

# The Third Proof

## Nine

### FROM CONTINGENCY TO NECESSARY BEING

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There is some truth to the charge that Thomas Aquinas' theological system is at times needlessly complex and obscure. Yet when the Angelic Doctor comes to his five arguments for God's existence, he is refreshingly straightforward, as is proper of a preacher and teacher, beginning from a very common sensical starting point and then working carefully from there. Indeed, his arguments are intended not so much for the mature philosopher but for the novice (Copleston 1955, 116)—something we must always keep in mind. Yet, if in this spirit we are tempted to dismiss these popular arguments of Aquinas due to their popularity (what we might call the snobbery fallacy) or even due to their age (perhaps the chronology fallacy) we should pause, for even if the arguments as they stand are in places inadequate in a modern analytic context, yet even so, I believe they, and especially the Third Way, to be valuable and even persuasive—persuasive, but not undefeatable as they stand. Some modification will need to occur.

#### 1. Aquinas' Third Way

Aquinas' Third Way develops an argument with roots in Aristotle and Averroes (Craig 1980, 182, 201). The argument has two stages, proceeding from contingent beings to a necessary being, and then from there to a *causeless* necessary being. Aquinas states his argument thus:

We find some things that are possible both of existing and not existing since some things are found to be generated and corrupted, and therefore to be possible both of existing and of not existing. But it is impossible for everything of this kind to exist always since what is possible of not existing at some time does not exist. Therefore, if all things were capable of not existing, at some time no thing would exist. But if this were true, even now nothing would exist since what does not exist does not begin to exist except through something else which exists; so that if no being existed, it would be impossible for anything

to begin to exist, and thus nothing would now exist, which is plainly false. Therefore, not all beings are contingent or possible; there must exist some thing which is necessary. But every necessary being either has a cause of its necessity from elsewhere, or it does not. But it is not possible to proceed *ad infinitum* in necessary beings which have a cause of their necessity, just as this was not possible in efficient causes, as was proved [in the Second Way]. Therefore, it is necessary to posit something which is necessary through itself, not having the cause of its necessity from elsewhere, but is the cause of necessity to other things, which is what everyone calls “God.”

Breaking down Aquinas’ argument, we begin with our common sensical premise, namely, that contingent or possible beings exist. Here we should immediately notice the defeatibility of the Third Way *if* one is willing to pay a high enough intellectual price. Most of us, it is true, admit the existence of some contingent beings and in fact take this belief to be *rightly* or *properly* basic belief in that our senses seem to tell us this and our senses should be generally trusted to give us accurate knowledge of the world around us (see Plantinga and Wolterstorff 1983, 58; Swinburne 2011, 54). However, many Hindus, for example, would deny the real existence of contingent beings since all apparent contingency is *maya* or illusion, and all that is, is the eternal or everlasting being, *Atman* (see Cush, Robinson, and York 2008).

But noting this unlikely possibility, let us return to more pressing matters. To begin with, it is proper that we first ask *what* a contingent or possible being is according to *Aquinas*. And it seems a being is contingent if at some point in time (past, present, or future) that being would not exist due to material corruption; that is, a contingent being is materially corruptible. Aquinas, following Aristotle and Averroes, implicitly understands that all sub-lunar beings (beings below the moon) are of such a sort, and therefore all sub-lunar beings are contingent. Examples of such are rocks, trees, animals and humans—they have a material aspect and so are contingent. Yet because the heavenly bodies beyond the moon were understood by Aristotelians not to possess matter, they were understood to be incapable of coming to be and ceasing to be materially, and so were (for Aristotle) or could be (for Aquinas) eternal, incorruptible or necessary. Yet because the heavenly bodies moved (as any astronomer knew), their movement needs an explanation and cause. These necessary beings need a cause of their motion (as per the Second Way), meaning that they need some uncaused necessary being standing further behind them. And since this cause standing further behind them cannot itself be caused by anything else (or else we would have an infinite regress), we need an uncaused necessary being. And part of our understanding of God is that He is an uncaused necessary being (Wippel 1984, 2000, 2006, 2007).