.

⁷Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 13, Art. 5.

⁸Cf. Summa Theologiae, Ia. Q. 13, Art. 1-4.

⁹Summa Theologiae, Ia, Q. 13, Art. 1.

¹⁰Summa Theologiae, Ia, Q. 13, Art. 2.

¹¹Summa Contra Gentiles, I, 30.4.

the nature of His Being because of the unity of His essence and existence. He articulated this saying: "Since therefore God is the first effective cause of things, the perfection of all things must pre-exist in God in a more eminent way. . . . Consequently, He must contain within Himself the whole perfection of being."¹²

It is no wonder then that Aquinas comes to the conclusion that: "whatever is said of God and creatures, is said according to the relation of a creature to God as its principle and cause, wherein all perfections of things pre-exist excellently. Now this mode of community of idea is a mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation."¹³ This method of speaking about God is nothing more but the language of analogy that uses concepts and terms in many senses in various proportions.

FIRST WAY: THE ARGUMENT FROM MOTION

The first and most manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, and therefore moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot be simultaneously potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, i.e., that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the 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.¹⁴

In the argument from motion, we see very clearly that Aquinas

¹²Summa Theologiae, Ia, Q. 4, art. 2.

¹³Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 13, art. 5.

¹⁴Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 2, art. 3.

predicates the concepts "First Mover" and "Existence" with the subject, which is God. This affirmation of the predicate "First Mover" to God is analogical in character if the subject contains causality in a supereminent way, is indistinguishable from it, and certainly the cause of any other motion. Needless to say, the first mover is the reason why other things move, and is precisely the reason why those that are moved are less eminent and less perfect. Since the first mover entails the very cause of all motion, it's being as pure actuality dictates that it's causal activity of must be in the highest degree possible.

In arguing about motion, Aquinas painstakingly showed that God is the ultimate cause of existence, and likewise possess the absolute responsibility for all that exists. We can see this when Aquinas said that God is wholly immaterial since He is pure actuality: "because no body is in motion unless it is put in motion, as is evident from induction. Now it has already been proved that God is the First Mover, and is Himself unmoved. Therefore it is clear that God is not a body."¹⁵ However, since God is pure actuality, existence is essential in Him, and thus His existence is a necessary one. Aquinas pointed out that: "existence must be compared to essence, if the latter is a distinct reality, as actuality to potentiality. Therefore, since in God there is no potentiality, it follows that in Him essence does not differ from existence."¹⁶ Furthermore, since God is the only Being whose essence and existence are one and the same, His existence is truly necessary. Aquinas was very explicit when he said: "it must be that all things which are diversified by the diverse participation of being, so as to be more or less perfect, are caused by one First Being, Who possesses being most perfectly."¹⁷ Lastly, since God is the single most necessary Being, all other things that exist merely participate in God's Being, and must therefore be caused by God.

From the considerations that we have pointed, we can clearly understand that the proof of God's existence, as articulated in the first way, is lucidly discussed within the parameters of the language of analogy. It is here that the first mover, as pure actuality, is identical with its existence, which it enjoys in a supereminent manner.

¹⁵Summa Theologiae, Ia, Q. 3, art. 1.

¹⁶Summa Theologiae, Ia, Q. 3, art. 4.

¹⁷Summa Theologiae, Ia, Q. 44, art. 1.

SECOND WAY: THE ARGUMENT FROM THE NATURE OF THE EFFICIENT CAUSE

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on in infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate cause is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or one only. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But in efficient causes it is possible to go on in infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.¹⁸

In the second way, Aquinas argued that God is the efficient cause, hence, His existence is a necessary one. As already discussed previously, the concept “existence” is analogically used when it is attributed to God. Since the nature of the efficient cause is pure actuality, that is, that God is not a body and that God’s essence and existence are identical, God possesses existence in a super-eminent manner. Hence, God is absolutely simple and the ultimate cause of all that exists. This is the reason why the notion of “Efficient Cause” (which is actually the first cause) is analogical in character when it is used to speak about God and His creation. Furthermore, the very idea of the first cause is the reason why other beings maybe thought of first causes in an imperfect and less eminent manner because it causes beings to serve as causes relative to each other.

THIRD WAY: THE ARGUMENT FROM POSSIBILITY AND NECESSITY

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently,

¹⁸Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 2, art. 3.

they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now, if these were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which 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 exist 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 in infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has already been proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore, we cannot postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others necessity. This all men speak of as God.¹⁹

The first, second, and third way closely resemble each other. In each case, Aquinas proposes the existence of a Being that is purely actual based in the conditions that he has set concerning the existence of all other things. The third way, similar to the first two ways, argued the absurdity of an infinite regression of metaphysical possible and contingent beings. Here we can see Aquinas' argument is closely unified with each other, pointing out a single, most absolute and most necessary cause for existence – God. Furthermore, in each way, Aquinas emphasized certain characteristics that such a Being should possess. For example, in the first way, he speaks of God as the first mover, in the second, he speaks of God as the first cause, while on the third he speaks about God as the most necessary Being. Hence, we can infer that Aquinas is allowing a certain positive knowledge about God, but only insofar as His existence is concerned. On the contrary, for God to be regarded as the first mover, the first cause, and the most necessary Being, God must be pure actuality. Now to be able to distinguish and speak about the difference in magnitude between the Creator and the created, between God and His creation, it must be spoken within the language of the analogical.

¹⁹Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 2, art. 3.

FOURTH WAY: THE ARGUMENT FROM GRADATION OF BEINGS

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 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. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all that genus; as fire, which is the maximum of 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 this we call God.²⁰

Here in the argument from the gradation of beings, Aquinas arrived at the conclusion what the greatest Being must also be the cause of any other lesser existence. Since the greatest Being is also the greatest good, the noblest, the truest, the best, the most eminent Being must be the cause of any other being. We can see very clearly how Aquinas linked the connection between being and goodness and how he arrived at the notion that the Highest Being possesses every perfection. In the Summa Contra Gentiles, the same line of reasoning can be found:

In every genus, furthermore, there is something that is most perfect for that genus, acting as a measure for all other things in the genus. For each thing is shown to be more or less perfect according as it approaches more or less to the measure of its genus. Thus, white is said to be the measure of all other colors, and the virtuous man among men. Now, measure of all beings cannot be other than God, Who is His own being. No perfection, consequently, that is appropriate to this or that is lacking to Him; otherwise, He would not be the common measure of all things.²¹

Since God's existence is the highest existence, the ontological foundation of His existence is His pure actuality. Conversely, Aquinas arrived at the conclusion that God's existence is a necessary one. In arguing about this, Aquinas pointed out that the cause of existence is the source of perfection found in entities,

²⁰Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 2, art. 3.

²¹Summa Contra Gentiles, I.28.8.

and thus this Being is the most true, the most noble, and the most perfect. Once again, the language is characteristically analogical. The language utilized signify that God, being the cause of all beings and whose essence and existence are one, possessed in a supereminent way all perfections found in created entities. These perfections are once again analogical in relation to the perfection of God Himself.

FIFTH WAY: THE ARGUMENT FROM THE GOVERNANCE OF THE WORLD

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless be 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 end; and this being we call God.²²

Aquinas once again emphasized that existence belongs perfectly to God since He is pure actuality. He arrived at this notion when he argued that beings without intelligence are directed by a principle who enjoys intelligence. He argued that some intelligent being direct natural things toward their end. Now, since God is pure actuality, Aquinas claims that the intelligence of God is identical with His governance, and He possesses these attributes in a supereminent degree. Furthermore, as the cause of all things, creation itself bears these characteristics in a lesser way. By taking into account these points, we can once again clearly see how Aquinas utilized the language of analogy to be able to argue his point.

CONCLUSION

In the discussion above, we see clearly that each of the arguments posited by Aquinas points to a Being who is at once

²²Summa Theologiae, Ia Q. 2, art. 3.

pure actuality. Furthermore, in each case, Aquinas directs the mind to attribute perfection, in the highest possible degree, to God alone. The climax of this outlook was reached particularly in the fourth way, the argument from the gradation of beings, wherein Aquinas demonstrates to us that only God enjoys supereminently perfection, and these perfections God imparts to creation albeit in a less eminent way.

It is in this way that Aquinas' line of reasoning is always leading from the imperfection of created entities to the perfection of the Divine Essence. Furthermore, he admits that the coherence between the two, between Creator and the created, is distinguishable and contingent with each other. The language of analogy is able to preserve the signification of concepts and terms taken from the realm of the empirical and attribute the same concepts to God, who is the primary analogon, in an imperfect manner.

From these considerations, we can infer that the five ways of Aquinas is not simply an argument that proves the existence of God in a rational and a philosophical manner. But more than that, the argument, because of the analogical use of language, directs and disposes the mind to investigate beyond the existence of God towards the Divine attributes and the inner life of God – theological truths that are proposed to men for belief.

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