God is typically understood to be the cause of all things and as such God is thought to be wholly uncaused, since if God is the cause of all things, there exists nothing that is not His effect, which is to say there is nothing that can act as His cause. This is what God is typically understood to be, but the argumentation by which one establishes that such a figure actually exists is not so straightforward.

Thomas’ second way is one such argument that seeks to show that there is an absolutely uncaused efficient cause of all that is, and in so showing concludes that this is what we call God. The second way then seeks to establish the existence of what we typically take God to be. In this chapter I shall offer a reading of Aquinas’ second way that does three things: (i) firstly I shall present a précis of the argument highlighting its main argumentative moves; (ii) secondly I shall present an analysis of the argument highlighting the deeper philosophical issues involved and offering some justification thereof; (iii) thirdly I shall consider the kind of God to which the second way commits us and the consequences that that has for our thinking about the creator/creature relationship.

1. Précis of the Argument

Let us begin with a preliminary presentation of the argument. Thomas writes as follows:

The second way is taken from the nature of efficient cause. We find there to be in sensible things an order of efficient causes such that it is never found to be nor is it possible that something is the efficient cause of itself; for then it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now it is not possible to proceed to infinity in efficient causes, because in all efficient causes that are ordered, the primary is the cause of the intermediate and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate, whether the intermediate causes are many or only one. Now, remove the cause
and one removes the effect. Therefore, if there is no primary cause in efficient causes, there will be neither an ultimate nor an intermediate. But if one proceeds to infinity in efficient causes, there will be no primary efficient cause, and thus there will be no ultimate effect, nor intermediate efficient causes, which is evidently false. Therefore, it is necessary to posit some primary efficient cause, which everyone calls “God.”

Thomas is clear from the outset, this proof will proceed from a consideration of the nature [ratio] of efficient causality; his intention then is to consider the order that is followed in efficient causes and ascertain whether or not the logic of that order entails that there cannot be an infinite regress in efficient causes. Accordingly, the order that is characteristic of efficient causes is such that the cause always precedes its effect, and this is because given the mode of causality the being of the effect is derived from that of the cause, so that it could never be the case that one could have the being of the effect without the cause from which it is derived.

Having presented the order essential to efficient causality, Thomas then goes on to deny the possibility of proceeding to infinity in efficient causes that are ordered to each other. What Thomas means by efficient causes that are ordered is a series of efficient causes all of which work together to produce some effect. In a finite ordered series of efficient causes, the primary is the cause of the intermediate and the intermediate the cause of the ultimate thereby producing the effect; so all causes work together to produce the ultimate effect, and this is the case whether or not the intermediate causes are one or many. Having presented the order obtaining amongst ordered efficient causes, Thomas then goes on to connect the latter up with the nature of efficient causality itself.

Recall that in efficient causality the being of the effect depends on that of the cause, so that the effect cannot precede the cause, but the being of the cause must precede that of the effect. It follows then that in efficient causality, without the cause there is no effect, i.e., remove the cause and one removes the effect. Consequently, when we consider an ordered series of efficient causes, the ultimate depends for its being on the intermediate and the intermediate on the primary, so that without the primary cause there is no intermediate, and without the intermediate there is no ultimate. But in an infinite series there is no primary cause; otherwise it would be finite. Therefore, if there were an infinite series of efficient causes, there would be neither intermediate nor ultimate causes, but this is evidently false. There must therefore be some primary efficient cause without which there is no intermediate or ultimate, and this we call God.

This is a brief summary of the argument; in presenting it I have deliberately glossed over some of the important philosophical issues involved so as to give the reader a feel for the argumentative moves that Thomas makes.