

Aquinas' "First Way": An Exposition and Wittgensteinian Assessment

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[I]t was nonsense to say that theological propositions were meaningless – what we wanted to know was how they were used ... WITTGENSTEIN¹

The “first and most manifest” of Aquinas’ Five Ways is “the argument from motion.” Also known as the First Way, this demonstration, as Aquinas bills it, relies on the Aristotelian analysis according to which change, as “the actualizing of a potentiality in a subject,” can only occur through an agent or “mover” already possessing at least as much actuality (positive reality) as the moving subject lacks. His argument proceeds by saying that there cannot be an infinite regress of movers and things moved, for in that case there would be – contrary to evident fact – nothing now in motion. The conclusion is that there must be some first cause of motion that is not itself in motion—a mover (as he later explains) that is a “completely actual” and therefore unchangeable source of change.²

What follows is a series of objections and replies in dialogue form concerning the First Way, capped off with a concluding, I think Wittgensteinian, assessment of it.

DIALOGUE

O: Why can’t there be an infinite regress of movers and things moved? The ancients believed that the world never had a beginning and will never end. Can we prove that they were wrong?

R: No. Aquinas’ point is that we haven’t accounted for why anything at all is in motion until we arrive at a primary mover, one not

¹ From notes of Gilbert Harris Edwards on an exchange between Wittgenstein and A. C. Ewing, quoted in *Public and Private Occasions*, p. 338.

² Aquinas devotes more attention to the argument from motion than to any of the others. His most extensive treatment of it is in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk. I, chap. 13). Also, the conclusion of this argument appears to be crucial in excluding any type of compositeness or plurality or limitation from what we (e.g., orthodox, catholic Christians) understand God to be. See *SCG*, chap. 14 ff.

deriving its motive power from something else. Thus, even an infinitely long series of secondary movers would depend for its existence on something not a part of that series.

O: Explanation must come to an end somewhere. And in my way of thinking (one going back at least to Democritus) the existence of motion is a *first principle* of explanation—not itself something to be explained.

R: My contention is that—contrary to evident experience – there'd be nothing in motion at all, and therefore “no potentialities being actualized,” if there existed only *moved* movers, that is, agents that always, *ad infinitum*, owe to their predecessors whatever actualities they transmit to their successors.

O: What's not evident to me is the truth, indeed the meaning, of the assumption that a mover must possess “at least as much actuality as the thing moved.”

R: A thing, *X*, changes by being, first, actually *X* and potentially *Y*, and then actually *Y*. Now isn't that evident? And isn't it equally evident that something that's not actually *Y*, can't possibly bring *itself* to be actually *Y*? (Descartes had the same thing in mind when he said that a cause must have at least as much “inherent reality” as its effect. I think he called this “the principle of causal adequacy.”)

O: But what exactly does all that *mean*?

R: To put it simply, it means: You can't *give* what you haven't *got*.

O: Suppose we heat a plate by putting it over a flame. The flame must have at least as much of the reality inhering in it (i.e., it must be at least as hot) as the plate it heats. O. K. But what could it mean to say that, for example, a builder has as much “inherent reality” as the house he builds?

R: Aquinas doesn't think that a producer must *look* like what he produces, just that something about him must be reflected in what he produces.

O: So how's the nature of the builder reflected in the house he built?

R: A solidly constructed, cleverly designed house surely shows something about the nature of its builder.

O: Then what does creation show us about its Creator?

R: Aquinas maintains that all created perfections (everything in the world that's in any way real or actual) somehow pre-exist in the uncreated reality of its Creator. The reality of inanimate things exists in God only “virtually,” i.e., only in virtue of the creative power by

which he made them; for, insofar as something is material, it can reflect nothing of the intrinsic nature of its Creator. Why? Because whatever is material is thereby subject to change, and to that extent passive rather than active, potential rather than actual—none of which can be said of that First Unmoved Mover, which, according to the First Way, we all call “God.”³

O: Man is a species of animal and therefore material. Yet we’ve been told that man is made in “the image and likeness of God.” What can that mean?

R: Although we humans are material beings, we transcend, in our own limited way, the passive existence of matter. We do this by virtue of our spiritual nature – our intellect and will. Therefore, since God can’t be any less than we are, there must be something about him that’s reflected, however dimly, in our spiritual nature. So it must be right to attribute *something like* intellect and will to God—even though we have no understanding of what it would be for an impassible, changeless Being to understand or will.

O: I’m certainly not clear about what the God you’re talking about is supposed to be like. I’m even in the dark about how your God’s existence is supposed to explain the existence of the world around us.

R: Aquinas certainly shared the un-clarity you speak of. As he saw it, the world’s reality is that of an ever-changing, created manifestation of the changeless, uncreated Reality we call “God.” But he would admit – even stress—that if the ever-changing existence of our world is a mystery, then the existence of its unchangeable Creator is *the Mystery of Mysteries*.

O: Doesn’t modern cosmology throw light on the origin of the cosmos?

R: Yes. But that will have no bearing on natural theology’s cosmological question, “Why does anything at all exist? Why something rather than nothing?” That question can’t be given a scientific explanation because all scientific explanations presuppose the existence of a cosmos, in however primitive a form. Theology’s answer to its question, its doctrine of Creation, is radically different in spirit from

³ Having arrived at the conclusion that God, as the absolutely first source of every change (i.e., of every transition from potency to act), Aquinas identifies the reality supremely worthy of the name “God” as *Pure Actuality (Ipsum Esse Subsistens)* – which, as I think Anselm would agree, is “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” “What answers to the ‘description’, *that than which none greater can be conceived?* If, as Cora Diamond suggests]we take this as a riddle question, we can think of Aquinas as proposing the answer: “It’s our God, of course: the great I AM, *Ipsum Esse Subsistens!* Although itself riddling, this answer may nonetheless strike one as “the only possible solution.” (Diamond, “Riddles and Anselm’s Riddle”).

the sort of answers given to questions in any of the sciences. The point of a scientific explanation is to *remove* mystery—or, rather, to remove one mystery and move on to another. And what all the sciences always need to look past is precisely what theology always needs to dwell on and keep alive—the Mystery of Existence.

O: You said that God is *changeless*. But can that be “the living God” to whom ordinary believers address their petitionary prayers?

R: That’s one of the many objections Aquinas comes to grips with in his writings. I’m amazed by *how many* conceptual questions arise for logically acute theologians like Aquinas. Thank God our religious life needn’t wait on all their answers!

O: A big AMEN to that! But I’d still like to know how Aquinas would answer the familiar objection, from “process theologians” and others, that Aquinas’ “Unmoved Mover” conception of God makes nonsense of the ordinary believer’s faith in the efficacy of prayer.

R: What Aquinas wants to rule out is the notion that anything, prayer included, could change God — not that prayer can affect the way things go in the world. How so? The contemporary Thomist, Brian Davies, explains it this way: “[I]f I pray for something, and if what I pray for occurs, its occurrence can be called an answer to my prayer. [T]hough nothing can cause God to will what he has not willed from eternity, God may will from eternity that things should come about as things prayed for by us” (*op. cit.*, p. 184).

O: As a (would-be) Wittgensteinian, it occurs to me that Aquinas’ account might be restated as follows: Prayer may have its effect “under the aspect of eternity.” What needs to be ruled out as nonsense is the notion that the efficacy of prayer is something subject to confirmation or disconfirmation by observing “the way things go,” and so “under the aspect of time.”

R: I wouldn’t object to that reformulation, though I’m not sure it makes Aquinas’ explanation any clearer.

ASSESSMENT

I think the argument from motion helps define or elucidate the use of the word “God” in classical monotheism. I also think – as I hope the preceding dialogue has shown – that it may be a more interesting and defensible argument than is nowadays generally allowed. I want now, however, to register my doubts about Aquinas’ claim that his First Way is a *demonstrative* argument yielding “scientific knowledge” (*scientia*) of its conclusion. Following Aristotle, Aquinas defines a scientific (as contrasted with a probable or dialectical argument) as

one whose conclusion follows necessarily from premises that are "more certain and better known" than it is. But *does* the First Way (or indeed any of Aquinas' "Ways") satisfy this requirement?

Speaker **O**, in the preceding dialogue, asked why we should accept the premise that "a mover must possess at least as much actuality as the thing moved," whereupon **R** replied (in effect) that the premise in question is a clear application of an self-evidently certain if informally stated truism, namely, "You can't *give* what you *haven't got*"? Now it must be admitted that the "truism" certainly is truistic *in certain contexts* – such as: "You can't give a beggar your spare change if you've got none!" and "A syllogism can't give you a conclusion that's not already contained in its premises." It is evidently not a truism, however, for evolutionary biologists. In fact, they appear to operate on a quite opposite principle, roughly: "The more perfect comes from the less perfect, e.g., life from lifeless antecedents." (Daniel Dennett speaks of a very gradual "ratcheting-up process.")

Reasonable modern theists will surely agree that modern biologists have operated in accordance with this evolutionary view with astounding success. But I take it they will object to putting "a metaphysical emphasis" on the principle by which biologists, *qua* biologists, have operated. That is, they will allow that the evolutionary principle has been a fruitful methodological maxim in biology but will nevertheless refuse to accord it *absolute* validity.

Neither the "More perfect *can* come from the less perfect" maxim *nor* the "You can't give what you haven't got" maxim expresses a rationally compelling, universally applicable truth. That does not, of course, stop theists from "holding fast religiously" to their conviction that all the "perfections" (all the positive reality) possessed by the myriad beings of the world can only be "gifts" from the infinite reservoir of being they call "God."⁴ Nor, I think, does it entail that their "holding fast" is irrational.

Whatever there is in Aquinas' First and other "Ways" depends, I think, on what they contribute to setting out and defending a coherent system of analogies, concepts, and beliefs – a system whose ultimate *raison d'être* is that of articulating a viable way of living and assessing life.⁵

⁴ "God is self-existent being itself, and therefore necessarily contains within himself the full perfection of being" (*Summa Theologiae* Ia.11.3).

⁵ On the priority of ethico-religious practice over its alleged theoretical (scientific or metaphysical) foundations, see Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. According to Hadot, "one can remain faithful to one's choice of a form of life without being obliged to adhere to the systematic construction which claims to found it As a matter of fact, ethics – i.e., choosing the good – is not the consequence of metaphysics but [vice-versa]" (pp. 282-83). I suppose Wittgenstein would be more sympathetic to that line of thought than Aquinas.

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's a *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. [*Culture and Value*, p. 64].

I want to emphasize the word "belief" in the preceding Wittgenstein remark, and to make two suggestions: first, that the belief in question may be a truth-claim; and second, that truth-claims have an importance in monotheistic religions that they didn't seem to have in, for example, the religion of ancient Greece. It is because monotheistic religions regard some of their distinctive teachings as truth-claims (and so subject to the laws of non-contradiction and excluded middle) that they have supported logically acute theologians such as Thomas Aquinas to work out consistent and coherent systems of belief. For their beliefs – concerning God's fullness of being, impassibility, and oneness, for example – are integral parts of their "system of reference." The ancient pagans, by contrast, didn't seem overmuch bothered by inconsistencies in the stories they told about the gods, as in the different accounts of Aphrodite's birth in Homer and Hesiod.

At the beginning of his "Notes on Frazer," Wittgenstein asks whether *either* St. Augustine (who calls upon God on every page of his *Confessions*) *or* the Buddhist holy man (who denies the existence of a Creator) must be mistaken. Wittgenstein replies, tautologically, that neither is mistaken if neither is asserting an opinion and so, I take it, making a truth-claim. Now it seems to me – though apparently not to Wittgenstein – that Buddhists and Christians clearly do make inconsistent truth-claims about whether the ever-changing world around us is the effect of an unchanging, fully actual, and transcendent Creator. Buddhism defined itself, in part, through its rejection of Hinduism's belief in the Creator god, Isvara. Its intellectuals sought to demonstrate, by rationally coercive arguments, both the logical incoherence and the spiritual undesirability of clinging to belief in such a deity. Now I think it an enduring merit of Aquinas' natural theology that it provides, in effect, a reasoned reply to such objections, a reply that, while not rationally coercive, is arguably at least as powerful as they are.

Could Wittgenstein have appreciated the "enduring merit" I've claimed for the sort of natural theology found in Aquinas? Perhaps the following passage suggests that he might have:

A proof of God's existence ought really to be something by means of which one convinces oneself that God exists. But I think that what *believers* who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is give their 'belief' an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would not have come to believe as a result of such proofs. [CV, p. 85]

In other words, the "proofs" of a natural theologian may be of value even though they never produce the conviction normally expected of proofs. In the case of Aquinas' arguments, I would say that their value consists in their contribution to: (1) distinguishing the supernatural Creator of monotheism from the merely preternatural "idols" of much popular religion; (2) answering objections to the consistency and coherence of theistic beliefs, e.g., from Buddhist and Jain logicians; and (3) opposing reductively non-cognitive⁶ interpretations of traditional Jewish, Christian, or Muslim beliefs. As a philosophical theologian, Aquinas was keen on showing that acceptance of the Christian faith does *not* demand (in Kierkegaard's phrase) "a crucifixion of the intellect." Perhaps Wittgenstein would have found in Aquinas a welcome therapy for the "irritation of the intellect" he experienced from the expression of some religious beliefs.⁷

⁶ I take it that "God, Creator of heaven and earth, exists" is not cognitively meaningful by the standards of experimental reasoning. For there's no way of decisively eliminating its negation using the hypothetico-deductive method. – Or should we qualify that with, *At least in this life?* Consider following from a Christian sermon:

No matter how much (or how little) we can know about God from the created order . . . and from other religious teachers, for us the definitive revelation that fulfills and corrects all others is Jesus Christ. *We may be wrong.* Only after we die can we learn whether Jesus is the most accurate disclosure of the Mystery which we call God. We live, and we will die, in the faith and hope that God is Christ-like, that God is love. – Rev. Jess Stribling, Christ & St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Norfolk, Va., 5/5/08. *My italics.*

According to his friend, Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein thought he could imagine himself, after death, "standing, in some queer bodily form, before the judgment seat of God." If we filled in that picture in with details from Christian iconography, wouldn't we be imagining a situation in which Christians would no longer be tempted to entertain the thought, "We may be wrong"? – Suppose, however, that a Christian, wakes up (or thinks he wakes up) in in a "post-mortem" Buddhist utopia. Should he conclude that that he was probably wrong after all? Or should he regard this new, other-worldly experience as a temptation to be resisted?

I think Wittgenstein would be of more help than Aquinas in investigating such questions. We might begin with *On Certainty*, sec. 512 ("What if you had to change your opinion even on these most fundamental things? . . .").

⁷ I'm thinking of his several remarks on predestination in *Culture and Value*, for instance:

How God judges a man is something we cannot imagine at all. If he really takes strength of temptation and the frailty of nature into account, whom can he condemn? But otherwise the resultant of these two forces is simply the end for which the man was predestined. In that case he was created so that the interplay of forces would make him either conquer or succumb. And that is not a religious idea at all, but more like a scientific hypothesis.//So if you want to stay within the religious sphere you must *struggle*. (p. 86)

Much of the *Summa Theologiae* is devoted to confronting difficulties such as that, thereby offering help to those of us who struggle to stay within the religious sphere.

Before closing, I must say something about what may seem the most serious impediment to a Wittgenstein-Aquinas alliance, namely the former's notorious rejection of metaphysics. For if metaphysics is to be banished, mustn't all theology, including Aquinas', share the same fate? My reply is that in the pejorative sense in which Wittgenstein normally uses the term, the First Way is not a clear instance of metaphysics. Properly backing up this reply would require another paper – a paper I would head with the following remarks attributed to Wittgenstein:

[T]he characteristic of a metaphysical statement, insofar as one could be given at all, is the empirical air, the pseudo-empirical character. They are put in such a way as to make us think we could experiment to find out more about them. (*Public and Private Occasions*, p. 39)

In contrast with Anselm's argument, Aquinas' First Way *does* begin with an empirical premise: there are things in motion. Reflecting on the manifest existence of these "mobile beings" in light of Aristotle's analysis of change, he was led to wonder why any of them exist – which led him to push beyond the ordinary practice of causal explanation, in which a change in one mobile being is attributed to the agency of another mobile being. So, although his argument is, in a sense, empirical, its conclusion – that there's an Absolutely Unmoved Mover – is not likely to make us think that we could make experiments to find out more about it!

Explanation in the natural and human sciences presupposes the existence of mobile beings, as their subject matter and starting points of explanation. So, in the context of scientific investigations, Aquinas' cosmological question, "Why are there any mobile beings at all?" has no place. Aquinas' effort, I want to say, was to persuade us that his extraordinary question and answer do have a meaningful place in a very different context.

What context? If we insist on calling it a *metaphysical* context, we should remember that it would be misleading to call a difference in metaphysical systems – such as the difference between that of Aquinas and Democritus – "a mere difference in way of talking":

There is also the difference in . . . the way we look at the world and our problems [I]t was nonsense to say that theological propositions were meaningless – what we wanted to know was how they were used . . . (*Public and Private Occasions*, pp. 338–39)

The positivists and the early Wittgenstein failed to count some quite useful sentences in theology as propositions because they hadn't sufficiently considered their use. Although I have argued against St. Thomas' characterization of his First Way as a proof, I submit that it can still be of use in preserving for us a way of looking at things

that is world-affirming but not idolatrous, a way of looking at things that tends to be "elbowed-aside" in these scientific times.⁸

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⁸ Cf. *Culture and Value*, p. 60: "Science: enrichment and impoverishment. *One* particular method elbows all the others aside."