In his *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas considers various objections to the claim that God’s existence can be proven via the use of reason. For example, he considers the objection that because God’s nature is unknowable to us, his existence cannot be established. Aquinas responds by claiming that God’s existence can be established *a posteriori* (i.e., through experience) in virtue of His effects made manifest in the world. Similar to contemporary intelligent design theorists today who insist that some intelligent creator must be responsible for certain biological phenomena in the world, Aquinas insists that God must be responsible for certain natural phenomena such as motion and change (cf. Carroll 2000; Dawkins 2006; Gregory 2009; Beckwith 2010). Yet, at the outset Aquinas responds to a very contemporary sounding skeptic, one who insists that the world can be fully explained without reference to God. At *ST I.3.2* Aquinas considers this criticism:

Further, it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle, which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God’s existence.

So, too, contemporary critics of the intelligent design movement regularly insist that we need not appeal to an all-powerful, personal being in order to explain apparent design in nature; rather, such phenomena can be fully and adequately explained by appeal to natural causes (Dembski and Ruse 2004; Ayala 2006; Carroll 2012, 185, 197). Biological order can be explained by causes such as natural selection and genetic drift, geological phenomena can be explained by natural causes such as plate tectonics, and astrological order can be explained via theories such as the Big Bang and Inflation.
Aquinas would not be persuaded by such appeals. Following Aristotle, he suggests that certain natural phenomena such as motion (construed generally as change from one state to another which includes locomotion, alternation, and growth or diminution) require more than an efficient cause for each effect which might have brought the motion about. Instead, Aquinas insists that even if every motion in the universe were brought about by a prior mover—e.g., if an infinite series of billiard balls conducted motion from one ball to the next without fail—the whole chain of motion requires some logical terminus or starting point, an unmoved mover responsible for ultimately causing and sustaining the motion of the world. This unmoved mover, says Aquinas, is God. Hence, the critic is wrong to insist that all natural phenomena can be adequately explained ultimately by natural causes since motion requires God as a transcendent prime mover.

In order to assess this reasoning, we must have a better sense of the particular elements of Aquinas’ argument; for example, why he insists that an infinite series of movers is inadequate for fully explaining the motion/change found in the world. We must also better understand the Aristotelian metaphysical framework that Aquinas is employing. And we must understand why and how Aquinas believes a being, God, can explain change/motion while being an unmoving/unchanging entity. After explaining these elements, we will establish that Aquinas’ prime mover argument for the existence of God fails for multiple reasons, including: (a) Aquinas’ Aristotelian assumption that all F-effects are ultimately caused by some actual-F thing is unsupported; (b) Aquinas’ Aristotelian arguments against the adequacy of an infinite series of movers are insufficient; (c) Aquinas’ assumption that an unmoved mover would be God is both unmotivated and inconsistent with the nature of God as a personal, active/creative being. Ultimately, rather than appeal to God in an attempt to explain some element of nature or the universe itself for which we have no current natural explanation, we should resist such “God of the Gaps” reasoning and trust that natural phenomena have natural explanations even if they are currently beyond our ken.

2. Aquinas’ Prime Mover Argument

Aquinas’ prime mover argument is directly adapted from Aristotle. As such it is important to keep in mind some Aristotelian context when contemplating Aquinas’ proof from motion. First, Aristotle believes (and attempts to prove) that the world is eternal in the sense of having no beginning or end. When Aristotle tries to prove that God is an unmoved mover of the universe, he does so by attempting to show that God causes motion by being a final cause or telos that initiates motion in the world via attraction rather than as an efficient cause. Aquinas, himself, believes that the universe was created by God in time though he insists that this is an article of faith that cannot be demonstrated: