1. Introduction

St. Thomas Aquinas argues in his “Fifth Way” that the natural order of the cosmos serves as evidence for God’s existence. Today, we recognize that our understanding of the order of the cosmos has changed drastically since the 13th century, when Aquinas was writing. For this reason, it has become common to dismiss Aquinas’ argument as either a “god of the gaps” argument, or just another “argument from design” grounded in outdated science. Neither of these are accurate characterizations of the “Fifth Way,” when properly understood.

In fact, the very possibility of scientific knowledge that is often used in attempts to discredit Aquinas’ argument and others like it is precisely what grounds Aquinas’ “Fifth Way” in the first place. Contrary to popular belief, the success of the scientific method over the past few centuries is evidence for, not against, God’s existence. It is argued within this chapter that the order within the universe, which itself is what makes scientific knowledge possible, is either caused or uncaused; if uncaused, then the universe is unintelligible and therefore knowledge is not possible, and if caused, the cause must be God.

There is unquestionably order in the universe. Flames rise, bodies fall, mass and energy are conserved—the world in which we live is governed by natural laws, causal regularities, and intelligible order. We can provide a scientific account of many of the phenomena that we encounter. Those explanations that elude us, we as philosophers and natural scientists hold, are at least knowable in principle, even if they lay practically outside of our collective grasp. This fact—that the universe is ordered and intelligible, that it can be known through philosophical reasoning and scientific investigation—is the keystone to St. Thomas Aquinas’ Fifth Way for demonstrating the existence of God.

This is not, of course, to take up the position that cause of every event is supernatural; that it is God, and not gravity, which is responsible for falling objects. The fact that objects fall to earth with such regularity is easily explainable using Newtonian physics. Few people wish to claim that it is the
active will of God that makes objects fall, as opposed to whatever natural forces exist within this world. But it is just such forces, such physical laws, such causal order, from which St. Thomas Aquinas derives his “Proof from the Governance of the World.” This Fifth Way is perhaps the most succinct and defensible “Argument from Design” that has been presented within the history of Western philosophy. Later philosophers have attempted to provide more detailed arguments from design, William Paley’s watchmaker analogy being among the most well-known. Despite these attempts at clarification by lesser philosophers (or perhaps because of them), misinterpretations and strawman-bashing abound within both philosophical dialogue and popular discourse. This chapter is an attempt to provide a strong, fair and honest interpretation of St. Thomas’ Fifth Way, so that we can better see the argument from design as it really is—solid evidence for the existence of God.

If we cared to boil St. Thomas’ argument down even further than its already wonderfully succinct form, we might say simply this: order exists in the universe. The universe (and/or its constitutive parts) itself cannot be an ordering principle, as it is unintelligent. Therefore, there must be some other cause of the order of the universe. This is what we call God. It is important to note that this is a metaphysical issue, not a scientific one. The order of the universe cannot be explained by electromagnetic fields, bosons, string theory, or some yet undiscovered more basic, fundamental feature of reality; rather, it is ultimately the order of such fundamental features of reality that requires an explanation.

A brief point of clarification: throughout this chapter, I will use the words science and scientific in the general modern sense, referring to our understanding of science as a method of inquiry grounded on empirical observation. In St. Thomas’ day, the word science would not have referred to a method of inquiry grounded on contingent facts.

2. Thomas’ Argument Explained

St. Thomas’ argument is commonly translated as the “Proof from the Governance of Things.” It seems evident that the universe is governed in such a way that it—or at least that which constitutes the universe—works towards certain ends. The sort of language that St. Thomas uses within this argument is largely foreign to modern thinkers—he talks of natural bodies (i.e., inanimate objects, lifeless beings, and plants) acting for the sake of ends. It is clear to nearly everyone that humans and other sentient beings certainly do act for the sake of some end—we act in order to realize some good that we desire. However, we rarely speak of natural bodies acting in order to obtain some good. Natural bodies are not conscious; how can it be that they strive to attain certain ends? Here many attempt to write off St. Thomas’ proof as naive and perhaps confused due to medieval scientific theories. One must resist this temptation—St. Thomas’ argument, when properly understood, is not refutable by “science,” so long as scientific knowledge is possible.