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A RESPONSE TO BECK

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David Beck does an excellent job in clarifying, extending, and defending the notorious Fourth Way. Generally, I do not contest his reading of the argument as Aquinas’ version. That is, for the most part, I think he is correct that his take on the proof is Aquinas’ own take on how the argument works. I do have concerns that there is more of Platonism or Neoplatonism in the proof than Beck sees, but I will not really belabor the point. Accordingly, I shall have nothing to say in this commentary on the first section of his chapter and, where I do offer some critical thoughts, I generally intend them to point towards potential flaws in the argument itself rather than Beck’s interpretation of Aquinas’ proof. Of course, one might think that any flaws that may come are just are results from a bad reading of Thomas, but that is another issue entirely. In this short commentary, instead, I will try to press on some specific points in Beck’s reconstruction and defense of the Fourth Way.

Let us begin with what Beck terms the observational base of his chapter. Here, Beck is clear about a move that I think any reasonable defense of the Fourth Way must make: namely, that the proof concerns only certain kinds of graded properties. As he notes, we should not take the proof’s unrestricted talk of gradations (simpliciter) to imply that there is a maximum of stink (something than which nothing smellier can be conceived). Instead, Beck sees Aquinas’ argument dealing with only those transcendental properties like being, truth, nobility, etc., and presumably including others like unity as well. Following the doctrine of the convertibility of the transcendentals, what you say of truth, for instance, you must say of the rest. Thus, Beck is clear that Aquinas “is actually interested in the application [of principles regarding gradations and maxima] only to certain properties, a specific subset of graded properties.”

I agree that the Fourth Way must take only these properties or properties like them as the root of the proof as it is given, and I agree that Aquinas clearly takes only these transcendentals as the target for his proof. But, if we move beyond simply clarifying what Aquinas intends with the argument outside of it being a mere historical artifact, one might simply say so what to this response. Aquinas focuses on the good rather than the bad; the true rather than the false; the noble rather than the ignoble, but why should we? That is, suppose that one buys the “principle of maximum” (PM) Beck pulls from the proof: X is more/less φ only insofar X approximates the maximum of φ. And, suppose further, that one sees that badness, falsity, ignobility, etc., vary in ways...
roughly parallel to the degrees of goodness, truth, nobility, etc. Does the PM imply some maximum of falsity, badness, and the like? We have a few options.

First, one could simply accept that there are maxima for these less-than-perfect gradations. That is, one could bite the bullet and affirm that there is a maximally bad object, for example. However possible this position may be, it seems remarkably implausible as a live option here (to put it as mildly as I can). Indeed, if this were the best option for the argument to take, it would probably serve more as reductio than rebut the question. Accordingly, I want to take this option off the table immediately as it is placed there.

Second, one might give some argument that the PM applies only to transcendentals. For instance, classical privation accounts of nasty properties might be appealing. There just is no falsity—only privation of the true. There is no ignobility—just a privation of the noble. So, there really are no such gradations of the kinds of properties mentioned at the outset. And with no “observational base” there is literally nothing for the PM to restrict. And this seems plausible, and even attractive, as a response to those properties directly contrary to transcendentals. But I do not see how it helps across the board. We might agree that more/less smelly is not measured by the PM and, thus, there’s no pre-eminently peerless stinker as Beck rightly argues. We agree, I suspect, that Dawkins really does miss Aquinas’ point pretty severely in this objection. Even with this rejoinder in hand, I am worried that the PM might still prove too much. Stink may be privative on the positive good smell or perfume. Certainly there are degrees of nice smelling things. Thus, we have a non-privative but also non-transcendental gradation.

Does the PM measure it? Intuitively, the answer is no, for it would be absurd, I think, to have the principle imply the real existence of some maximally sweet smelling object. But how can we rule this implication out? I can see the priviation theory as a way of resisting the implication from gradation to maximum for all gradations—some just do not have a maximum. But saying that the PM does not hold for all gradations does not imply that it will not hold for a great many—including something that it, intuitively, should not cover. We are missing an argument showing that the transcendentals are the only sort of gradations that fall under the scope of the PM otherwise it seems to prove too much; demonstrating the real existence of maximally sweetly odorific objects. That is, I grant that the Fourth Way will not imply the existence of maximally evil, false, ignoble, etc., being; however, it is not so obvious that it will not imply the existence of a maximally sweet smelling, a maximally hairy, etc., object. I suspect that most (all?) classical theists would scoff at this sort of implication, but the fact remains that some argument excluding this implication is needed otherwise the principle would seem to cherry-pick only those properties helping the proof.

Next, I want to move from the “observation base” that is measured to the account of measuring used. Beck is clear that the PM “is a standard principle in both Aristotle and Thomas and must express formal causality, in particular