

FIVE WAYS

Thomas Aquinas' Theology of God

Syed Waqas

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INTRODUCTION

Saint Thomas Aquinas is, beyond doubt, one of the greatest of all Roman Catholic theologians—some even call him the greatest.¹ It is absolutely factual to state that, as a philosopher theologian, Thomas Aquinas is one of the most important figures in the history of Western civilization's medieval period. The amount of contribution he made to the Western religious philosophy puts his stature above many others in terms of the extent of his influence on the development of Roman Catholic theology since the 14th century. Moreover, it is not only the Roman Catholicism that has benefitted from the theological thought of Thomas Aquinas, but even the groups representing other Christian doctrinal positions including the Orthodox Church and Protestant denominations have also made extensive use of the contributions of Thomas Aquinas.²

Thomas Aquinas was born in 1224 in the town of Aquino in the Kingdom of Sicily—a territory that corresponds with today's *Lazio*.³ His father, Landulf of Aquino, was a nobleman who owned the castle of Roccasecca where Thomas Aquinas was born, whereas his mother, Theodora Rossi, was a countess and was related to the Hohenstaufen Dynasty of the Holy Roman Emperors.⁴ Thomas Aquinas went to the University of Naples for his theological studies and joined then recently established Dominican order after his graduation.

From a literary point of view, Thomas Aquinas was a prolific writer. He wrote some very important works of pure philosophy by keeping in line with the intellectual vis-à-vis academic

¹ Joseph Peter Wawrykow, *The Westminster Handbook of Thomas Aquinas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), viii.

² Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White (eds.), *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), vii-viii, 1.

³ Pasquale Porro, *Thomas Aquinas: A Historical and Philosophical Profile* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 3.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1933), 23.

trend of the contemporary world around him. The most of his philosophy work is, nonetheless, found within the context of Scriptural theology, which is *per se* an attempt of systematizing his epistemology of Christian doctrines derived from the Bible with the philosophical epistemology of his era.⁵ It is probably the reason why Thomas Aquinas is found engaging with the works of philosophy even in his sermons and biblical commentaries, which was, with a bit of stretch, reconcilable with the theological practice of Christian academics at the time.⁶

Looking historically at the time period Thomas Aquinas lived, he appears to be a polymath to a modern eye in the light of his encyclopedic works. Within the enormous body of his writings, he treats philosophy as a superior branch of knowledge with its major sub-disciplines studied and critiqued in a comparison-contrast framework. The main philosophical disciplines Thomas Aquinas deals with are logic, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of nature, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophical psychology, philosophical theology, and political philosophy.⁷

From the viewpoint of personal philosophy, Thomas Aquinas is most well known for his so-called *Five Ways* of attempting to determine and demonstrate the existence of God. The *Five Ways* originally revolve around the principles of natural theology, which is the basis of the cluster of arguments Thomas Aquinas develops within the five main arguments. These five arguments constitute only an introduction to a rigorous project in natural theology. In order to understand his work on natural theology, it is important that we define and appreciate the nature and scope of natural theology within the proper context of his arguments. In principle, natural theology is such that is purely and properly philosophical and hence it does not make use of

⁵ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, 41.

⁶ Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 46.

⁷ Davies and Stump, *Handbook of Aquinas*, 45.

appeals to religious authority in order to establish a basis for truth.⁸ Thomas Aquinas' work on natural theology, which reflects Aristotelian metaphysics, runs through thousands of tightly argued pages and assigns a new dimension to the subsequent work on theology in the Catholic Church.

⁸ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, 41.

Summa Theologica

The *Summa Theologica*, also known as *Summa Theologiae*, *Summa Theologicae* or only *Summa*, is "one of the classics of the history of philosophy and one of the most influential works of Western literature."⁹ The word *Summa Theologica* means "body of theology," sometimes more literarily translated as "compendium of theology"; in fact, a translation of *Summa* exists in English under the title *Compendium of Theology*.¹⁰ The book is divided in three parts that are designed upon the principle of *exitus-reditus*, "emanation and return," which is employed as a framework of explaining that everything originates from God and ultimately returns to God.¹¹ Part one of the book discusses the nature of God and the emanation of all creation from the Godhead; part two analyzes the return of the only rational creature, man, to the *creator*, God; and part three highlights the theological as well as philosophical importance of Christ in terms of being the definite way by which the rational creature returns to God.¹²

Summa Theologica was originally intended to be an introduction to beginners in theology. Theology was deemed as the top-notch science during Medieval period, particularly around the time of Thomas Aquinas, and therefore the students of theology were required to take philosophy only after having mastered other sciences that fell under the broader umbrella of philosophy.¹³ Schools and universities were, for the most part, seminary contours in their technical function where sciences of the day were taught either as stepping stones towards the

⁹ Jorge J. E. Gracia, Gregory M. Reichberg, Bernard N. Schumacher, (eds.), *The Classics of Western Philosophy: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 165.

¹⁰ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium of Theology* (trans. Cyril Vollert, St. Louis, MO: Herder Book CO., 1947)

¹¹ Thomas D. McGonigle and James F. Quigley, *A History of the Christian Tradition* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1988), 168.

¹² McGonigle and Quigley, *History of Christian Tradition*, 168.

¹³ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, 41.

higher end of the "queen of the sciences," namely theology, or as of secondary importance to that of the study of the religious sciences.¹⁴

Thomas Aquinas lived a relatively shorter life and could not complete his *magnum opus*, *Summa Theologica*. It is, nevertheless, a wonder of the intellectual tradition of Christendom that the *Summa* is, in spite of the fact that it is incomplete, one of the most important works within Catholic academia and theology. Thomas Aquinas started writing *Summa* in 1264 and continued to add more volumes to the work until the time of his death in 1274. Thomas describes his work in the *Summa* as an exercise in the "sacred doctrines" (*sacra doctrina*).¹⁵ As a theologian, Thomas Aquinas was inclined towards natural theology, which is fundamentally an endeavor aimed at developing a methodology for welding reason and religion together into one body.

The *Five Ways* of Thomas Aquinas, which will ensue in the coming pages, follow the same route in stipulation as that of natural theology. The thesis of the *Five Ways* is presented in the first part of the book in a relatively short essay, which defines and describes the nature of the divine and the emanation of creation. This essay is only one of over three thousand essays put together in the *Summa* in its entirety. Such enormity of scholarship does indeed grant modern reader a glimpse into the prolificacy of Thomas Aquinas as an author.

The fact of the matter is that *Summa Theologica* has been one of the most influential as well as most studied texts on Christian theology. The Roman Catholic theology maintains a significant niche for the study of the *Summa* even in the present times. Since this paper is concerned with the study of the theology of God in the work of Thomas Aquinas, the discussion on the book itself is out of scope beyond this point.

¹⁴ Kevin Twain Lowery, *Maturity of Belief: Critically Assessing Religious Faith* (New York, NY: Continuum Books, 2007), 141.

¹⁵ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Holy Teachings: Introducing the Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), 12.

Theological Approaches of Thomas Aquinas

Europe during the so-called "Dark Ages" was a place one would least want to inhabit. It was a dark continent in the sense that it had become oblivious towards its glorious past of Greco-Roman civilization that was once the global epicenter of the power, philosophy, religion, scientific learning, political enlightenment, and spiritual didactics.¹⁶ Homer, Pythagoras, Thales of Miletus, Democritus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and a number of others were such mighty figures of the West that had introduced entirely new systems of thought within the realm of Western philosophy. These intellectual giants of the ancient past, therefore, pioneered the Western civilization in the sense Europe came to know it at the dawn of the Renaissance. Aristotle, in particular, was the most towering "teacher" of empirical philosophy that in modern terms can be equated with science.¹⁷

The most of Aristotle's corpus had been lost to the Latin West for nearly a millennium before it was brought back. By contrast, major Arab philosophers of the period, such as *Ibn Sina* or Avicenna (c. 980-1087) and *Ibn Rushd* or Averroes (1126-1198), had access to the works of Aristotle, particularly such important works as *De Anima*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Physics*, and *Metaphysics*.¹⁸ Islamic centers of learning enjoyed the privilege of being the masters of Aristotelian wisdom and logic for a long period of time before passing it on to Europe. Italian Renaissance, for instance, emerged from the intellectual transaction of Europe with Muslim Spain, Asia Minor and Middle East, which is an affair immortalized in the story of Italian Michael Scot who transported innumerable volumes of the Arab works on Aristotle and Plato to

¹⁶ Richard C. Dales, *The Intellectual Life of Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (New York, NY: Brill Publications, 1995), 109.

¹⁷ Lowery, *Maturity of Belief*, 40.

¹⁸ Porro, *Thomas Aquinas*, 230.

Europe.¹⁹ In fact, Avicenna and Averroes produced sophisticated commentaries on those original works of Aristotle as mentioned above, which became the basis for the subsequent learning of Europe in Aristotelian philosophy.

The Latin West's increased contact with the Arabic world, particularly with the Muslim Spain and Baghdad Caliphate, in the 12th and 13th centuries led to the gradual recovery and exposure to those lost Aristotelian works. Aristotle had been in oblivion in Europe and it was very difficult for the European mind to make sense of Aristotle without an external aid. The writings of the Arabic commentators of Aristotle mentioned above, therefore, particularly helped in terms of bringing the faded European intellect in the frequency of harmony with Aristotelian philosophy. Interestingly, the medieval European universities, particularly the University of Naples, founded in 1224, became the center of learning from this particular point of view.²⁰

It was such a religious and academic environment in which Thomas Aquinas was born. Thomas Aquinas had been gifted with an inquisitive mind in an age when blind following was of utmost necessity within the church. He, therefore, found himself at the horns of dilemma, namely a raging battle between religion and philosophy, which was haunting European lifestyle.²¹ The recent discovery of Aristotle and revival of learning in Europe were causative factors in developing skepticism and emphasis upon reason in lieu of revelation among the philosophical class about the existence and nature of God.²² Thomas Aquinas, therefore, decided to devote himself in the service of God on the intellectual frontier of harmonizing the two apparently competing disciplines, philosophy and theology. In spite of his foundation in theology, Thomas Aquinas' ultimate authority in ascertaining truths and deriving philosophical conclusions for

¹⁹ "Michael Scot" (Retrieved on 5/17/2019 - <https://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/Biographies/Scot.html>)

²⁰ Nicholas Rescher, *Studies in Arabic Philosophy* (Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 1968), 151.

²¹ Wigelsworth, *Science and Technology*, 149.

²² Andrew Beards, *Philosophy: the Quest for Truth and Meaning* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010), 9.

theological ends was Aristotle whom he throughout addresses with the honorific title of *Philosopher*—a title exclusively used for Aristotle in *Summa Theologica*.²³

Thomas Aquinas views God as an *absolute* necessity for the origination, existence, and continuation of the universe as a material entity and unity. This view of Thomas Aquinas is owed to his *Five Ways* that are the foundation of his entire theology of God. The most fundamental argument in the attempt of proving the existence of God is that of the interrelation of self-existence and contingency. Similarly, another popular argument in theology is called the *Cosmological Argument*, which, however, has been used in a somewhat unique way by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa*. These *Five Ways* are given a proper treatment in the following section.

²³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (vol. 2, New York, NY: Cosimo, 2007), 590, 720, 782.

Philosophical Positioning of God

Thomas Aquinas' theology of God is fundamentally a philosophical path to the quest of God in the footsteps of Aristotle, which a critic calls 'marriage between Aristotle and Christianity'.²⁴ His quest covers the most celebrated arguments of his day in the defense of the existence of God in an *a posteriori* approach.²⁵ In the part one of *Summa Theologica*, section two and article three, Thomas Aquinas gives his historic *Five Ways*.²⁶

The God of Thomas Aquinas is not *the* Christian God, a personal God of love and mercy *per se*, because it is a God who simply exists without an external help in order to be treated as *the* perfect *Being*. He introduces five main arguments, which are generally known in Latin as *quinque viae*, "Five Ways," to prove the existence of God that are deemed as revolutionary in the philosophical-theological reasoning of the medieval times.²⁷ However, critics of religious philosophy, such as Herman Philips, believe that Thomas Aquinas failed to accomplish anything substantial with his Five Ways because later natural theology superseded the philosophical brilliance of Thomas Aquinas' five arguments that had been developed with the adaptation of Aristotelian metaphysics.²⁸ Majority of the theologians of his time were not really concerned with proving their faith to be true from a philosophical standpoint, because they thought that 'reason (or philosophy) had no place in evaluating articles of theology' and that 'one needed only

²⁴ Herman Philips, *God in the Age of Science* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 20.

²⁵ Paul Weingartner, *God's Existence: Can It Be Proven?* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Books, 2010), 29.

²⁶ Michael B. Wilkinson, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 127.

²⁷ Davies and Stump, *Handbook of Aquinas*, 115.

²⁸ Wilkinson, *Philosophy of Religion*, 20.

faith.²⁹ Thomas Aquinas believed in a different epistemology that would involve ascertaining God's existence from cosmological, ontological, and teleological investigations.

It is the ripe moment to get into the text of the historic *Five Ways* of Thomas Aquinas in order to develop an appreciation for the theology, philosophy, and methodology involved in the building of these arguments in the firsthand. The translated text of the five arguments is produced below here for a proper study of the language in order for the reader to ascertain good and bad propositions of these arguments.

→ The First Way: Argument from Motion

1. Our senses prove that some things are in motion.
2. Things move when potential motion becomes actual motion.
3. Only an actual motion can convert a potential motion into an actual motion.
4. Nothing can be at once in both actuality and potentiality in the same respect (i.e., if both actual and potential, it is actual in one respect and potential in another).
5. Therefore nothing can move itself.
6. Therefore each thing in motion is moved by something else.
7. The sequence of motion cannot extend *ad infinitum*.
8. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

→ The Second Way: Argument from Efficient Causes

1. We perceive a series of efficient causes of things in the world.
2. Nothing exists prior to itself.
3. Therefore nothing (in the world of things we perceive) is the efficient cause of itself.
4. If a previous efficient cause does not exist, neither does the thing that results (the effect).
5. Therefore if the first thing in a series does not exist, nothing in the series exists.

²⁹ Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, *Science and Technology in Medieval European Life* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), xv.

6. If the series of efficient causes extends ad infinitum into the past, for then there would be no things existing now.
7. That is plainly false (i.e., there are things existing now that came about through efficient causes).
8. Therefore efficient causes do not extend ad infinitum into the past.
9. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

→ The Third Way: Argument from Possibility and Necessity (Reduction argument)

1. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, that come into being and go out of being i.e., contingent beings.
2. Assume that every being is a contingent being.
3. For each contingent being, there is a time it does not exist.
4. Therefore it is impossible for these always to exist.
5. Therefore there could have been a time when no things existed.
6. Therefore at that time there would have been nothing to bring the currently existing contingent beings into existence.
7. Therefore, nothing would be in existence now.
8. We have reached an absurd result from assuming that every being is a contingent being.
9. Therefore not every being is a contingent being.
10. Therefore some being exists of its own necessity, and does not receive its existence from another being, but rather causes them. This all men speak of as God.

→ The Fourth Way: Argument from Gradation of Being

1. There is a gradation to be found in things: some are better or worse than others.
2. Predications of degree require reference to the “uttermost” case (e.g., a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest).
3. The maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus.
4. 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.

→ The Fifth Way: Argument from Design

1. We see that natural bodies work toward some goal, and do not do so by chance.
2. Most natural things lack knowledge.
3. But as an arrow reaches its target because it is directed by an archer, what lacks intelligence achieves goals by being directed by something intelligence.
4. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.³⁰

When appreciating the above from a critical perspective, it is obvious from the study of the *Five Ways* of Thomas Aquinas that he was a man of his own age and character. His language and methodology are both medieval, although the arguments themselves are ancient with relatively modern connotations. In spite of the odds, Thomas Aquinas does a great job in bringing up a solid foundation for theological engagement with philosophy on the subject of the existence of God. Even though borrowed from Aristotle and influenced by Averroes, the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas lands into the fertile plane of natural theology, where belief begs support of the reason for earning a justification to be as such. Thomas bridges this gap in the medieval period by marrying reason and revelation, which could not otherwise find a friendly ground on either side of the battle back in his era. This was, in one way or the other, a huge leap into the future towards building a patchwork for the theologians of the Reformation movement.

³⁰ Weingartner, *God's Existence*, 5-7.

Theological Reflections

Thomas Aquinas is definitely one of the greatest theologians, philosophers, and scholars of the history of Christian thought. His contributions are so mammoth that it is literally impossible to undo their continued influence on the theological as well as philosophical thought of the Christian world. The reward for Thomas Aquinas for his service to the church is, therefore, that he is ordained to the status of *saint* by the Roman Catholic Church. It is indeed due to his towering stature among the theologians and thinkers of Christian history that the custodians of Papacy quote the intellectual and spiritual contributions of Thomas Aquinas every now and then.

Since the present paper only studies the theological-philosophical view of God as proposed by Thomas Aquinas, I will focus on this particular aspect of his work in a critical reflection upon his work. Personally, Thomas Aquinas has always fascinated me for his philosophical work in the aid of theology. I have a firm belief in the proposition that reason and intellect are crucial tools for maintaining a rational belief in the existence of God. Apart from the existence of God, yet another question that begs our attention is that of the nature of God. God, for instance, is a unity (i.e. one) in the Western religious tradition, whereas God is a multiplicity in the Eastern, particularly Indic (Indian) religious tradition. I have never been able to reconcile my own understanding of God to the Eastern view of God. My theological view does not stumble on determining and believing in the existence of God, for God as *the* principle of all principles has to exist for the rest to exist in contingency, as Spinoza also maintains. Second, God is one single entity above and beyond all kinds of pluralities, whether Eastern or Western, and therefore, my intellectual and spiritual aspects of the "self" do not find comfort in viewing

God from a pluralistic or monistic view. God does indeed exist and only exists as a *being* that is absolute in oneness and uniqueness.

When reading Thomas Aquinas, one is confronted with his *Five Ways*, which are noted above, in one of the hundreds of articles included in *Summa Theologica*. Those ways of proving God's existence seem highly appealing in their construction and conclusion. Even though the methodology of describing the five main arguments is situated in the understanding of the old world and therefore can be critiqued for its crudeness, it makes perfect sense, nonetheless, to a mind that sincerely looks into the questions and propositions used in building those arguments. The first argument, for instance, is about the necessary being who is the prime mover. In its nature and construction, the argument has been borrowed from Aristotle. However, its application is done more religiously in the work of Thomas Aquinas than in that of Aristotle. Even though it does not prove the character of a Christian God, it does at least prove that there is a necessary being at the very bottom of the causal regression into primordial past. If there is no ultimate mover that is unmoved in self, it turns out to be a philosophical quandary.

The second argument is normally called the "Original Cause" argument, which, in my opinion, overlaps on the first and the third arguments. The third one is in fact similar, too, because it analyzes the nature of the contingent beings, the entire creation, in relation to the necessary being, God. Even though they appear similar to a cursory eye, they inherently have independent propositions and philosophical properties. This third argument poses serious challenge even to a mind that is already into theological reflection and intellectual thought-process. It is, in fact, hard to escape the thought how our own existence depends on so many other factors that we do not normally appreciate. There is a perfect balance in the universe and that balance has made it possible for life to exist and thrive. It is man alone, the crown of all

creation, who is self-intelligent and can think about the phenomena around him. Such a faculty cannot but be granted from the outside in order to make man different from the rest of the creation—a message that the Holy Book shares with mankind in the first place. At the same time, I am also perplexed that the birth of a human being is a huge chance-leap against the law of probability. Every human being is the result of so much competition and fight for survival in the earlier phases of creation not only as sperm and egg, but also in the hostile environments of the earth in distant past. If it is not all a design of the one who is a necessary being behind all this artistry and intelligence, then there is no explanation possible even in philosophical terms for accounting for the glory and glamour of the universe.

The fifth argument, in fact, tows the line of the above chance theory. Although Thomas Aquinas almost rejects the element of chance and determines that everything takes place because of a reason that is put behind it by a planner, God, the element of probability is perhaps ignored here. However, such a fallacy can be given to the age of Thomas Aquinas when theology was to lead philosophy and thus all things had to be determined in the end to meet the Roman Catholic principles of metaphysical truths. Modern understanding of the last argument would include chance as a positive element to it, because chance brings in a margin of freedom for the creation to operate on its own.

Overall, the work of Thomas Aquinas on establishing the existence of God is impressive. The best part of his work is his own conviction in whatever he is committing to writing. Such a conviction is projected everywhere on his work. Furthermore, the major arguments do not include Trinity in relation to the explanation of the nature of God, which is something I would be more willing to accept than an argument purely for the Trinity. The principle of the unity of God

in trinity does not have an appeal for me and I would be little inclined to use it in my personal religious practice and intellectual exercise.

The church has definitely benefitted from Thomas Aquinas in the past and can and will continue to learn and benefit from him even today and in future. Such arguments as the Five Ways, in my opinion, should be made occasional part of the church sermons for the pews to stay in touch with the intellectual tradition of the Christian religion. The church sermons, observably, comment very little on the existence of God as a principle and the focus typically remains on other things of routine matters. It should be changed to some degree for fundamentally raising the collective awareness level of the church audience.

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