The Fourth Proof

Thirteen

A FOURTH WAY TO PROVE GOD’S EXISTENCE

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1. Introduction

Of Thomas Aquinas’ *Quinque Viae*, surely the Fourth Way of the *Summa* (ST), though perhaps the least discussed, is the one that creates the most controversy. There are at least four larger reasons for this. For one, this argument is often branded as a moral argument that brings with it a commitment to some form of absolute morals, and so it dies the death of all current moral arguments, precisely because of that apparent commitment to an objective axiology. Second, this argument appears more broadly to involve a host of metaphysical commitments, many of them deceptively Platonic ideas, which we simply cannot handle in the 21st Century. Third, of course, this argument is cloaked in an Aristotelian philosophy of science, especially ideas of formal and even final causality, which have been unacceptable for centuries now. We can include here the frequent allegations, some clearly correct, of just plain bad science in both Aristotle and Thomas. And finally, to top it off, some commentators have freely admitted that they simply cannot make sense of, or do not so much as understand the argument. C. F. J. Martin (1997), for example, says, “I don’t think I understand the Fourth Way... I console myself by the consideration that I am in good company: both Kenny and Geach seem to give up on the Fourth Way” (171). Even Etienne Gilson (1960) remarks that it is “the deepest one from the point of view of metaphysical knowledge” (76).

So our concern in this chapter is to determine what value, if any, this argument might still have for us today. I begin by looking at the text itself. I consider possibilities for translation and give consideration to other similar arguments in Thomas’ corpus. This section concludes with an examination of proposals for sources of the Fourth Way, and I argue that Plato is not an option. Then, in the following section, I explain the argument itself. This involves a careful exposition and examination of each part of the argument. I argue here that, given Aristotelian realist metaphysics, there is good reason to hold that the argument’s premises are all true. The final section of this chapter concludes by considering the value of this Fourth Way for our current philosophical
discussion, in particular by attempting to situate it within the context of the other four. I argue that it does play a valid role, though granting that it takes last place in terms of congeniality with current thought. First place no doubt goes to the Fifth, with the Second a close follow-up. There are, however, specific instances of this argument that do seem to resonate in the 21st Century, such as C. S. Lewis’s Moral Argument.

2. The Text of the Fourth Way

A. Translation

First, the original Latin text of Thomas:

Quarta via sumitur ex gradibus qui in rebus inveniuntur. Invenitur enim in rebus aliquid magis et minus bonum, et verum, et nobile, et sic de aliis hujusmodi. Sed magis et minus dicuntur de diversis secundum quod appropinquat diversimode ad aliquid quod maxime est, sicut magis calidum est, quod magis appropinquat maxime calido. Est igitur aliquid quod est verissimum, et optimum, et nobilissimum, et per consequens maxime ens, nam quae sunt maxime vera, sunt maxime entia, ut dicitur II Metaphys. Quod autem dicitur maxime tale in aliquo genere, est causa omnium quae sunt illius generis, sicut ignis, qui est maxime calidus, est causa omnium calidorum, ut in eodem libro dicitur. Ergo est aliquid quod omnibus entibus est causa esse, et bonitatis, et cujuslibet perfectionis, et hoc dicimus Deum.

A literal, mostly word-by-word translation, my own, runs as follows:

A fourth way concludes from the measures (degrees, levels, gradations), which in things can be found. It can be found, namely, in things some more and less good, and true, and distinguished (noble, outstanding), and so with others [properties] of this kind. However, more and less are said about different [things] according as they resemble (are alike, come close to) in different ways something which is the most (maximum), just as [something is] more hot as it more resembles most hot. There is therefore something which is most true (truest), and most good (optimal), and most noble (noblest), and as a result (consequence) most being, for those that are most true, are most being, as it says in Metaphysics II. But what is said to be the most amount in any kind (genus, sort) is the cause of all [things] that are in that kind (genus, sort) just as fire, which is most hot, is the cause of all hot [things], as is said in the same book. Therefore there is something which of all beings (entities) is the cause of [their] being, and