

# “From the Nature of the Universe” by Thomas Aquinas



*St. Thomas Aquinas, Thoemmes*

**About the author. . .** St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1275), is generally considered to be the most prominent thinker during the Medieval period. Thomas, although primarily a theologian, argues philosophically in many of his works and, unlike St. Anselm, clearly distinguishes between the methods of philosophy and religion. He uses the scientific thought of Aristotle as a method of theological and philosophical understanding. Nevertheless, for Thomas, philosophy is primarily based on the use of reason, whereas religion is primarily based on the use of divine revelation provided by faith. Both kinds of knowledge, according to Thomas, are consistent and compatible. He is convinced metaphysics is the most important aspect of philosophy.

**About the work. . .** Philosophical reasoning, according to Thomas, is sufficient by itself, without faith or revelation, to demonstrate that God exists. Thomas believes God’s existence, although not self-evident, can be made evident using reasoning drawn from the nature and structure of the world.

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The so-called “five ways” are taken from his *Summa Theologica*.<sup>1</sup> Thomas, as do many philosophers, believes that we can know by reason *that* God is, but we cannot know *what* God is. In other words, the nature of God, often defined by the characteristics of perfection, is, according to Thomas, only a linguistic approximation.

**From the reading...**

“I answer that, The existence of God can be proved five ways.”

## Ideas of Interest from *Summa Theologica*

1. What is Thomas’s objection to the ontological argument?
2. Why doesn’t the observation “whatever is in motion is put in motion by another,” logically apply to the First Mover?
3. Search, locate, and restate a good definition of “efficient cause.”
4. Can you suggest ways to distinguish physical from logical necessity? Provide some examples. Would Thomas distinguish between physical and logical necessity?
5. What is the difference between the First Cause and the First Mover?
6. Research the term, “teleology.” Explain why Thomas’s fifth argument is often called the “teleological” argument.
7. Restate each of Thomas’s five arguments as clearly as possible. What is the major premiss<sup>2</sup> of each argument? What objections can you construct to each of Thomas’s arguments?

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* second and revised edition, 1920 by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

2. Rhetorically, the major premiss can be thought of as the rule or main generalization upon which the argument is based. *I.e.*, in the argument, “All men are mortal, and Socrates is a man; thus, Socrates is mortal,” the major premiss is “All men are mortal.”

## **The Reading Selection from *Summa Theologica***

### **Whether God exists?**

*Objection 1.* It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the word “God” means that He is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist.

*Objection 2.* Further, it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle which is human reason, or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God’s existence.

On the contrary, It is said in the person of God: “I am Who am.” (Exodus 3:14)

### **The Five Ways**

I answer that, The existence of God can be proved in five ways.

#### **[The Argument from Motion]**

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from to . But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the

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same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, *i.e.* that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also must needs be put in motion by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover; seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.



*Il Posillipo, Naples, Italy, Library of Congress*

## **[The Argument from First Cause]**

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. In the world of sense we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or only one. Now to take away

the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

### **[The Argument from Necessity]**

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

### **[The Argument from Gradation]**

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 things, 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, some-

thing noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaph. ii*. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum 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 from Design]

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

Reply to Objection 1. As Augustine says (*Enchiridion xi*): “Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works, unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil.” This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.

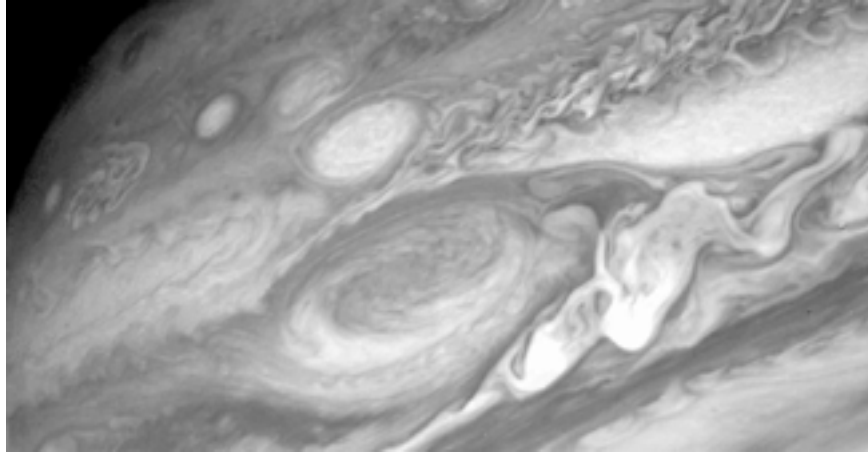
Reply to Objection 2. Since nature works for a determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must needs be traced back to God, as to its first cause. So also whatever is done voluntarily must also be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason or will, since these can change or fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle, as was shown in the body of the Article.

## Related Ideas

*Summa Theologica* (<http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html>). The online text of *Summa Theologica* available for download.

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*Stephen Loughlin’s HomePage* (<http://www4.desales.edu/~philtheo/aquinas/>).  
*St. Thomas Aquinas*. A site dedicated to St. Thomas Aquinas with bibliography and major links.



*Jupiter’s Great Red Spot and Surrounds, JPL, NASA*

**From the reading...**

“This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.”

## Topics Worth Investigating

1. How do you think Thomas would respond to the following objection to the First Cause argument for God’s existence?

The argument that there must be a First Cause is one that cannot have any validity... If anything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be

the world as God.<sup>3</sup>

2. Research the concept of the “Great Chain of Being.” Relate this presupposition to the levels of being and goodness described by Thomas.<sup>4</sup> Would the assumption of “Great Chain of Being” indicate how someone viewed contemporary moral issues such as animal rights, extinction of species, or other ecological issues?
3. If the premisses in the First Cause argument were true, how could Thomas account for miracles? How could he account for chance events? Is the First Cause argument inconsistent with either the ideas of predestination or fatalism?
4. Which of Thomas’s arguments are most open to the objection of the existence of non-moral<sup>5</sup> evil?

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3. Bertrand Russell. *Why I Am Not a Christian*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957.
  4. A. O. Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being: The Study of the History of an Idea*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.
  5. *I.e.*, natural events such as floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes—non-moral evil includes events not dependent on human free will—the so-called “acts of God” as sometimes labeled in insurance policies.



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