

#### 4. Does God Exist?

The question about the existence of God may seem like a theological question. After all, it is a question about God and theology typically covers questions about God. However, the question about the existence of God is actually a philosophical question since it merely asks whether he exists or not. Philosophy only asks whether God exists? It cannot answer questions such as "Who is God and what is his plan for me?"

Thomas Aquinas assumes, like most philosophers, that the question of God's existence is one of the primary objects of the philosophical pursuit. Obviously, the existence of God makes an enormous difference in how we perceive the world and one another. Notably, Thomas believes that the existence of God is not self-evident. He does not think that God's existence is known immediately. Rather, one must reason to the conclusion that God exists. This is an important distinction. God's existence is not self-evident but it can be demonstrated logically.

Now this may seem contradictory to what we said above about pagans living on an island. If a pagan on an island can rationally come to know that God exists, why would Thomas then say that the existence of God is not self-evident? The problem here is semantic. By the term "self-evident," Thomas means that something cannot be possibly denied.  $2+2=4$  is self-evident and no rational person in the history of the world has denied it. However, the same is not true about God. You can reason your way along to the conclusion, and people can fail along the logical journey. Consequently, there are atheists in the world even though all the atheists agree that  $2+2=4$ . So one can come to know the existence of God, but it is not self-evident. It takes some intellectual work.

In order to make this intellectual work easier for us, Thomas provided his famous "five ways" (quinque viae) for demonstrating the existence of God. The five ways do not prove the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, but they do demonstrate that what is commonly called "God" is necessary if we are to account for motion, causality, possibility, being, and design.

**First Way: Argument from Motion** - The first way holds since all things are in motion, there must be something that is the first "unmoved mover," which we call God.

**Second Way: Argument from Efficient Causes** - The second way holds since we all experience the principle of cause and effect, there must be an initial first cause, which we call God.

**Third Way: Argument from Possibility** - The third way observes all things are contingent, which is to say all things have not always existed and might not always exist. Trees, homes, leaves, people, nations, rocks, rivers, etc. come and go. Yet if this is the case absolutely, then at some point nothing would have existed and thus nothing could come to be. But this is impossible because things do exist.

Therefore, there must be "something" that is not contingent and responsible for the existence of all contingent things. In other words, while things come and go, one thing must remain always the same, and this is God.

**Fourth Way: Argument from Degrees of Being** - The fourth way can be difficult to understand. The fourth way observes gradation in all things. Some things are better than others. There is the best of everything in every class. So when it comes to existence, something must be "the best." With regard to all things that exist there must be one that exists in the greatest and best way—one who is existence itself, and this is God.

**Fifth Way: Argument from Design** - The fifth and last way is perhaps the easiest and most effective argument for God. The fifth argument observes there is design in creation. It is the old watchmaker argument. Suppose you were walking in the desert and you came across upon a golden watch. Would you assume that bits of sand had rubbed together to form gears, crystal, springs, hands, levers, and a wristband all by chance? Or would you rather observe the intricate design of the object and assume a designer had crafted it? The fifth way appeals to complexities of creation and the design found within it. Seashells display mathematical proportionality. The tilt of the axis of planet earth provides an optimal seasonal change for life. The eyeball is an amazingly efficient optical instrument Nature displays order and design everywhere. Therefore, there must be one who designed the cosmos, and this is God.

For the sake of simplicity, here is an advanced outline of each of the five ways taken from the words of Saint Thomas Aquinas in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3:

**First Way: Argument from Motion**

1. Our senses prove some things are in motion.
2. Things move when potential motion becomes actual motion.
3. Only an actual motion can convert a potential motion into an actual motion.
4. Nothing can be at once in both actuality and potentiality in the same respect (i.e., if both actual and potential, it is actual in one respect and potential in another).
5. Therefore nothing can move itself.
6. Therefore each thing in motion is moved by something else.

7. The sequence of motion cannot extend for infinity.
8. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first unmoved mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

### **Second Way: Argument from Efficient Causes**

1. We perceive a series of efficient causes of things in the world.
2. Nothing exists prior to itself.
3. Therefore nothing is the efficient cause of itself.
4. If a previous efficient cause does not exist, neither does the thing that results.
5. Therefore if the first thing in a series does not exist, nothing in the series exists.
6. The series of efficient causes cannot extend for infinity into the past, for then there would be no things existing now.
7. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

### **Third Way: Argument from Possibility**

1. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, that come into being and go out of being, that is, contingent beings.
2. Assume that every being is a contingent being.
3. For each contingent being, there is a time it does not exist.
4. Therefore it is impossible for these always to exist
5. Therefore there could have been a time when no things existed.
6. Therefore at that time there would have been nothing to bring the currently existing contingent beings into existence.
7. Therefore, nothing would be in existence now.
8. We have reached an absurd result from assuming that every being is a contingent being.
9. Therefore not every being is a contingent being.
10. Therefore some being exists of its own necessity, and does not receive its existence from another being, but rather causes them. This all men speak of as God.

### **Fourth Way: Argument from Degrees of Being**

1. There is a gradation to be found in things: some are better or worse than others.
2. Predications of degree require reference to the "uttermost" case (for example, a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest).
3. The maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus.

4. Therefore there must also be something that is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection - this we call God.

### **Fifth Way: Argument from Design**

1. We see that natural bodies work toward some goal, and do not do so by chance.
2. Most natural things lack knowledge.
3. But as an arrow reaches its target because it is directed by an archer, what lacks intelligence achieves goals by being directed by something intelligence.
4. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end, and this being we call God.

**What About Atheists?** Now then, if one were to present these five ways for demonstrating the existence of God to an atheist, would he be convinced? Perhaps not. Thomas would reply with the words of the Psalm, "The fool hath said in his heart There is no God," because the five ways are logically sound and inescapable. Thomas says that the atheist is not a logical man because he refuses to acknowledge what is demonstrable. The atheist denies the existence of God for moral reasons, not for philosophical reasons. If Thomas were around today, he would debate atheists by appealing to these points above. As a Dominican, however, he would realize it is personal sanctity that convinces the unbeliever. This was always the message of Saint Dominic, and it was the way that Thomas lived his life. Usually, atheists or heretics are what they are because of scandal and moral reasons, not because of logical failures.

**Atheists and the Moral Argument against God:** When you consider atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, their strongest arguments are "moral arguments" against the existence of God. Why are children sold through human trafficking for prostitution? Why does God allow hurricanes to destroy the innocent? Why do babies die? In reality, these are not arguments about God's existence, but rather arguments about the goodness of God. The atheist first creates scandal regarding God's goodness, and then rejects Him.

This atheistic attack requires a theological answer that includes a doctrine of free will, original sin, and divine providence. However, at the end of the day, there is not a sound philosophical answer to the moral arguments against God. The most compelling response is to cast light on the fact that God Himself entered the world to suffer and die on the cross for the sake of human happiness in eternity. God does not reign like a Turkish Sultan over the sin, evil, and death. Rather, God reigns from the cross as a Suffering Servant.