

# Philosophy

## The Power of Ideas

NINTH EDITION

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## PHILOSOPHY: THE POWER OF IDEAS, NINTH EDITION

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC/DOC 1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

ISBN 978-0-07-803835-8

MHID 0-07-803835-9

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Cover Designer: *Studio Montage, St. Louis, MO*

Cover Image: *Fancy Collection/SuperStock*

Typeface: *10/12 Plantin Light*

Compositor: *Aptara<sup>®</sup>, Inc.*

Printer: *R. R. Donnelley*

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Do not be confused when Anselm says that God is “something than which nothing greater can be thought.” He just means, in plain English, “God is the being with the following characteristic: when you try to think of a greater or higher being, you cannot do it.”

### Aquinas

About a century and a half after Anselm died, **St. Thomas Aquinas** (c. 1225–1274), whom we have discussed in earlier chapters, interpreted Aristotelian philosophy from a Christian perspective. Aristotle, as we have had occasion to mention, emphasized the importance to philosophy of direct observation of nature. In keeping with his empiricist, Aristotelian leanings, Aquinas regarded the ontological argument as invalid. You cannot prove that God exists, he said, merely by considering the word *God*, as the ontological argument in effect supposes. For that strategy to work, you would have to presume to know God’s essence. The proposition “God exists,” he said, unlike “A square has four sides,” is not self-evident to us mere mortals. Although you can prove God’s existence in several ways, he asserted, you cannot do it just by examining the concept of God. You have to consider what it is about nature that makes it manifest that it requires God as its original cause.

The ways in which the existence of God can be proved are in fact five, according to Aquinas. Although Aquinas’s theological and philosophical writings fill many volumes and cover a vast range of topics, he is most famous for his **Five Ways** (but some philosophers—discussed later—do not regard Aquinas’s proofs of God as his best philosophy). It would be surprising if you were not already familiar with one or another of Aquinas’s Five Ways in some version. In any case, they are included as a reading selection at the end of the chapter.

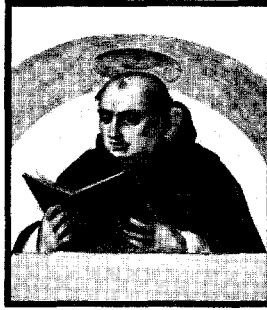
**The First Way** The first way to prove that God exists, according to Aquinas, is to consider the fact that natural things are in motion. As we look around the world and survey moving things, it becomes clear that they did not put themselves into motion. But if every moving thing were moved by another moving thing, then there would be no **first mover**; if no first mover existed, there would be no other mover, and nothing would be in motion. Because things are in motion, a first mover must therefore exist that is moved by no other, and this, of course, is God.

We should note here that Aquinas is usually understood as meaning something quite broad by *motion*—something more like “change in general”—and as including under the concept of movement the coming into, and passing out of, existence. Thus, when he said that things do not put themselves into motion, do not suppose that he thought that you cannot get up out of your chair and walk across the room. He meant that things do not just bring themselves into existence.

**The Second Way** Aquinas’s second way of proving God’s existence was very similar to the first. In the world of sensible things, nothing causes itself. But if everything were caused by something else, then there would be no first cause, and if no first cause existed, there would be no first effect. In fact, there would be no

## PROFILE: St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274)

Aquinas, the son of a count of Aquino in Italy, studied for many years with Albertus Magnus (“Albert the Great”). Albertus, who had the unusual idea that Christian thinkers should be knowledgeable about philosophy and science, wished to make all of Aristotle’s writings available in Latin. His fondness for Aristotle was a strong influence on his pupil, Aquinas.



Aquinas eventually received his doctorate from the University of Paris in his late twenties and soon acquired a substantial reputation as a scholar. For ten years in his thirties and early forties, he was a professor for the Papal Court and lectured in and around Rome.

Now, the thirteenth century was a time of considerable intellectual controversy between the Platonists and the Aristotelians. Some theologians believed that the teachings of Aristotle could not be harmonized with Christian doctrines. This belief was in part a reaction to Averroës (1126–1198), a brilliant Arabian philosopher, and his followers, whose philosophy was built entirely around the ideas of Aristotle. The Averroist philosophy conflicted with Church doctrine on creation and

personal immortality, making Aristotle odious to some Christian theologians.

But Aquinas was no Averroist and defended his own version of Aristotle with inexorable logic. He returned to Paris in 1268 and became involved in a famous struggle with the Averroists, which he won. Although some factions within the Church voiced strong opposition to his philosophy, opposi-

tion that lasted for many years after his death, slowly but surely Aquinas’s thinking became the dominant system of Christian thought. He was canonized (officially declared a saint) in 1323.

Aquinas was a stout fellow, slow and deliberate in manner. He was thus nicknamed the Dumb Ox. But he was a brilliant and forceful thinker, and his writings fill many volumes and cover a vast array of theological and philosophical topics. His most famous works are the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1258–1260) and the *Summa Theologica* (1267–1273), a systematic theology grounded on philosophical principles. He was, in addition, a most humane and charitable man.

In 1879, Pope Leo XIII declared Aquinas’s system to be the official Catholic philosophy.

second, third, or fourth effect either: if no first cause existed, there would be no effects, period. So we must admit a first cause, to wit, God. (This is a good time to read the box on the next page, “The Big Bang.”)

Note that Aquinas did not say anything in either of the first two proofs about things being moved or caused by *earlier* motions or causes. The various motions and causes he is talking about are simultaneous. His argument is not the common one, that things must be caused by something earlier, which must be caused by something earlier, and so on, and that because this chain of causes cannot go back infinitely, there must be a first cause, God. In Aquinas’s opinion, there is no philosophical reason that the chain of causes could not go back infinitely. But there cannot be an infinite series of *simultaneous* causes or movers, he thought.

**The Third Way** Aquinas’s third way is easily the most complicated of the Five Ways. Many consider it his finest proof, though Aquinas himself seemed to prefer the first.

Many paraphrasings of the third proof are not faithful to what Aquinas actually said, which is essentially this: In nature some things are such that it is possible for them not to exist. Indeed, everything you can lay your hands on belongs to this “need-not-exist” category; whatever it is, despite the fact that it does exist, it need

## The Big Bang

The view now accepted by most scientists is that the universe is an explosion, known as the **Big Bang**. Unlike other explosions, the Big Bang does not expand outward into space, like a dynamite or bomb explosion, nor does it have a duration in external time, as do all other explosions, because all space and all time are located within it. The beginning of the Big Bang is the beginning of space and time and of matter and energy, and it is, in fact, the beginning of our expanding universe.

The most prevalent view among the qualified experts who have an opinion on the matter is that it is impossible to know what transpired in the Big Bang before  $10^{-43}$  seconds after zero time, when the Big Bang began. But for various reasons that we need not go into here, most of these experts do apparently believe that there was a zero time, that the universe did have an absolute beginning, that there was a first physical event.

Now, either the first physical event, assuming that such a thing did take place, is explainable, or it is not. On one hand, it is difficult to believe that the first physical event has no explanation, for that amounts to saying that the entire universe, with its incredible size and complexity, was just a chance occurrence, a piece of good luck. But on the other hand, if the first physical event is explicable, then it would seem that the explanation must refer to some sort of nonphysical phenomenon, which certainly could be called “God.”

Thus, the Big Bang theory, if true—and there seems to be much reason for supposing that it is true—may require philosophers to make a hard choice between an unexplainable universe and one explainable only by reference to something nonphysical.

not have existed. Now, that which need not exist, said Aquinas, at some time did not exist. Therefore, if everything belongs to this category, then at one time nothing existed, and then it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist—and thus even now nothing would exist. Thus, Aquinas reasoned, not everything is such that it need not exist: “There must exist something the existence of which is *necessary*.”

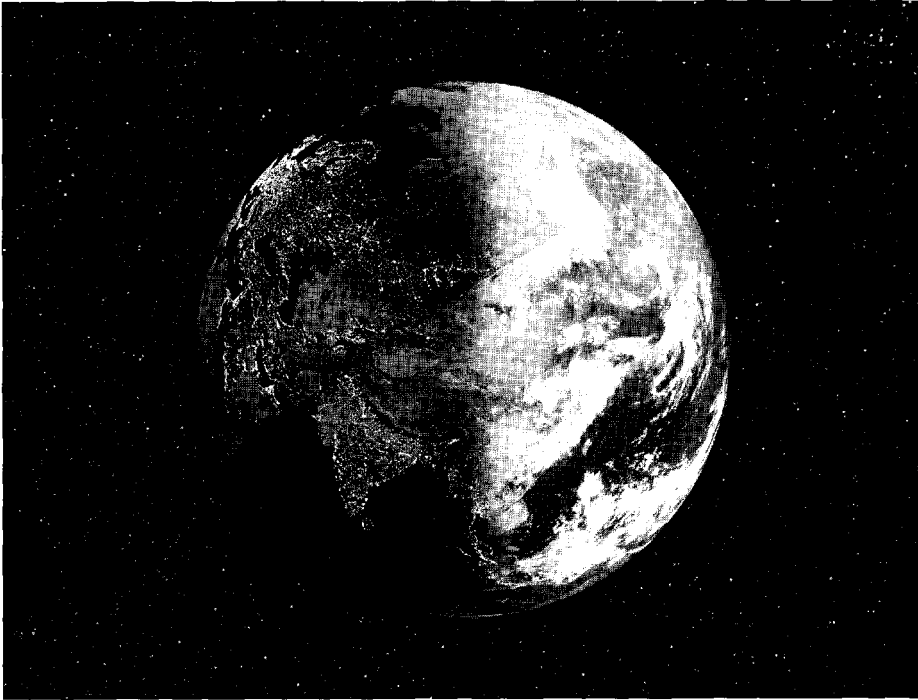
This is not quite the end of the third proof, however, for Aquinas believed that he had not yet ruled out the possibility that the necessity of this necessary being might be caused by another necessary being, whose necessity might be caused by another, and so on and so on. So, he asserted, “It is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another.” Conclusion: There must be some necessary being that has its own necessity, and this is God.

We said the third way was complicated.

**The Fourth and Fifth Ways** Aquinas’s fourth way to prove God was to consider the fact that all natural things possess degrees of goodness, truth, nobility, and all other perfections. Therefore, there must be that which is the source of these perfections, namely, pure goodness and truth, and so on, and this is what we call God.

And the fifth way or proof of God’s existence was predicated on the observation that natural things act for an end or purpose. That is, they function in accordance with a plan or design. Accordingly, an intelligent being exists by which things are directed toward their end, and this intelligent being is God.

Aquinas’s first three proofs of God’s existence are versions of what today is called the **cosmological argument**. The cosmological argument is actually not



Our galaxy has maybe 2 billion Earth-like planets, and there are at least 80 billion galaxies in the observable universe. Do the math. That's a lot of opportunities for life to take hold.

one argument but a type of argument. Proponents of arguments of this type think that the existence of *contingent* things, things that could possibly not have existed, points to the existence of a noncontingent or *necessary* being, God, as their ultimate cause, creator, ground, energizer, or source of being. Note the difference between the cosmological argument and ontological arguments, which endeavor to establish the existence of God just by considering his nature or analyzing the concept of God, as we saw attempted by Anselm.

Aquinas's fourth proof, which cites the existence of goodness or good things, is called the **moral argument**. Here again, the term does not refer to just one argument but rather to a type of argument, and, as we will see, some of the "versions" of the moral argument resemble one another only vaguely.

Arguments like Aquinas's fifth proof, according to which the apparent purposefulness or orderliness of the universe or its parts or structure points to the existence of a divine designer, are called **arguments from design**, or **teleological arguments**.

Let's summarize all of this. Between them, Anselm and Aquinas introduced what have turned out to be the four principal arguments for God's existence. These are

- the ontological argument
- the cosmological argument

- the teleological or design argument
- the moral argument

Notice that none of these four arguments rests on any religious assumptions. They should therefore require the assent of every nonreligious person, if they are sound.

To a certain extent, the history of the philosophy of religion is a continuing discussion of various versions and aspects of these four arguments. Therefore, understanding each type of argument provides you with a good grasp of the basics of the philosophy of religion.

Now, before we leave Aquinas, we should call your attention to the fact that the distinction we drew at the beginning of this chapter between theology and the philosophy of religion is pretty much the same as the distinction Aquinas drew between theology and philosophy.

According to Aquinas, if your thinking proceeds from principles that are revealed to you in religion and that you accept on religious faith, then your thinking is theological, though he did not often use the word *theology*. If your reasoning proceeds from what is evident in sensory experience, then your thinking is philosophical.

According to Aquinas, some theological truths, truths of revelation, are such that philosophy could never discover them. For example, philosophy cannot establish that the universe had a beginning and is not eternal. And not everything discovered by philosophy is important for salvation. But philosophy and theology, although separate disciplines, are not incompatible; in fact, they complement each other, he thought (in contrast to some other Christian thinkers who thought that philosophy could lead to religious errors).

From the standpoint of theology, that God exists is a given, a truth that you start out knowing. From the standpoint of philosophy, that God exists is not a given but may be inferred from your experience.

Thus, Aquinas's proofs of God's existence are philosophical proofs. They do not depend for their soundness on any religious principles.

## MYSTICISM

Quite a different approach to God may be found in the writings of the anchoress **Julian of Norwich** (1342–1414?), one of the great mystics of all time.

Anchoress? That is a person who had the great fortune to be anchored for life to a church. You will find more information on this in the nearby Profile on Julian.

Why do you believe in God, if you do? Perhaps at some point you had a “mystical experience”—you experienced God directly; God *came* to you. If you have had this type of experience, you may be unable to offer a justification or argument for your belief, and your inability to do so may not bother you in the slightest. If you have had a mystical experience of God, this whole business of debating the strengths and weaknesses of arguments about God may strike you as just so much mental exercise.

It is, however, one thing to say, “God came to me” and quite another to explain why this mystical experience is a reliable form of knowledge. Before we go