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A RESPONSE TO ROSEMAN

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Roseman subjects Aquinas’ second way to sustained criticism in his denial of its relevance for us today. I find Roseman’s objections problematic, and in order to explain why this is so, I shall treat of Roseman’s argumentation in a threefold manner: (i) his exposition of the second way, (ii) the non-modern philosophical framework of the second way and (iii) the form of life within which Aquinas developed his natural theology.

1. Exposition of the Argument

There are three pivotal components of the second way all of which Roseman justly treats but none of which he treats justly. These are: (i) causality, (ii) causal series, and (iii) the affirmation of God. Let us deal with each in turn.

Concerning (i), causality for Thomas is a dependency relation whereby the effect stands in potency to its cause and is actualised thereby. Specifically with regard to efficient causality, we saw that it involves, fundamentally, the transfer of esse, so that nothing can be the efficient cause of itself, for then it would precede itself in existence. Roseman fails to convey this metaphysics of causality that Thomas adopts, and this affects his reading of the proof. Contrary to Roseman, Thomas neither assumes the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) nor a pure Aristotelian account of causality. For Thomas, we can only posit a cause for an actualized potency, whereas according to the PSR, as Roseman presents it, we posit a cause for simply anything. Hence, pace Roseman, Thomas did not assume the PSR. Now, it is well known that Thomas’ implementation of the Aristotelian act/potency distinction went significantly beyond the thought of Aristotle, particularly in his (Thomas’) introduction of esse as the act of all acts (see Kerr 2015a, Ch. 3; 2015b, § 1). Given that efficient causality fundamentally involves the causality of esse and that Aristotle recognised no such principle, it cannot be that Thomas is simply regurgitating Aristotle’s notion of efficient causality, as Roseman states, but he has his own metaphysics of causality that he deploys in the second way.

Concerning (ii), the distinction between essentially ordered and accidentally ordered series of causes is key to the second way, exploiting as it does the metaphysics of the essentially ordered series in order to arrive at its conclusion. Roseman fails to articulate this important aspect of Thomas’ thought. In place of this, Roseman offers a causal sequence of his own construction wherein each cause and effect relation is an event in itself, so that
the sequence strung together will be a sequence of discrete events. But this fails to engage with the metaphysics of the causal series operative in the second way, i.e., the essentially ordered series. Pace Roseman, the latter is not a series of many causal events, but a single causal event made up of various causal components (the primary, intermediate, and ultimate causes), all of which are ordered for the production of the effect (see Kerr 2012; 2015a, Ch. 5). In the causal sequence he proposes, Roseman seems to be approximating to Thomas’ notion of an accidentally ordered series, which is indeed made up of a number of discrete causal events strung together in a sequence.

In failing to make this important distinction, Roseman is led to the conclusion that there is no logical guarantee that the sequence will terminate. And indeed, if it is an accidentally ordered series that Roseman is considering, as appears to be the case, then Thomas agrees, there is no logical guarantee that the series should terminate, such a series is potentially infinite. But this is not threatening to Thomas’ argumentation, since it is not the accidentally ordered series whose infinity Thomas denies, but the essentially ordered.

Concerning (iii), Roseman claims that Thomas intends to conclude to a necessary being that exists in itself and is the reason that all other things must be. But there is no evidence for this, and indeed the actual text of the second way concludes to a primary efficient cause that everyone names God. Now, Roseman rightly points out that this is not the Catholic understanding of God, though contra Roseman’s later assertions, in being the primary efficient cause of all that is, it is single and unique, since anything other than it receives its esse from it, in which case there is nothing that exists that is not an effect of it and which could be like it. So at best this establishes monotheism, but not Catholicism; Roseman is surely right to point out the latter. Thomas would agree that he has not established Catholicism in the second way, for if he had he could have ended the Summa there and then. The second way merely establishes a primary efficient cause of all that is, the remainder of the Summa shows—among other things—that this primary efficient cause is God as Catholicism interprets it. Thus, Thomas’ conclusion, to the effect that this is what we call God, is merely making the point that if we understand God to be anything, it is a primary cause of all that is. So there is no assumption of a Catholic God in the second way.

All of these misunderstandings entail that in presenting the argument, Roseman puts forward an argument for God’s existence, but not Thomas’. It follows then that any criticism of the argument presented by Roseman will not necessarily be a criticism of Thomas’ second way. And indeed none of Roseman’s initial objections touch on Thomas’ argumentation: Thomas does not require a prior commitment to the God of Catholicism, the ordered causal series as Thomas articulates it is not as Roseman conceives it, the existence of mental causes does not preclude an essentially ordered efficient causal series, and as far as the second way goes, the paradox of omnipotence does not apply,