

PROBLEMS WITH AQUINAS' THIRD WAY

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1. Introduction

Of Thomas Aquinas' five proofs of the existence of God, the Third Way is a cosmological argument of a specific type sometimes referred to as an *argument from contingency*. The Aristotelian argument for the existence of the First Unmoved Mover was based on the observation that there is change (or motion), coupled with the principle that nothing changes unless its specific potential to change is actualized by an actual change undergone by some other thing. It then arrives at the conclusion that there exists something in a constant state of pure activity, which is not itself moved but sets everything else in motion. The operative sense of contingency this argument turns on, then, is that of motion. That is, things have the potential to change in certain ways (depending on the kind of things they are), but may or may not do so; whether they actually do being contingent on whether they are acted on in the right way by something else. For this reason, Aristotle's argument delivers a first mover, which brings about the motion in all that exists, but not a being that brings about the very existence of everything else.

The argument referred to specifically as the argument from contingency, by contrast, turns on the idea of the contingency of the very existence of anything at all. That is, if something exists which may not have existed, and the fact that it does exist rather than not is contingent on the action of other existing things which are themselves contingent, then the existence of the whole lot of contingent things, taken together, is also contingent. From this, the argument ultimately concludes that there is a necessary existent—something that exists, for which it is not the case that it might not have existed, and the existence of which does not therefore depend on any other existing things, but on which the existence of all other things depends.

The object of this chapter is not, however, arguments from contingency in general, but specifically Aquinas' Third Way as it appears in his *Summa*. I will raise three objections to this argument. First, the argument depends on the premise that if everything were contingent, then there would have been a time during which nothing exists; but this is not self-evident, and no argument is given for it here. Secondly, Aquinas tells us that a key premise in this argument, that an infinite order of things necessary through one another is impossible, has been proven just previously (in the Second Way) with respect to an infinite order of efficient causes. But this argument fallaciously

equivocates between two different senses of the term first, and the fallacy does not disappear when applied to the Third Way. Thus, in this argument Aquinas not only fails to prove the existence of a thing necessary in itself, but he also fails to prove that anything is necessary at all. Lastly, this argument suffers from a puzzling ambiguity as to the meaning of the term necessity, and either way of interpreting the term consistently in the argument raises difficulties.

Aquinas' Third Way in the *Summa* at I.2.3 is as follows:

We find some things that are possible both of existing and not existing since some things are found to be generated and corrupted, and therefore to be possible both of existing and of not existing. But it is impossible for everything of this kind to exist always since what is possible of not existing at some time does not exist. Therefore, if all things were capable of not existing, at some time no thing would exist. But if this were true, even now nothing would exist since what does not exist does not begin to exist except through something else which exists; so that if no being existed, it would be impossible for anything to begin to exist, and thus nothing would now exist, which is plainly false. Therefore, not all beings are contingent or possible; there must exist some thing which is necessary. But every necessary being either has a cause of its necessity from elsewhere, or it does not. But it is not possible to proceed ad infinitum in necessary beings which have a cause of their necessity, just as this was not possible in efficient causes, as was proved [in the Second Way]. Therefore, it is necessary to posit something which is necessary through itself, not having the cause of its necessity from elsewhere, but is the cause of necessity to other things, which is what everyone calls "God."

The argument breaks down as follows:

- (1) Some things are found to be generated and corrupted.
- (2) Anything that is generated and corrupted is possible both of existing and not existing (implicit).
- (3) Therefore, there are things that are possible of both existing and not existing (1 and 2).

I have inserted here, as the implicit premise (2), what is minimally necessary to take us from (1) to (3). But this leaves open the question as to whether we are also to understand here that anything that is possible both of existing and not existing is generated and corrupted so that, essentially, the contingent just is the generated and corrupted; or whether the category of the contingent might include that which is not generated and corrupted. That is, can there be something that is everlasting, without beginning or end, and yet is such that it might not have existed? From the next premise, it appears not.