Fourteen

NOT SO SUPERLATIVE: THE FOURTH WAY AS COMPARATIVELY PROBLEMATIC

Benjamin W. McCraw

Introduction

Aquinas’ Fourth Way inspires much debate amongst philosophers and Thomistic interpreters. Issues as to the overall significance of the proof, Aquinas’ own assessment of the argument, and inquiries into its philosophical genesis all contribute to differences in understanding and evaluating Thomas’ fourth demonstratio. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange (1953) takes the Fourth Way as the paradigm and most exemplary theistic argument Aquinas gives. But P. T. Geach (1967, 116), in examining the argument at length, has a much more guarded assessment of the Way’s force. And Anthony Kenny (1969, 94) explicitly rejects the argument as a failure. Many view the proof as decidedly Platonic or Neoplatonic (Kenny 1969; Gilson 1956, 70-4), whereas others see more of Augustine’s influence in the argument (Esser 1954). One can also find Aristotle’s doctrine of four causes underpinning Aquinas’ reasoning (Urban 1984). Aquinas himself (SCG I, 13) even claims that the argument has its roots in Aristotle more generally. Certainly much ink is spilt in developing and defending a proper interpretation of the Fourth Way. I, however, wish to avoid all of these interpretative melees and focus on the general philosophical requirements of the proof.

In this chapter, I raise a series of objections to the sort of argument Aquinas gives in his Fourth Way. My target is not any specific philosophical thesis that Aquinas assumes or requires in the process of his particular argument, but to attack the roots of the general line of reasoning. In avoiding the particular details of Aquinas’ proof, we can focus exclusively on the general philosophical features that his argument or any other like it will utilize. To put it somewhat differently, I analyze the core of the Fourth Way as a general type of argument or reasoning rather than the specifics of Thomas’ own reasoning. Taking such a route will provide an analysis with more breadth in its application beyond the details of Aquinas. If my criticisms hold, then they will apply to any argument reasonably resembling that of Aquinas’ Fourth Way. And in criticizing the core of the argument, we have more leeway to detach from its historical roots for an approach more conducive to general philosophical arguments, positions, and views.
Here is how the chapter unfolds. The first section focuses on Aquinas’ argument in order to clarify the general features essential to the proof. There, I contend that the Fourth Way requires three basic claims: (1) there exist gradations of properties, (2) those gradations require a maximum, measure, or paradigm explaining them, and (3) God serves as an adequate explanation for those gradations. I argue that (1)-(3) form the core philosophical reasoning or structure behind the proof and, therefore, these are the proper targets of any general philosophical assessment of the argument. The second section addresses (1), and there I provide some arguments denying what Aquinas takes to be plainly obvious: that there are qualitative gradations of certain properties possessed by objects. However plausible (1) may seem, we still have philosophical resources capable of casting doubt upon it. Moving on to the third section, I discuss (2). In order to move from (1) to (3), there must be something needing an explanation for which God serves as well as a general stance on how that explaining is to be done. If no such explanation must be given, then we can undercut the motive to posit God’s existence qua Explanation in the first place. Unsurprisingly, the fourth section provides objections to (3), and here I examine arguments claiming that God does not serve as an adequate explanation for the qualitative properties or gradations posited in (1). The final section ends assesses the prospects of a Fourth Way-type argument, concluding that it will not suffice as an adequate argument for the existence of God.

1. The Fourth Way

In this section, I examine the Fourth Way closely in order to distill its general structure. This structure provides the various targets of criticism in the rest of the chapter, so we must be careful here. To begin, let us examine the proof at length in Aquinas’ own words in the *Summa* (*ST*) at I.2.3:

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like. But *more* and *less* are predicated of different beings according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest, and, consequently, something which is most being... Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus, as fair, which is the maximum of heat, is the cause of all hot things... Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

The argument may be short but there is a great deal to unpack in all of this.