

Philosophy Night

"Natural Theology"



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The following from the book *Natural Theology* by D.Q. McNerny. 2005/2020. FSSP.

Q. What is Natural Theology?

A. In natural theology we study God and everything that pertains to God from a purely natural point of view, meaning that we advance our study on the basis of human reason alone. (Introduction, p. 1)

The principal purpose of (the believing natural theologian) is to show that man can come to have knowledge of God through means other than divine revelation. Specifically, the natural theologian seeks to demonstrate that natural reason, i.e., human reason unaided by revelation, is able to attain certain knowledge that God exists, and, in addition, is able to attain knowledge of some of the aspects of the divine nature (Introduction, p. 2)

Proofs for the Existence of God Before St. Thomas

The Platonic Proof:

We have reason to believe...that the philosophic science we now call natural theology began with Plato...to be found in Book X of Plato's *Laws*. (p. 50)

The Athenian and his interlocutors...express their concern that so many of the youth of the city are advocating views which are essentially atheistic. Specifically, the youth have adopted the position that nature, which is to say, material reality, takes precedence over soul, or spiritual reality. They argue that the most primitive reality is material, and out of that came the soul, or spiritual reality. This, to the Athenian and his companions, is to have things just backwards, for it is soul that comes first, and out of soul comes material reality, or nature (50). Before there was matter, there was spirit, and matter proceeds from spirit-that is the point the argument is intended to show (51).

Athenian: Everywhere we look there are things, material objects, and those things are constantly in motion. Motion can be classified as

- a) a thing that is capable of moving other things but not itself, and
- b) a thing that is capable of moving both itself and other things (the most important kind of motion)

This self-moving motion 'can generate itself' and is 'infinitely superior' to all else. And it must be recognized as 'first, in ancestry as well as in power' (p. 51).

Athenian: consider all the multitudinous instances of motion that are taking place in the universe, where one thing produces change in another thing, and then that thing in turn produces change in yet another thing, and so on, and so on. In considering such a sequence, he asks, is there to be found an originating source of all the change that is taking place? If there is such a source, it cannot be something whose motion is explained by something outside itself. No, this initial principle 'can hardly be anything except the change effected by self-generated motion.' ...'self-generating motion' according to the Athenian, is nothing else than the definition of 'soul.' It is soul, then, spiritual reality, which is the most ancient thing there is, and which is the generating source of all material reality. Matter thus takes second place in relation to spirit (51).

“A soul or souls - and perfectly virtuous souls at that - have been shown to be the cause of the phenomena [i.e., of all moving material things], and whether it is by their living presence in matter that they direct all the heavens, or by some other means, we shall insist that these souls are gods.” (Plato, *Laws*, 899b, 4-7)

The Aristotelian Proof:

The two governing ideas in Aristotle's proof, ideas which will later be adopted by St. Thomas and taken as his own, are as follows: (i) everything that moves (i.e., that changes in any way whatever) is moved by another, and (ii) in any system of moving things, all of which are dependent for their movement on something other than themselves, one eventually must arrive, in order to explain all of this movement, at a mover which is *not* dependent on another (p. 53).

The fundamental philosophical explanation for the fact that everything that moves (i.e., changes) is moved by another is found in the very important metaphysical distinction between potency and act, as it is applied to motion. Obviously, nothing could move in a particular way unless it had the capacity, or the potential, to do so. Something that is moving in a particular way here and now is said to be 'in act' with respect to that movement. Now, nothing can be both in potency and in act with respect to a particular movement, for that would involve a contradiction. ...A non-moving thing could not cause its own motion, for in order to do so it would have to be both non-moving and moving at the same time (54).

If we have a system (for example, the actual universe) which is composed of things which move but no one of which can, of itself, provide the explanation for its movement, we have to ask: Where did the system itself come from? Whence all this movement which cannot explain itself? The idea Aristotle is developing here might be easier to grasp if we think of a series of things all of which are moved by another, that is, no one of which contains within itself the explanation of its motion (54).

...if we simply claim that the series is endless we provide no explanation at all for that movement. We must, then, Aristotle argued, conclude to the existence of a First Mover, by which he meant a mover which is the explanation for everything that moves, but which is itself unmoving. Right here, in the fact that Aristotle's explanatory source of movement is unmoving, we see a stark contrast to Plato's explanatory source of movement, which was described as self-moving. (For Aristotle, movement or change, even if generated by the moving beings itself, would be a sign of imperfection.) We must not imagine this First Mover as being the first in a series of the kind of moving things described above; the First Mover is the explanation for the series itself, but is completely outside the series. There is, then, 'only one mover [i.e., mover], the first of unmoved things, which being eternal will be the principle of motion to everything else. This Prime Mover, though the cause of all all physical movement, is itself immaterial, 'without parts and without magnitude.' In the *Metaphysics*, now using the term 'God' rather than 'Prime Mover,' Aristotle writes: 'We say, therefore, that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God.' (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b, 28-30) (McInerney, p. 55).

The Augustinian Proof

Though St. Augustine of course maintained that we have a sure knowledge of the existence of God through faith, he also makes clear that we can arrive at such knowledge through natural reason, albeit this knowledge, in comparison to that which comes to us through faith, is 'a sure, though, as yet, very inadequate form of

knowledge.' If one sets out to prove the existence of God, one must obviously have at the outset some sort of understanding of the term 'God.' St. Augustine begins his argument by asserting that we 'call that reality God which has nothing superior to it.' (56)

...it is precisely truth, he contends, which is the reality that has nothing superior to it. This he endeavors to show by calling attention to two principal manifestations of truth, mathematics and wisdom... (56).

There is in mathematical truth, according to St. Augustine, something of the eternal, for 'seven and three are ten, not only now, but forever.' Number has to it a certain transcendent aspect, and therefore, by knowing number, i.e., any mathematical truth, we are led to a reality which is superior to our own mind. Truth which is superior to the human mind, a truth which provides the guidelines for the workings of the mind, cannot be a product of the mind itself. Our minds are changeable, but this truth which guides the mind is unchangeable. The fact that the human mind is able to know truth at all, but especially mathematical truth, points necessarily, then, to something which is superior to the mind, truth by which the mind knows truth itself (56f).

"You granted that if I could prove that there was something above our minds, you would admit it was God, provided that there was nothing higher. I agreed and stated that it would be enough for me to prove this point. For if there is anything more excellent, then this is God; if not, then truth itself is God. In either case, you cannot deny that God exists, which was the question we proposed to examine in our discussion" [St. Augustine, *The Free Choice of the Will*, Book II]. (McInerny, p. 57).

St. Anselm's Proslogion (the Ontological Argument)

"And so, Lord, do Thou, who dost give understanding to faith, give me, so far as Thou knowest it to be profitable, to understand that Thou art as we believe; and that Thou art that which we believe. And, indeed, we believe that Thou art a being than which nothing greater can be conceived. Or is there no such nature, since the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God? (Ps. XIV, 1). But, at any rate, this very fool, when he hears of this being of which I speak - a being than which nothing greater can be conceived - understands what he hears, and what he understands is in his understanding; although he does not understand it to exist.

For, it is one thing for an object to be in the understanding, and another to understand that the object exists. When a painter first conceives of what he will afterwards perform, he has it in his understanding, but he does not yet understand it to be, because he has not yet performed it. But after he has made the painting, he both has it in his understanding, and he understands that it exists, because he has made it.

Hence, even the fool is convinced that something exists in the understanding, at least, than which nothing greater can be conceived. For, when he hears of this, he understands it. And whatever is understood, exists in the understanding. And assuredly that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, cannot exist in the understanding alone: then it can be conceived to exist in reality; which is greater.

Therefore, if that, than which nothing greater can be conceived, exists in the understanding alone, the very being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, is one, than which a greater can be conceived. But obviously this is impossible. Hence, there is no doubt that there exists a being, than which nothing greater can be conceived, and it exists both in the understanding and in reality" (Proslogion, Ch. II. qtd. McInerny, p. 60).

The Five Ways of St. Thomas Aquinas The Metaphysical Foundations of the Proofs

Substantial Being:

Substantial being is independent being in relation to accidental being. The latter can only exist through other being, i.e., substantial being, but substantial being exists, again, through itself. A substance is an actual existent, a real being and not a fiction (p. 70).

Contingent Being and Necessary Being:

There is only one unqualifiedly necessary being, and that is God Himself. As a necessary being, God is a being for whom it is impossible not to be. ...we arrive at the existence of God as necessary being by beginning with contingent being.

If necessary being is being that cannot not be, the essence of contingent being is that it is being that *can* not be. St. Thomas often uses the expression 'participated being' in referring to contingent being... Contingent being participates in being in the sense that, in contrast to necessary being, which simply *is* being, contingent being *has* being, as a possession that comes to it from outside, and by way of gift.

...we know ourselves as contingent being, for we know that at one time we did not exist, and we know that some day, with respect to our present mode of existence as creatures composed of body and soul, we will cease to exist. And we contingent beings immersed in a veritable sea of contingent beings (71).

Potency and Act

Aristotle identified the essence of motion, or of any change of whatever sort, as the actualization of a potency. ...There is, first and foremost, and obviously, the thing that undergoes the change; and then there is the change itself, which can be broadly described as a transition from one state to another (72).

A green apple can become a red apple because it has the capacity for that kind of qualitative change. More precisely, we say that a green apple has the potency to become a red apple, or that a green apple is in potency (*in potentia*) with respect to a red apple (73).

The apple is now in act with respect to greenness, and in potency with respect to redness. And the privation of the green apple is redness, for that is precisely what it lacks, and toward which the change will be directed. We say the change is the actualization of a potency because what is happening in change is the realization, the bringing into actual being, of a specific capacity in a thing that has that capacity. In this case it would be a green apple, capable of becoming a red apple, actually becoming a red apple (73).

Contingent being is changing being, for better or worse (74).

Whatever Is Moved Is Moved By Another

Here movement is to be understood as referring to any change whatever. ...No thing that changes can, of itself, account for the change that it is undergoing. ...This principle is not immediately self-evident (74).

Consider now the case of Dorothea, whom we observe sitting in a chair in her room, reading. We observe her put her book aside, rise from the chair, and walk across the room to the window. What we

observed was this physical thing, a human body, move from one place to another. It was a body that moved, but it was moved by something other than itself. We can confidently say that what moved Dorothea's body was Dorothea's will, a faculty of her rational soul (74).

The Principle of Causality

St. Thomas: "A cause is that upon which a thing depends either for its very existence or for any changes it may undergo as an existent." (qtd. p.77).

Contingent being is being that cannot account for its own existence.

Necessary being is the efficient cause of contingent being in the most radical of ways, for it calls contingent being into existence out of nothing. ...Before contingent being exists there is nothing. In order for contingent being to cause itself, it would have to precede itself, but because nothing precedes the existence of contingent being, the purported cause of something would be nothing. But from nothing you get nothing (*Ex nihilo nihil fit.*) (p. 78)

The Impossibility of an Infinite Series of Causes

Turning the crank of a hand generator (A) activates an electric motor (B) which activates a mechanism © which causes a little flag to wave back and forth (D). As soon as one stops turning the crank, the motor and mechanism stop, and the little flag no longer waves. A series of accidentally subordinated causes, A, B, C, D, is one in which simultaneous causal activity by all the causes in the series is not necessary. All that A, the first in the series, has to do is initiate causal activity, and its initiating action will continue down the series of subordinate causes even though it no longer acts (80).

...in our series C can cause D only because, here and now, it is being caused by B; and the same is to be said of B in relation to A, which must be, we will say, a cause which causes other causes, but which is itself uncaused. In other words, A is not an effect as well as a cause; we might call it pure cause (81).

Think of great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, daughter. The daughter exists because at one time in the past her great-grandmother exercised the causal activity which is human generation. The daughter could get married and herself now exercise that kind of causal activity, but obviously her great-grandmother, who has long since gone to her reward, would not have to be herself exercising that activity in order for her great-granddaughter to be able to exercise it. This then, is a series of accidentally subordinated causes. The question is, would it be possible that such a series might be infinite? In other words, could there be, antecedent to the great-grandmother cited above, a series of mother that just went on and on and had no beginning? (82).

To posit an infinite succession backward is tantamount to holding that succession proceeds from nowhere, but if the succession proceeds from nowhere, then there simply is no succession (83).

The Five Ways of St. Thomas Aquinas

The First Way: The Argument from Motion [ST I, q. 2, art. 3]

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 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 potentiality to actuality. 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 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.

The Second Way: The Argument from Efficient Causality [ST I, q. 2, art. 3]

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 Third Way: The Argument from Contingent Being [ST I, q. 2, art. 3]

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 Fourth Way: The Argument from Degrees of Being [ST I, q. 2, art. 3]

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 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.

Commentary on the Fourth Way:

We look about us in the world and we see a multiplicity of being, and in comparing these beings with one another we immediately see that they are distinguishable in terms of "more" and "less" - more or less this, that, or the other thing, depending on the point of view from which we are assessing them. When we reflect on this very common and ordinary way of responding to our world, we further see that the only reason we can make such comparisons is because in doing so we are, implicitly or explicitly, making reference to a "most." ...The maximum can be said to cause the comparative judgments we make, because such judgments would not be possible without the maximum (III).

Now, let us think in terms of sheer existence, of being as opposed to non-being. We note, when we consider existence in this most basic of ways, that some beings can rightly be called understanding being in the most basic sense. higher beings than others, A single cell bacterium is not less an existent than is a bald eagle, but they do not exist on the same level; the bald eagle represents a higher level of being than does the bacterium. We say he has more being than the bacterium. So, there are degrees of being. (III)

We conclude that there must necessarily exist a being that is the highest of all beings, for it would be incoherent to claim that there are degrees of being, and yet deny the existence of a highest degree.

The Fifth Way: The Argument from Finality [ST I, q. 2, art. 3]

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.

Commentary on the Fifth Way:

The basic assumption with which the argument begins is that intelligence is to be found everywhere in nature, even where perhaps we would least expect to find it, in the activity of inanimate matter. Human beings clearly have intelligence, and the higher animals have something analogous to intelligence. However, we would not be inclined to say that inanimate matter has intelligence. But if it can be shown that even

inanimate matter acts intelligently, then we are forced to seek an explanation for that intelligent behavior apart from the inanimate matter itself (114).

Empirical science can predict the future state or behavior of inanimate things precisely because, under certain conditions, those things will always act for the sake of a specific end that can be known beforehand (115).

The intelligent behavior of inanimate bodies cannot be explained in terms of those bodies themselves, for the simple reason that they lack intelligence. The source of the intelligent behavior of those bodies is then external to them (116).