

Treatise on God

by Thomas Aquinas, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province

Introduction: Thomas Aquinas was born in Roccasecca, Italy, in about 1224. After receiving his initial education from the Benedictine monks at Monte Cassino, he studied at the University of Naples, where he encountered members of the Dominican order. Attracted to the Dominicans, he joined the order despite opposition from his family. He was trained in philosophy and theology in Paris and in Cologne, Germany, under the Dominican Albert (later known as Albert the Great). After being ordained a priest, Aquinas pursued advanced studies in theology at the University of Paris, receiving his degree in 1256. He taught for a few years at the University of Paris and was then assigned to teach at various Dominican schools in Italy. Aquinas returned to the University of Paris in 1268, but four years later he went back to Italy to establish a new Dominican house of study at the University of Naples. He died in 1274 at Fossanova, Italy, while traveling to Lyons to serve as a papal consultant at the Second Council of Lyons.

Aquinas's major works include the *Summa Contra Gentiles* ("Comprehensive Treatise against the Gentiles"), the *Summa Theologiae* ("Comprehensive Treatise on Theology"), *Disputed Questions* (summaries of debates he conducted on various topics as a professor of theology), and detailed commentaries on the principal works of Aristotle.

Our reading consists of two "articles" (subdivisions) of the section in the *Summa Theologiae* that discusses the existence of God. The first article asks whether the existence of God is self-evident. (If God's existence is self-evident, there would seem to be no need to formulate a proof that God exists.) Aquinas contends that God's existence is self-evident in *itself* but not *to us*. A proposition is self-evident in itself if the subject implies the predicate. Since God *is* existence (as Aquinas argues elsewhere), the term "God" implies "existence" and God's existence is therefore self-evident in itself. But God's existence is not self-evident to us because our limited human minds are incapable of grasping the full meaning of the term "God."

Since God's existence is not self-evident to us, Aquinas proceeds to offer, in the following article, five proofs that God exists: (1) The fact that there are things in motion implies that there is a first mover that is not itself in motion—and this first mover is God. (2) The fact that there are series of efficient causes (agents that bring things into existence or impart change) implies that there is a first efficient cause—and this first cause

is God. (3) The fact that there are possible beings (beings that can not-be) implies that there must be a necessary being (a being that *cannot* not-be) that is its own source of necessity—and this being is God. (4) The fact that there are beings with different degrees of various perfections (for example, of goodness) implies that there is a being that is the cause of all these perfections—and this being is God. (5) Finally, the fact that natural beings without intelligence act for goals (for example, plants act to grow and reproduce) implies that there is an intelligent being that directs natural beings toward their goals—and this being is God.

Note that Aquinas begins each article by formulating objections against his own view. Then, after setting forth his own position, he responds to the objections he had raised.

—Donald Abel

Summa Theologiae, Part 1, Question 2: The Existence of God

First Article: Whether the Existence of God Is Self-Evident?

Objection 1. It seems that the existence of God is self-evident. Those things are said to be self-evident to us the knowledge of which is naturally implanted in us, as we can see in regard to first principles. But Damascene says that *the knowledge of God is naturally implanted in all*.¹ Therefore the existence of God is self-evident.

Obj. 2. Further, those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known, which the Philosopher² says is true of the first principles of demonstration. Thus, when the nature of a whole and of a part is known, it is at once recognized that every whole is greater than its part. But as soon as the signification of the word "God" is understood, it is at once seen that God exists. For by this word is signified that thing than which nothing greater can exist. But that which exists actually and mentally is greater than that which exists only mentally. Therefore, because as soon as the word "God" is understood it exists mentally, it also follows that it exists actually. Therefore the proposition that God exists is self-evident.³

Obj. 3. Further, the existence of truth is self-evident; for whoever denies the existence of truth concedes that truth does

exist: If truth does not exist, then the proposition “Truth does not exist” is true. But if there is anything true, there must be truth. God is Truth itself: *I am the way, the truth, and the life* (John 14:6). Therefore the proposition that God exists is self-evident.

On the contrary: No one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident; as is clear from the Philosopher, concerning the first principles of demonstration. The opposite of the proposition “God is” can be mentally admitted: *The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.”*⁴ Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident.

I answer that: A thing can be self-evident in either of two ways: on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other, self-evident in itself, and to us. A proposition is self-evident because the predicate is included in the notion of the subject, as “Man is an animal,” for animal is contained in the formal idea of man. If, therefore, the essence of the predicate and subject be known to all, the proposition will be self-evident to all; as is clear with regard to the first principles of demonstration, the terms of which are common things that no one is ignorant of, such as being and non-being, whole and part, and such like. If there are some to whom the essence of the predicate and subject are unknown, the proposition will be self-evident in itself, but not to those who do not know the meaning of the predicate and subject of the proposition. Therefore it happens, as Boethius says, that there are some mental concepts self-evident only to the learned, as that incorporeal substances are not in space.⁵ Therefore I say that this proposition, “God exists,” of itself is self-evident, for the predicate is the same as the subject; because God is His own existence. Because we do not know the essence of God, the proposition is not self-evident to us; but needs to be proved by such things as are more evident to us, though less evident in their nature—namely, by effects.

Reply [to Objection] 1. To know that God exists in a general and indefinite way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man’s beatitude. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by a man must be naturally known to him. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching; for many there are who imagine that man’s perfect good (which is happiness) consists in riches, and others in pleasures, and others in something else.

Reply Obj. 2. Perhaps not everyone who hears of this word “God” may understand it to signify something than which nothing better can be imagined, seeing that some have believed God to be a body. Yet, granted that everyone understands that by this word “God” is signified something than which nothing greater can be imagined, nevertheless, it does not therefore follow that he understands that what the word signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally. Nor can it be argued logically that it actually exists, unless it be admitted that there exists something than which nothing greater can be imagined;

and this precisely is not admitted by those who hold that God does not exist.

Reply Obj. 3. The existence of truth in a general way is self-evident, but the existence of a Primal Truth is not self-evident to us....

Third Article: 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.

Obj. 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 that appears 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 things that happen intentionally 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).

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

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain and evident to our senses that some things are in motion. Whatever is in motion is moved by another, for nothing can be in motion except it have a potentiality for that towards which it is being moved; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act.⁶ By “motion” we mean nothing else than the reduction of something from a state of potentiality into a state of actuality. Nothing, however, can be reduced from a state of potentiality into a state of actuality, unless by something already 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. It is not possible that the same thing should be at once in a state of actuality and potentiality from the same point of view, but only from different points of view. What is actually hot cannot simultaneously be only potentially hot; still, it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that from the same point of view and in the same way anything should be both moved and mover, or 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 be put in motion by another, and that by another again. This cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover—seeing that subsequent movers only move inasmuch as they are put in motion by the first mover; as the staff only moves 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.

The second way is from the [notion] of efficient causation.⁷ In the world of [things that can be sensed,] we find there is an order of efficient causation. 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. 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 one only. 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 cause, nor any intermediate [causes]. 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 put forward a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that could either exist or not exist, since they are found to be generated, and then to corrupt; and, consequently, they can exist and then not exist. It is impossible for these always to exist, for that which can one day cease to exist must at some time have not existed. Therefore, if everything could cease to exist, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. 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. Every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. 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 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, something noblest, and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for the truer things are, the more truly they exist. What is most complete in any genus⁸ is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the most complete form of heat, is the cause whereby all things are made hot. 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 fifth way is taken from the governance of the world; for we see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for some purpose, which fact 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 purpose. Whatever lacks intelligence cannot fulfill some purpose, unless it be directed by some being endowed with intelligence and knowledge; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are ordained towards a definite purpose; and this being we call God.

Reply [to Objection] 1. As Augustine says: *Since God is wholly 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.*⁹ This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.

Reply Obj. 2. Since nature works out its determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must be traced back to God, as to its first cause. So also whatever is done designedly must also be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason or will, for these can suffer change and are defective; whereas things capable of motion and of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle.

NOTES

1. *On the Orthodox Faith* (a Latin translation of Pege Gnoseos [“The Fountain of Wisdom”]), Book I, Chapter 1, Section 3. John Damascene (about 675–749) was a Greek theologian. [D.C.A., ed.]
2. *the Philosopher*: Aristotle. The reference here is to *Posterior Analytics*, Book I, Chapter 3. [D.C.A.]
3. This argument, now known as the “ontological argument,” was first formulated by Anselm in his *Proslogion*. Anselm (about 1033–1109) was an Italian theologian and philosopher. [D.C.A.]
4. Psalms 15:1 (14:1 in some versions); Psalms 53:1 (52.1) [D.C.A.]
5. *How Substances Can Be Good in Virtue of Their Existence without Being Absolute Goods*, point 1. Boethius (about 480–524) was a Roman statesperson, philosopher, and theologian. [D.C.A.]
6. In Aquinas’s philosophy, the potential is contrasted to the actual. A being has a potency for something if it can be (or do) something but is not (or is not doing) it. A being is *reduced* from potentiality to actuality when it begins to be (or do) that which it was capable of being (or doing). [D.C.A.]
7. *efficient cause* is an agent that brings a being into existence or brings about a change in a being [D.C.A.]
8. *genus*: category [D.C.A.]
9. *Enchiridion*, Chapter 11. Augustine (354–430) was a north African theologian and philosopher. [D.C.A.]