

Epistemological Value of the Five Ways in the Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas

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Much has been written about St Thomas Aquinas' five ways to prove the existence of God. Today some authors question their scientific value, while some others think that even St Thomas was not sure about their scientific value. It is not my intention in these pages to deal directly with the problem of the scientific validity of the five ways, which has been discussed from all possible angles, but only to offer some reflections on their epistemological value for the concept of Theology as science, always according to St Thomas Aquinas. The first part of our inquiry will deal with the need to prove scientifically the existence of God if Theology is to be taken as true science. The second part will be dedicated to find out what proofs of the existence of God given by other thinkers were accepted by St Thomas as valid because they met his scientific standards. This will entail the analysis of St Thomas' mind at the time he formulated the five ways; then, what proofs or ways really met the scientific conditions to justify Theology as science.

The need to prove scientifically (philosophically) the existence of God

a) ***Methodological difficulty.*** Living in a theistic society, the existence of God was an accepted fact during St Thomas' time; and yet, when he came to the study of God, in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologiae*, he took pains to prove by reason that God existed. Furthermore, having reexamined the arguments used by other phi-

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losophers and theologians to prove the existence of God, he rejected them, even those that exhibited some scientific appearance. The reason was because they did not meet his strict scientific standards.

In dealing scientifically with the proof of the existence of God, St Thomas encountered a methodological problem. According to the Aristotelian methodological questionnaire, which St Thomas strictly follows, there are two possible questions that can be asked regarding the subject: 1) *An est?* Does God exist? 2) *Quid est?* What is God? And there are also two questions regarding the attributes. 1) *Quia est?* Is God eternal? 2) *Propter quid est?* Why is God eternal? The first question refers to the existence of an attribute in the subject, while the second deals with the reason why that attribute is due to that nature. Of the two possible questions in each set only one can be asked if the question is to be meaningful. The two questions cannot be asked; either we know the existence of X and ask for its nature; or we know what X is and ask whether X exists in reality. This methodological questionnaire is based on the Aristotelian principle that all our knowledge is from previous knowledge.¹ He who asks about the existence of X and its nature does not know anything about it and therefore the questions are impossible or meaningless. However, when St Thomas comes to the study of God, he inquires about His existence and His nature. In this fashion, the rigidity of the method puts St Thomas in a quandary, for either he knows what God is and then he can ask whether God exists, or he knows that God exists and asks for the whatness of God. But what he cannot do is to ask both questions, because he must know something about God, and the least one can know is that God *is*. And yet St Thomas inquires about the two, giving us his answer to this riddle with the following words,

To know that God exists in a general and confused 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 man must be naturally known by him. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter 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.²

¹ Aristotle, *Posterior Analytic*, Bk. 1, ch. 1 (71 a1)

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q.2, a.1 ad 1.

These words are the answer to the argument of those who affirmed that the existence of God is a self-evident proposition because "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 the first principles." This is the major premise or the general proposition while the minor, taken from St John Damascene, affirms that the knowledge of the existence of God is naturally implanted in man's heart: "The knowledge of God is naturally implanted in us."³ To solve this objection, St Thomas distinguishes general and confused knowledge from clear and absolute manner. The question about the existence of God is not about whether there is a being beyond us in which our happiness is found, but it is restricted to the true God who is the source and principle of the whole universe. He wants to have clear and absolute (scientific) knowledge of the existence of the real God, the supreme being, the creator of the world.

Why is St Thomas so meticulous in proving the existence of God when it was an accepted fact during his time? He approaches the problem of God from the human viewpoint. For man to be a true believer, he needs to know scientifically, that is, with the certitude of human learning, that God exists. And for a man who wishes to investigate something about God he must know scientifically that God is:

...Now, among the inquiries that we must undertake concerning God in Himself, we must set down in the beginning that whereby His existence is demonstrated, as the necessary foundation of the whole work. For, if we do not demonstrate that God exists, all consideration of divine things is necessarily suppressed.⁴

St Thomas is adamant on this. That, before engulfing in the investigation about God, man must know by demonstration that God *is*. Demonstration means to know something scientifically, to have scientific evidence about the said truth. And scientific evidence is an epistemological requirement for Theology to be true science. The starting point of the scientific inquiry about God must be grounded in truths which are evident to man by reason. Man's intellectual development must rest on the hard core of reality as grasped by his intellectual power by man's unaided reason. Man cannot begin his intellectual journey

³ *Sum. Th.*, I.q.2, a.1 obj.1.

⁴ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 9, 5.

about God based on faith, because faith, which is the acceptance of a truth based on the testimony of others (God), needs reason. Even in the process of learning man rests on evidence. St Thomas admits that the disciple at the very beginning accepts in faith what the teacher presents, but he must know evidently that the teacher is competent and honest. Man becomes a believer when he does not have vision, thus we may say that "faith begins where science ends." Faith, which is the substitute of science when scientific-vision cannot be attained, demands evidence, that is, it has to be rooted in the evidence of credibility, otherwise it would be a mere credulity. For this reason, in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, St Thomas says that the natural way to proceed is: first, to deal with those truths that man can know by reason and, afterwards, with those that are known by revelation.⁵ Why? St Thomas is fully aware that scientific knowledge enjoys greater perfection than faith; that when possible, science is preferable to faith; consequently, scientific knowledge should be sought by man where he can have it. Only when science is not possible man must have faith; for faith which, is imperfect knowledge, is better than no knowledge at all.⁶

b) ***Scientific status of theology.*** In the first question of the *Summa Theologiae*, St Thomas concludes that Theology is a true science, the science of God. This science has for its subject-matter God and other things inasmuch as they are related to God, that is, "sub ratione deitatis"; and the principles from which this science is to be developed are the principles of faith, that is, the truths handed down to man through the revelation from God.

Here St Thomas encounters a difficulty. By definition, science is evident knowledge, but the articles of faith, which are the principles of theology, are not evident to man. The epistemological problem is not about certitude because faith may command stronger certitude than science in the human context, but about evidence. If the principles of Theology are not evident to man neither are the theological conclusions evident, and consequently, the theological conclusions are not scientific conclusions even when all the canons of syllogism have been rigidly followed, since the conclusion follows the weakest side. This

⁵ Cf Ibid., I, 9

⁶ Cf. *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. by James A. Wwisheipl, OP, and Fabian R. Lacher, OP, (Albany, N.Y., Magi Books, Inc., 1989) 4, Lect. 5, n. 662.

means that Theology is not a true science, since neither its principles nor its conclusions are evident.

To solve this epistemological problem St Thomas applies two principles. The first principle refers to the nature of science. Science is the knowledge of the conclusion which means that no science, as such, investigates and justify its own principles but assumes them as true.⁷ The justification of the principles of any science belongs either to a higher science or to wisdom. Thus Theology as science does not justify its principles but assumes them as true. This brings us to the second principle, namely, the one of the subordination of sciences used by St Thomas to solve the problem of the evidence of theology. According to this principle, the conclusions of one science (subordinans) become the principles of another (subordinate) science.⁸ Accordingly, Theology is a subordinate science and therefore the evidence of its principles depend on a superior science. In the same way that Architecture is a subordinated science of Geometry, and Music is subordinated to Arithmetic, Theology is subordinated to the science of God and the blessed. But there is a difference, since Geometry and Arithmetic are human sciences and are evident to man, while the science of God and the blessed are not evident to man. Now, if the range of the human intellect does not extend to the principles of Theology, much less can man reach the principles of the superior science.

The core of the principle of subordination of science means that the subordinated science as such (the scientist) does not have evidence or see the truth of the principles but accepts them by faith, that is, it trusts in the testimony of the higher science. The musician as musician and the architect as architect do not need to see the conclusions of Maths and Geometry but accept them as true because they believe in the testimony of the mathematician and geometrician. In the same way, the theologian accepts as principles those truths which have been revealed by God. The analogy is valid. But there is a point that theology must know scientifically; namely, that God exists and that God has revealed these truths. Thus, Theology accepts as principles the truths which God evidently knows and reveals them to man, who, in turn, uses them as principles for his theological conclusions. The truths revealed by God are evidently known by God Himself but not by man

⁷ Cf. *Sum. Th.*, I, q.1 a.2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

who accepts these truths because they were revealed by God. This knowledge implies the scientific knowledge that there is God and that God reveals Himself to man. Thus, God's existence must be a truth outside the revelation from God; even more, the knowledge of the existence of God is a prerequisite of faith. In other words, before man can accept God's revelation he must know that God exists, otherwise he might fall into one of his illusions. Therefore man must scientifically know by his reason, at least, that God *is*, that God exists. It is the scientific proof of the existence of God that gives consistency to man's faith in St Thomas' anthropology. These are his words:

The existence of God and other like truths about God, which can be known by natural reason, are not articles of faith, but are preambles to the articles; for faith presupposes natural knowledge, even grace presupposes nature, and perfection presupposes something that can be perfected. Nevertheless, there is nothing to prevent a man, who cannot grasp a proof, accepting, as a matter of faith, something which in itself is capable of being scientifically known and demonstrated.⁹

Attitudes regarding the demonstration of the existence of God

So far we have dealt with the problem that for St Thomas the proofs of the existence of God must meet the scientific standards if Theology is to be ranked among the sciences. However, St Thomas' thesis was confronted by several opinions contrary to his doctrine of the demonstrability of the existence of God. For some, the proposition *God is* is a self-evident proposition, while for others, it is beyond the range of the natural intellect of man, thus he must accept it by faith. St Thomas rejects both of them because they arise from two different ways of looking at the range of the human intellect: one is too optimistic, while the other is too pessimistic.

According to the *optimistic* attitude: there is no need to prove the existence of God because the proposition "God is" is self evident. St Thomas rejects this opinion because "it fails to distinguish between that which is self-evident in an absolute manner and that which is self-evident in relation to us." In general, a proposition is self-evident when "the predicate is included in the essence of the subject, as *man is an animal*, for *animal* is contained in the essence of *man*."¹⁰ Now the

⁹ Ibid., I, q.2, a.2 ad 1.

inclusion of the predicate in the essence of the subject may be perceived by man immediately, and the proposition is self-evident absolutely and in relation to us; or after certain reasoning in which case the proposition is self-evident absolutely but not in relation to us.

Applying this distinction to the proposition "God is," St Thomas agrees that it is a self-evident absolutely or in itself but not in relation to us, because man cannot have a comprehensive and exhaustive knowledge of the essence of God which is His existence.¹¹

According to the *pessimistic* attitude, man cannot prove or know by reason that "God is," because he is so transcendent that man cannot know it by his reason alone: he needs faith and revelation to know that God is. St Thomas rejects this agnostic theory because this opinion arises from the erroneous conception of the nature of human intellect. They say that the intellect of man is so imperfect and weak that it cannot transcend the material world and reach the spiritual world without the aid of revelation. St Thomas refutes this opinion based on the nature of demonstration which is either from cause to effect, *a priori*, or from effect to cause, *a posteriori*.

The existence of God cannot be proven *a priori* because man does not know the essence of God. But man can prove the existence of God *a posteriori*, that is, from effect to cause. According to those who deny the demonstrability of the existence of God, they reject the possibility of proving the existence of God *a posteriori* because the effects of God (creatures) are not proportionate or commensurate to the cause, God. St Thomas' answer of to this difficulty is worthy to be transcribed in his own words:

From effects not proportionate to the cause no perfect knowledge of the cause can be obtained. Yet from every effect the existence of the cause can be clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects; although we cannot perfectly know God as He is or His essence.¹²

Against this optimism of St Thomas is the hard reality that even when some men may be able to prove the existence of God, the majority are not. If the proof of the existence of God is needed to justify man's

¹⁰ Ibid., I, q.2, a.2.

¹¹ Ibid., a.1.

¹² Ibid., a.2 ad 3.

faith, how is it that many human beings are not able to do so? St Thomas maintains, first, that man must accept the existence of God for the knowledge that God exists is of necessity for the attainment of man's final end; second, that man can demonstrate the existence of God although he cannot know Him as He is. Third, this certitude of human learning does not require that each and every believer (man) has to be able to see the scientific value of the proof; it is sufficient that the experts on the field arrive to that vision. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* he admits that not all men can see the strength of the arguments and challenges those who deny the possibility of knowing the existence of God by reason to accept the fact that there are things which they may not see while other men can see. These are his words,

"...many, remaining ignorant of the power of demonstration, would hold in doubt those things that have been most truly demonstrated."¹³

About those authors he said that "it would be a height folly for a simple person to assert that what a philosopher proposes is false on the ground that he himself cannot understand."¹⁴

Not all men can see the strength of the arguments to prove the existence of God. In the same way that not all men can see the physical and mathematical proofs of these sciences. It is not needed, because man is a social being. What is sufficient is that some men prove the existence of God, so that their knowledge will provide the necessary foundation for faith and the scientific status of Theology. This brings us to the second question, namely, what are the valid arguments that can be used to prove the Existence of God?

Proofs of the Existence of God which meet the scientific standards

a) *There are many ways by which man accepts the existence of God* and there are several proofs that authors bring forth to prove the existence of God. St Thomas, in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Gospel of St John* mentions several ways by which man comes to know that God exists.¹⁵ Some of these ways may seem to be more ap-

¹³ *Contra Gent.*, I, 4,5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 3, 4.

¹⁵ *Comment. on the Gospel of St. John*, Prologue, nn. 3-7.

pealing or easier to understand than those which St Thomas proposes but he approaches the problem by establishing the ways by which man comes to know scientifically the existence of something.

Likewise, our intellect knows *whether a thing is*, in three ways. First, because the answer falls within the range of sensation. Second, we know from the cause-effect relationship of things within the range of sensation, as in the case of knowing fire as result of the perception of smoke. Thirdly, we know that a thing is in itself, as a result of a tendency that it has toward certain acts, and we know this inclination from reflection on our actions, being aware that they are going on.¹⁶

Thus an existential proposition is proven primarily by direct experience or sense intuition, that is, when the thing is present to man through sensation. Second, the existence of a thing is proven by its effects. And third, from knowledge by connaturality, that is, by the tendency that man finds in himself towards the end of that tendency.

b) *St Thomas only admits the proof of efficient causality* as valid to consolidate Theology as science. He does not look for the ways by which a man may accept the existence of God, as he does in his *Commentary to the Gospel of John*. In the *Summa Theologiae* his aim is to give scientific foundation to Theology, whose scientific status was questioned by some during his time. Science depends on objective evidence and not merely on a subjective assent to truth. Consequently the possibility of Theology as science depends on the scientific knowledge of God's existence.

Since the proposition *God is*, is an existential proposition there are only three possible ways to prove its truth, namely, either by direct intuition of God, that is, by direct experience of God, by the principles of efficient causality, or by connaturality, as said above.

(1) *By direct intuition of God*. But this proof eludes man in this world because God is an immaterial and spiritual substance. Man cannot have direct or immediate knowledge of spiritual substances because man's intuition, both sensible and intellectual, depends on the senses, that is, man's immediate knowledge is given through his senses. In other words, man's knowledge of God's existence is deduced from and depends on previous knowledge.

¹⁶ *In III Sententiarum*, 23, I, 2 sol.; cf. *In I Sent.*, 3, I, 2, sol; *In VII Metaph.*, Lect.17, n. 1648; *In Post. Analyt.*, Lect.19, nn 1-5; *Quotlib.*, VIII, 4c.

(2) *By connaturality.* We have seen already how St Thomas rejects this proof as insufficient when he rejected that the proposition "God is" is a self-evident proposition.

(3) *Through the principle of efficient causality.* Only through the principle of efficient causality man comes to know the existence of the cause whose effect is intuitively present to him. For it is the principle of efficient causality which links existentially cause and its effect. If there is an event, if there is a thing which comes into existence, then that thing or event must have a cause. The existence of the event or thing, which results from the activity of a cause requires the existence of that cause itself, otherwise the event will not have sufficient reason for its existence.

Science is certain and evident knowledge through causes. St Thomas surveys the possibility of knowing the existence of God through the different causes and concludes that only through the principle of causality and *a posteriori* can man prove the existence of God. The main reason is because we do not know the essence of God and because God does not have cause like in the case of material and efficient causality *a priori*. Besides, St Thomas rejects the ontological arguments because there is an illegal transition from the order of essence to the order of existence, or from the logical order to the ontological one.¹⁷

Against the possibility of proving the existence of God through the principle of efficient causality *a posteriori* is the logical principle that the middle term of demonstration is the essence. Since we do not know the essence of God, and the effects used to prove the existence of God are not commensurate to God, that is, they do not reveal the essence of God, therefore we cannot have scientific proof of the existence of God. St Thomas answers to this objection by saying that "when the existence of a cause is demonstrated from an effect, this effect takes the place of the definition of the cause in the proof of the cause's existence."¹⁸ And he goes deeper in the analysis of the objection when he says that the "names given to God are derived from His effects." Regarding the non commensuration, he answers that "we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects; though we cannot perfectly know God as He is in His essence."¹⁹ □

¹⁷ Cf. *Sum. Th.*, I, q.2, a.1 ad 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* a.2 ad 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* ad 3.