Aquinas's Third Way

Brian Davies OP

The study of arguments for God's existence is much more in vogue in English speaking philosophical circles than it was when Fergus Kerr entered the Order of Preachers. In what follows I make no attempt to defend the general project of arguing for the existence of God. Instead, I aim briefly to defend an argument of Thomas Aquinas which is still commonly rejected even by authors who are usually counted among his supporters. This argument is most frequently referred to as the third of his 'Five Ways' (to be found in *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 2,3).[1] My suggestion in what follows is that, when properly understood, Aquinas's Third Way is a good defence of the claim that God exists.

What is the Third Way Arguing?

Here is what I take to be an accurate English translation of the Third Way:

> The third way is based on what need not be and on what must be, and runs as follows. Some of the things we come across can be but need not be, for we find them being generated and destroyed, thus sometimes in being and sometimes not. Now everything cannot be like this, for a thing that need not be was once not; and if everything need not be, once upon a time there was nothing. But if that were true there would be nothing even now, because something that does not exist can only begin to exist through something that already exists. If nothing was in being nothing could begin to be, and nothing would be in being now, which is clearly false. Not everything then is the sort of thing that need not be; some things must be and these may or may not owe this necessity to something else. But just as we proved that a series of agent [efficient] causes can't go on for ever, so also a series of things which must be and owe this to other things. So we are forced to postulate something which of itself must be, owing this to nothing outside itself, but being itself the cause that other things must be. And this is what everyone calls God.[2]

There are some textual problems when it comes to available Latin versions of the Way. Some manuscripts containing it omit 'And this is what everyone calls God' (*quod omnes dicunt Deum).* Some have 'Now nothing of this sort can exist for ever' (*Impossibile est autem omnia quae sunt talia semper esse*) instead of 'cannot be like this' (*Impossible est autem omnia quae sunt talia esse*). As far as I can gather, we have no reason to expect a definitive scholarly resolution to these textual matters in the foreseeable future. So I am assuming that the translation given

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above accurately represents what Aquinas wrote in framing his Third Way. Yet what is he arguing in it?

(a) What Need Not Be and What Must Be

He starts by referring to 'what need not be' and to 'what must be' (he writes *Tertia via est sumpta ex possibili et necessario*, which we might most literally render as 'The Third Way is based on the possible and the necessary'). But what does Aquinas have in mind when speaking like this?

Some interpreters have taken him to be thinking along lines to be found in the writings of Gottfried Leibniz (1640-1716). According to him (and to others), one can distinguish between necessary truths and contingent truths. A necessary truth is one whose negation is a logical impossibility. A contingent truth is one which can be consistently denied. 'A truth is necessary', says Leibniz,

> when the opposite implies a contradiction; and when it is not necessary, it is called contingent. That God exists, that all right angles are equal to each other, are necessary truths; but it is a contingent truth that I exist, or that there are bodies which shown an actual right angle.[4]

On Leibniz's account, to say 'God does not exist' is (demonstrably) an attempt to state a logical impossibility. And the distinction between necessary beings and contingent beings is a distinction between (a) things which (demonstrably) cannot be thought not to be without logical absurdity, and (b) things which can be thought not to be without logical absurdity. Not surprisingly, therefore, in speaking of God's existence Leibniz ends up saying that it is not the case that God just *happens* to exist. He holds that we must affirm God's existence on pain of contradiction.[5] And that is what Aquinas has sometimes been taken to be arguing in his Third Way. Hence, for example, according to Ronald Hepburn:

> St. Thomas' Third Way - the argument about 'might-not-have-beens' - uses ... the concepts of 'contingency' and 'necessity'. The contingent is what happens to exist, but need not have existed: necessary being is being that *has* to exist, that cannot *not* exist ... We could rephrase the argument in this way: 'The proposition "God exists" is necessary'. That is, it would be contradictory to deny God's existence.[6]

Yet Aquinas regularly denies that the existence of God is provable on the ground that 'God does not exist' is demonstrably contradictory.[7] And, so we may now note, the start of the Third Way has nothing to do with a distinction between our ability to distinguish between (a) what might be said not to exist without contradiction, and (b) with what cannot be said not to exist without contradiction. Aquinas is not invoking this distinction when he alludes to 'what need not be and what must be' (or

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'the possible' and 'the necessary'). Instead, he is concerned with a distinction which he asserts to be obvious on the basis of observation — one between what is generated and perishable (on the one hand) and (on the other) what is not generated and perishable. *Possibilia,* for Aquinas, are beings *possibilia esse et non esse* (i.e. 'able to be or not to be'). And beings *possibilia esse et non esse* are, for him, *generabilia et corruptibilia* ('generable and perishable'). In Aquinas's scheme of things, a 'possible' (able to be or not to be) being is something in the world (something in principle observable) which has a parent or parents (a producer or producers) of some sort. So you and I, my parrot, and the roses in my garden are, in Aquinas's terms, 'possible' beings (things able to be or not to be).[8] And 'possible' beings are also, for Aquinas, things in the world which can *perish* — in the ordinary, everyday sense of 'perish' which we use when we speak of things around us dying or being destroyed. I can perish because I can become a victim of cancer. You can perish because you can be knocked down by a bus. My parrot will certainly perish if I stop feeding it. And my roses will perish if I stop watering them. On these counts too, I, you, my parrot, and my roses are, for Aquinas, beings *possibilia esse et non esse.* They are things which come to be by virtue of something else. They are also things which might cease to be as nature has its way. They are parts of a world in which things come to be and pass away (our world).[9]

With respect to interpretations of Aquinas such as that of Hepburn, we also need to note something else. This is that Aquinas never speaks of God as being *the only* necessary being. In the thinking of philosophers such as Leibniz, God is just that. He is the *one and only* necessary being — for he is the one and only thing of which it is demonstrably contradictory to deny that it exists. But, as I have noted, Aquinas does not think that 'God does not exist' can be shown to be logically contradictory. And he says that there are *many* necessary things. He thought that the heavenly bodies are ungenerated and incorruptible. So the heavenly bodies are, for him, *necessary* things. He thought that, while human beings are generable and perishable, the same cannot be said of their human souls. So human souls are, for him, *necessary* things, as, in his view, are angels. According to Aquinas's way of thinking, angels cannot be generated because they are incorporeal. They can only be created from nothing (*ex nihilo*). Since they are incorporeal, they cannot perish either (they can only, so to speak, be 'de-created' by God). The generation and perishing of things is always, for Aquinas, an instance of what he calls 'substantial change'. And substantial change, for Aquinas, can only occur in the physical world. It always involves there being something material there after something material has ceased to be (as, for example, when a cow becomes beef or a human being has turned into a corpse).[10]

(b) Now Everything Cannot Be Like This

As it begins, then, the Third Way is concerned to note that there are things in the world which come into being and perish. And Aquinas takes it as obvious that there are such things. Having asserted that this is the case, however, he has a question to raise. Is everything such that it is able to be and not to be? Is everything like you, me, my parrot, or the roses in my garden? Aquinas's answer to this question is 'No'.

Why? Because, so he argues:

> (i) what is able to be and not to be, once was not (*quandoque non est* — which might equally well be translated as 'sometime is not');
> (ii) if everything were able to be and not to be, once upon a time there was nothing (*nihil fuit in rebus*);
> (iii) if that were true there would be nothing even now, because something that does not exist can only begin to exist through something that already exists.

But what does Aquinas mean in saying this?

Many of his readers have taken him to be arguing that, if everything is perishable, everything would have perished by now. This understanding of Aquinas presumes him to be supposing that the world never began to be (that it is backwardly infinite). It then reads him as arguing that, given that the world never began to be, it must have ceased to be before now if everything is 'able to be or not to be'. Readers of Aquinas who interpret him along these lines take him to be holding that, if the world has existed from infinity, perishable things in it would have perished before now. On their account, therefore, Aquinas is saying: (a) if everything is such that it will perish at some time, then there must already have been a time at which everything perished, (b) since there are now things, and since something cannot come from nothing, it cannot be true that everything is such that it will perish at some time.

But is this really what Aquinas is arguing in his Third Way?[11] Those who want to give an affirmative answer to this question might reason as follows:

1. Aquinas did not believe that philosophy can show that the world began to be.[12] So the Third Way possibly assumes that the world never began to be (i.e. that its history is backwardly infinite).
2. There are texts with which Aquinas was familiar which argue that, if everything is perishable, then everything would have perished by now. An example can be found in Maimonides's *The Guide of the Perplexed*, where we find Maimonides (1135–1204) arguing:

> There is no doubt that there are existent things. These are the existent things that are apprehended by the senses. Now there are only three possible alternatives, this being a necessary division: namely, either no existents are subject to generation and corruption, or all of them are

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> subject to generation and corruption, or some of them are subject to generation and corruption whereas others are not. Now the first alternative is clearly absurd, for we perceive many existents that are subject to generation and corruption. The second alternative is likewise absurd, the explanation of this being as follows: if every existent falls under generation and corruption, then all the existents and every one of them have a possibility of undergoing corruption. Now it is indubitable, as you know, that what is possible with regard to a species must necessarily come about. Thus it follows necessarily that they, I mean all existents, will necessarily undergo corruption. Now if all of them have undergone corruption, it would be impossible that anything exists, for there would remain no one who would bring anything into existence. Hence it follows necessarily that there would be no existent thing at all. Now we perceive things that are existent. In fact we ourselves are existent. Hence it follows necessarily, according to this speculation that if there are, as we perceive, existents subject to generation and corruption, there must be a certain existent that is not subject to generation and corruption.[13]

There can be no doubt that Maimonides is here offering an argument which looks very similar to part of Aquinas's Third Way. And it is as sure as anything that Aquinas knew of this argument. One might therefore suggest that his Third Way is effectively repeating it, and that it is, indeed, arguing that perishable things must perish at some time, so that it cannot be that everything is perishable.

3. Aquinas endorses the notion that something perishable will perish at some time. He does so in his commentary on Aristotle's *De Caelo*, where he defends *De Caelo* I,12 by saying that *omne corruptibile quandoque corrumpetur* ('everything perishable will perish at some time').[14] Then again, at *Summa Theologiae* Ia,48,2, he asserts that the perfection of the universe requires that there should be both perishable and imperishable things in it, and that the perfection of the universe requires that 'there should be some which can fail in goodness [from which] it follows that sometimes they do fail'. So Aquinas's Third Way invokes the notion of everything perishable perishing.

But these three arguments are answerable for the following reasons:

1. Aquinas consistently held that we cannot prove that the universe is either backwardly finite or infinite.[15] So we might reasonably suppose that in his Third Way he is not assuming that the history of the world is backwardly infinite.

2. Even though Aquinas agreed that it cannot be proved that the world began to be, he could still have constructed an argument to the effect that not everything can be able to be or not to be. A thing able to be or not to be is, for him, always something which depends in some way for its being

there on something else. But does everything depend in some way for its being there on something else? Aquinas certainly did not think so. In his view, God depends in no way for his existence on anything. And he thought that this is the case whether or not the world had a beginning.

3. Aristotle's views in the *De Caelo* are not cited in the Third Way. Neither is the argument of Maimonides. And, even if Aquinas thought that the perishable will perish, he does not state this explicitly in the Third Way (as Maimonides clearly does in his argument). As I have noted, Aquinas must have been familiar with Maimonides's text. So, perhaps, the differences between it and the Third Way should be thought of as telling us something about the nature of the Third Way's argument — chiefly, that Aquinas did not intend the Third Way as asking us to believe that perishable things must perish.

4. The Third Way does not invoke the notion of the world being backwardly infinite, and it would be surprising if it did so since: (a) Aquinas did not believe that the world is backwardly infinite (because his reading of the book of *Genesis* led him to believe that the world began to be, though he did not think of this as a conclusion which could be defended by means of philosophical argument); (b) Aquinas offers the Third Way as a demonstration (*demonstratio*) of the conclusion 'God exists' and since all that he says in various texts about what a demonstration amounts to makes it perfectly clear that he could never have used, as part of an attempted demonstration, a premise which he believed to be *false*. In the Third Way Aquinas says, quite simply, that 'a thing that need not be once was not; and if everything need not be, once upon a time there was nothing'. Given what Aquinas means by 'a thing that need not be', the most natural way of reading him here is as saying that: (1) things which are generated come to be having not existed before they came to be, and (2) if everything is generated, then there would be nothing now. In other words, at the start of the Third Way Aquinas is most plausibly read as arguing that not everything can be something generated — that not everything can be such that its coming to be depends on something else which accounts for this.

5. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas offers an argument which, like that of the Third Way, starts with the fact that there are things which are able to be or not be. Here he says:

> We find in the world certain beings, those namely that are subject to generation and corruption, which can be and not-be. But what can be has a cause because, since it is equally related to two contraries, namely, being and non-being, it must be owing to some cause that being accrues to it. Now, as we have proved by the reasoning of Aristotle, one cannot proceed to infinity among causes.[16]

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Aquinas is not here asserting that things which are able to be or not to be must perish at some time. He is claiming that there cannot be an endless series of causes of something able to be and not to be. Given that this *Summa Contra Gentiles* argument exists to suggest what Aquinas deems to be implied by there being things which are able to be or not to be, one might argue that it should strongly affect our reading of the Third Way, especially if we bear in mind that the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was written before the *Summa Theologiae*. Some readers of the Third Way have felt that its first part does not involve reasoning to do with causal dependence, as does the *Contra Gentiles* argument. But, given the *Contra Gentiles* argument (surely a useful indication of Aquinas's thinking on what needs to be said about things able to be or not to be), the most natural assumption is that the first part of the Third Way is indeed employing causal reasoning.[17] And it is, perhaps, worth mentioning that causal reasoning seems clearly at work in yet another passage from Aquinas which bears strong resemblance to the Third Way. Here I refer to chapter 6 of the *Compendium of Theology* (*Compendium Theologiae*), written almost at the end of Aquinas's life, where we read:

> Everything that has a possibility of being and of not being needs something else to make it to be, for as far as it itself is concerned, it is indifferent with regard to either alternative. But that which causes another thing to be is prior to that thing. Hence something exists prior to that which has the possibility of being and of not being. However, nothing is prior to God. Therefore it is impossible for Him to be and not to be; of necessity He must be. And since there are some necessary things which have a cause of their necessity, a cause that must be prior to them, God, who is first of all, has no cause of His own necessity. Therefore it is necessary for God to be through Himself.[18]

As with the case of the extract from the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, we surely have here a text which we should draw on as we try to make sense of the Third Way.

6. 'Posible not to be' in the Third Way is meant to signify a contrast with 'necessary'. It does not only mean 'perishable'. It also means 'generated/generable'. So, when Aquinas says that 'everything able not to be' at one time or other is not (*quandoque non est*), he does not obviously mean that everything able not to be is such that it will cease to be because it perishes.

7. If in the Third Way Aquinas had wanted to focus on the notion of possible beings perishing, he could have said that, of anything able to be or not be, it is true that 'quandoque non erit' ('it *will not be* at some time'). But he does not do this. He uses language which seems to be tensed. His Latin includes the words *aliquando*, *quando*, and *fuit*. But all of these words can be very naturally translated without making Aquinas coming

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out as arguing other than I am here taking him to be arguing. Take, for example, the phrase *nihil fuit in rebus*. Given the way in which Aquinas builds up to this phrase, it is quite in order to translate it into English as: 'there would have been nothing'.

8. At the point in his Commentary on the *De Caelo* where Aquinas seems to endorse what Aristotle says, he uses the future tense (*corrumpetur*). He says that something perishable *will* perish. In the Third Way, however, he says that anything able to be or not to be *quandoque non est* (at one time or another is not). This observation may be read as saying nothing more than that things able to be or not to be are not always in existence — which would be just as true of them if they come into being as it would if they perish.

9. We may wonder whether Aquinas could ever have wanted to say (a) that there could take place a total perishing of *everything* that is perishable, and (b) that, if this were to happen there would be *nothing*. According to Aquinas, perishing occurs as something new comes about from something (perishable) already there. Quite generally, perishing, for Aquinas, is the occurrence of substantial change (which, for Aquinas, presupposes matter — not, for him, something able to perish). To use the example I gave above, it is what we have when a cow is slaughtered and turns into beef.[19] So the disappearance at some time of all that is perishable would not, according to Aquinas on perishing in general, entail the disappearance of *everything* perishable. And the fact that any given perishable thing has perished would not entail that there is *nothing*. Aquinas certainly believed that every created thing (including what he called 'matter') can be *annihilated* by God (as simply ceasing to sustain its existence, whereupon it would fall into nothing). He thought that God can make every creature cease to be (just as he makes every creature continue to be). But for God to do this would not, for Aquinas, be a case of God bringing it about that something has *perished*. It would be a case of God bringing it about that something has simply ceased to exist. Aquinas certainly thinks that when, say, a cow is slaughtered, it ceases to exist. But, quite generally, this means for him that what is actually a cow has ceased to exist because its matter has taken on a new form. According to Aquinas's way of thinking, perishing is not a case of *nothing* coming about. It is always a case of *something else* coming about.

10. If we look closely at the text of the Third Way, we do not find anything in it which forces us to read it as telling us that perishable things would have perished before now so that, if everything is a perishable thing, it would follow that there would now be nothing. What we find is:

> Some of the things we come across can be but need not be, for we find them being generated and destroyed, thus sometimes in being and

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> sometimes not. Now everything cannot be like this, for a thing that need not be was once not; and if everything need not be, once upon a time there was nothing. But if that were true there would be nothing even now, because something that does not exist can only begin to exist through something that already exists.

As far as I can see, and bearing in mind what I have noted above, Aquinas, in his Third Way, can be read as arguing that not everything can be able to be and not to be because (i) all such things depend on something for their being there and (ii) without something not merely able to be and not to be there would be nothing at all. In the Third Way, so we may suggest, what Aquinas finds unbelievable is that everything is generated. He may be read as asking 'How can everything be such that its coming into being depends on something else which has brought it about?'. Some have interpreted the Third Way as saying that, if everything is able to be or not to be, then everything began to be, from which it follows that there must once have been a time when there was nothing. But we are certainly not forced to accept this reading.[20] As I have noted, Aquinas argues that it cannot be proved that the world began to be. So it would be extremely odd if, in the Third Way, he is arguing for a *temporal* beginning of things from nothing. Also, it seems patently false that, if everything began to be, there must have been a time when there was *nothing*. An infinitely backward series of things coming into being might contain members which overlap with each other so that there is no time in the past at which there is nothing. And we might charitably give Aquinas credit for having been aware of this (it is, in fact, a view which he explicitly attributes to Aristotle and to the Latin Averroists). We might suppose that he could have been intelligent enough to have acknowledged that, though everything began to be, it does not follow that there was a time before everything began to be. In any case, Aquinas did accept that an infinitely backward series of things coming into being might contain members which overlap with each other so that there is no time in the past at which there is nothing. Hence, for example, in one place he writes:

> It is not impossible to proceed to infinity *accidentally* as regards efficient causes; for instance, if all the causes thus infinitely multiplied should have the order of only one cause, while their multiplication is accidental: e.g. as an artificer acts by means of many hammers accidentally, because one after the other is broken. It is accidental, therefore, that one particular hammer should act after the action of another, and it is likewise accidental to this particular man as generator to be generated by another man; for he generates as a man, and not as the son of another man. For all men generating hold one grade in the order of efficient causes — *viz.*, the grade of a particular generator. Hence it is not impossible for a man to be generated by man to infinity.[21]

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(c) Things Which Must Be

At this point we may move on to note what else Aquinas has to say in the Third Way. And the first thing to observe is that, having argued that not everything is able to be or not to be, he continues by wondering about what can be said of what is not able to be or not to be (i.e. of what is 'necessary').

To start with, he says that something not able to be or not to be 'either has its necessity caused by another, or it has not'. One might understandably take this assertion as supposing that necessity is a property which a thing might acquire by virtue of what it does, or by virtue of what something else does. But Aquinas can hardly be thinking along these lines. As we have seen, a 'necessary' being is, for him, something which is not able to be or not to be. So the 'necessity' of a necessary being cannot, for him, be a property which it might acquire (if it were there to acquire it, it would not be a necessary being). For Aquinas, necessity (in a being) is not a property which something might come to have, whether by its own agency or by that of something else. So, in saying that a necessary being 'either has its necessity caused by another, or it has not', he has to be maintaining that any necessary being must either exist as what it is independently of something else, or that it must exist as what it is because something else accounts for it existing as what it is. In other words, he is evidently envisaging two possibilities: (1) a necessary being might owe its existence to something else; (2) a necessary being might owe its existence to nothing else.

How might a necessary being owe its existence to something else? On Aquinas's account, a necessary being is not the result of a substantial change. It is not generated. It does not come to be from something identifiable in the world and existing before it (something able to turn into it). If it owes its existence to something else, therefore, a necessary being, on Aquinas's account, depends for its being on something which causes it to be without there occurring a change. Or, to put it another way, its existence is not something that comes to be in the context of a world of change. And, if its existence is caused by something else, the something else in question causes it to be just as it is without effecting a change.

For Aquinas, then, a necessary being owing its existence to something else exists because its being there as the thing it is depends on something else which directly causes it to be there as the thing it is. It does not have ancestors or things which turned into it. It has not come to be from anything. According to Aquinas, if the existence of a necessary thing is caused, it has nothing accounting for its existence except its cause — and the cause here will be nothing pre-existing it and bringing it to birth, and nothing pre-existing out of which it comes.

At this point it will help us in understanding Aquinas if we consider what he says on the topic of creation. There are many texts which we

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could look at, but let us here focus on *Summa Theologiae* Ia,44,1, where Aquinas asks whether God is the efficient cause of all things (*utrum Deus sit causa efficiens omnium entium*). And let us note that, though Aquinas here concludes that God is the efficient cause of all things, he introduces an objection to his conclusion which turns on the notion of necessary beings.

Here is the objection:

> A thing requires an efficient cause in order to be. Hence that which cannot but exist does not require one. Now no necessary thing is able not to be, for what has to be cannot fail to be. Since there are many necessary things in reality, all beings are not from God.

And here is Aquinas's reply:

> There are some objects which have a cause for their necessity. The reason why an efficient cause is required is not just because the effect is such that it may or may not exist, but because it would not exist did its cause not exist.

What we need to concentrate on at the moment is the last sentence of this last quotation: 'The reason why an efficient cause is required is not just because the effect is such that it may or may not exist, but because it would not exist did its cause not exist'.

Aquinas is here accepting that there might be necessary beings, i.e. things which do not come to be because something in the world produces them or turns into them. But he still thinks it worth asking why there is any given necessary being. He wants to say that, though something might be a necessary being, we might still ask why it exists. Or, to put it another way, he thinks that we ought to be struck by the thought that it is potentially not existing.

Aquinas thinks that something can be potential in various ways. He thinks, for example, that a cow, though actually in the field, might be potentially in the barn. He also thinks that someone, though actually fat, might be potentially thin, and that someone actually pale might be potentially tanned. Aquinas's account of *motus* (change), on which the first of his Five Ways turns, has the notion of potentiality right at its centre. But, though Aquinas says nothing of this in his First Way, he also has a notion of potentiality which is more than a notion of things being able to be otherwise than they are with respect to place, quantity, or quality.

Consider the case of James. He is actually (as a matter of fact) in his room, but potentially (he could be) at the top of the Empire State Building. He is actually thin, but potentially fat. He is actually pale, but potentially tanned. Also, alas, he is actually a human being, but potentially a corpse.

So James can be modified. And he can also perish. But in being like this he has not, Aquinas thinks, exhausted the depths of his potentiality.

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For, according to Aquinas, James might not exist at all (is potentially non-existent). According to Aquinas, something which exists might be thought of as potentially not existing not just because it might not have been generated or might be subject to perishing. According to Aquinas, James, though generated and mortal, is also potential in another sense. For there might never have been a world in which James was conceived as a mortal (perishable) individual. There might have been no world at all and, therefore, no James.

In this sense, so Aquinas thinks, James is potentially non-existent. And it is this way of thinking that Aquinas has in mind in saying, as quoted above, that 'The reason why an efficient cause is required is not just because the effect is such that it may or may not exist, but because it would not exist did its cause not exist'. He means (a) that there might be something not able to be or not to be (something ungenerable and corruptible) and (b) that we might still wonder how it comes to exist at all.[22]

And that, so we now need to note, is the thinking at work at the stage we have now reached in our reading of the Third Way. In saying that something not able to be or not to be 'either has its necessity caused by another, or it has not', Aquinas means that we may wonder 'How come?' with respect to something which is not able to be or not to be. He is saying that, even if something or other is ungenerable or imperishable, it is still something which exists. So how come it exists?

According to the text of the Third Way (and as we find Aquinas saying elsewhere), there are two possible answers to this question: (1) something not able to be or not to be might exist because it is something which does so by nature; (2) something not able to be or not to be might exist because something else accounts for its existing. This is the sense of the Third Way's statement: 'Now a thing which must be either has its necessity caused by another, or it has not'. According to Aquinas, a thing which must be exists either as derived or as underived.

The conclusion of the Third Way is that there is something which (a) must be and (b) exists underived. But this conclusion does not follow from the fact (if it is a fact) that a thing which must be exists either as derived or as underived. We need to rule out the possibility that everything which must be is derived. And Aquinas is clearly aware of this point as he works towards his conclusion in the Third Way. For, having argued that a thing which must be exists either as derived or as underived, he goes on to argue that not everything which must be can be derived. For, so he says:

> just as we proved that a series of agent causes can't go on for ever, so also a series of things which must be and owe this to other things. So we are forced to postulate something which of itself must be, owing this to nothing outside itself, but being itself the cause that other things must be.

In other words, according to Aquinas, if everything not able to be or not

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to be depends on something causing it to be (something which is a precondition of it being since it would not be if it were not for that thing), then there will be nothing not able to be or not to be.

And Does the Argument Work?

I think it works very well. Given what I have argued above, it can be stated as follows:

1. We see that there are things which come about by generation and which perish.
2. Not everything can be like this since if everything were like this there would be nothing now (since things which come about by generation, and which perish, are only there by virtue of something else).
3. So there is something which exists and does not come to be by generation and which is not perishable.
4. But of any such thing we can ask how it comes to exist.
5. The answer to this question can only lie in something which exists of itself and is the cause of all things other than it which are neither generated or perishable.

How can we fault this argument?

One may reject (1) while in the grip of a philosophical theory according to which we can know nothing, a theory which no philosophers believe in as they go about their daily business and plan for their retirement. Most people would find (1) to be obviously true, as it surely is (and if it is not, then what do we know about anything?).

And (2) is evidently true: if *absolutely everything* depends for its existence on something else, then there would not be anything. If absolutely everything would not be there but for the activity of something else, then nothing would be there since everything would then depend for its being there on something and since the something in question would be part of what we mean when we speak of *absolutely everything*.

Yet what about (4)? In the text of the Third Way Aquinas works up to it by means of a tautology. He says: 'Not everything then is the sort that need not be; some things must be, and these may or may not owe this necessity to something else'. The tautology, of course, lies in the words 'these may or may not owe this necessity to something else', and I presume that one cannot dispute it. In that case, however, Aquinas is now already home and dry with respect to the Third Way. For if X (a necessary being) owes its necessity to nothing (if nothing accounts for it existing), then there is something which is necessary and which owes its necessity (its being there as something not able to be or not to be) to nothing. And if X owes it necessity to something else (if the existence of X derives from something other than it), then there is something which is both necessary

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and which owes its necessity to nothing — unless we can make sense of there being an infinite series of causes for there being anything at all, which arguably we cannot.[23] Interestingly (to me anyway), this argument seems very close to one offered by Duns Scotus, who (to my mind cogently) reasons: 'Some being is an effect because it is produced. Now either nothing produces it, or it produces itself, or it is produced by another. It is not produced by nothing, for nothing is the cause of nothing. Neither does it produce itself, for ... 'nothing begets itself'. Therefore it is produced by another — and so the process would continue indefinitely. Consequently, one must stop with something that is not produced but that produces by its own power and not in virtue of any other; and this I call the first'.[24]

One might wonder whether 'the first' should be identified with God. Or, to stick with Aquinas's language, one might wonder whether 'something which must be, owing this to nothing outside itself, but being itself the cause that other things must be' is rightly to be thought of as divine. The answer, of course, is: 'It all depends on what you want 'divine' to mean'. Critics of Aquinas frequently object to his arguments for God's existence (especially as given in his Five Ways) since, so they think, the arguments do not show that God exists with all the attributes commonly ascribed to him in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Yet in texts such as *Summa Theologiae* Ia,2 (in which we find the Third Way) Aquinas is not out to show that there is something which is all that Jews and Christians commonly think of as God. He attempts to do this only in texts such as *Summa Theologiae* Ia,3-49. In the Third Way (and following what he has said in *Summa Theologiae* Ia,2 concerning the general project of arguing for God's existence) he is assuming *nothing* about the divine nature and is simply taking it for granted that the word 'God' can be agreed to signify 'something which must be, owing this to nothing outside itself'. Is he right to do so? I would suggest that he is. Whatever else those who believe in God want to say about divinity, they would (at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition) surely agree that God is 'something which must be, owing this to nothing outside itself'. They might want to say a lot more about God. But they would surely want to say at least this.[25]

1 For a rejection of the Third Way coming from someone almost entirely critical of Aquinas on the topic of arguments for God's existence, see Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways* (London, 1969), Ch. IV. According to Kenny, Aquinas's Third Way is vitiated by an elementary logical fallacy, by some incredible views about perishing, and by a failure to prove the existence of God as opposed to something else. For a rejection of the Third Way coming from a well known admirer of Aquinas, see John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C., 2000), Ch. XII. According to Wippel, Aquinas's argument has virtues. Like Kenny, however, Wippel concludes that it is logically flawed.

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2 This is the translation of the Third Way offered by Timothy McDermott in *Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Oxford and New York, 1993), p.201. I see no reason to quarrel with it, though I prefer 'efficient causes' to McDermott's 'agent causes' (the Latin is *causis efficientibus*), as I indicate in the parenthesis to be found in my quotation from McDermott's translation. In the sentence beginning 'But just as we proved ...' Aquinas is referring back to the second of his Five Ways.

3 For some discussion of the Latin text of the Third Way, see Fernand Van Steenberghen, *Le Problème de l'Existence de Dieu dans les Écrits de S. Thomas D'Aquin* (Louvain La Neuve, 1980), pp. 188 f.

4 Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, ed. C.I. Gerhardt, 7 vols, (Berlin, 1857-90), Vol.III, p.400.

5 For an account of Leibniz on God's existence, see William Lane Craig, *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz* (London, 1980), Chapter 8. Those interested in detailed discussion of Leibniz on necessary and contingent being might consult Benson Mates, *The Philosophy of Leibniz* (Oxford and New York, 1986).

6 R.W Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox* (London, 1958), p.171. Other writers interpreting the Third Way along Hepburn's lines are quoted in Patterson Brown, 'St Thomas' Doctrine of Necessary Being', reprinted in Anthony Kenny (ed.), *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London and Melbourne, 1969). Brown's paper clearly indicates why they are wrong in their interpretation.

7 Cf. *Summa Theologiae* Ia,2,1 and *Summa Contra Gentiles* I,10. Aquinas holds that there is an inherent contradiction in 'God does not exist' since he holds that God's essence is to be (that God is *ipsum esse subsistens*) and since he takes this to mean that what we succeed in alluding to when we speak of God cannot be something the nature of which is potentially non-existent. But he does not think that 'God does not exist' can be proved to be contradictory apart from the supposition that God, in fact, exists

8 Things can come to be in the world which would not be 'possible' beings as Aquinas is thinking of 'possible beings' in the Third Way. I and my friends might make a car, but a car, for Aquinas, is not a natural entity. Strictly speaking, it is a collection of things brought together by art. When Aquinas speaks of possible things in the Third Way he is thinking of what is generable in nature — babies, plants, etc. He is thinking of what he would have called *entia per se* as opposed to *entia per accidens*.

9 Cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles* I,10. For a clear explanation of why readings of the Third Way such as that provided by Hepburn are wrong, see Patterson Brown, 'St Thomas' Doctrine of Necessary Being', *The Philosophical Review* LXXIII (1964).

10 Cf. *Summa Contra Gentiles* II,30: 'Although all things depend on the will of God as first cause, who is subject to no necessity in His operation except on the supposition of His intention, nevertheless absolute necessity is not on this account excluded from things, so as to compel us to say that all things are contingent ... Some things are so created by God that there is in their nature a potentiality to non-being; and this results from the fact that the matter present in them is in potentiality with respect to another form. On the other hand, neither immaterial things, nor things whose matter is not receptive of another form, have potentiality to non-being, so that their being is absolutely and simply necessary'. (I

quote from James F. Anderson's translation of *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book II, Notre Dame and London, 1975).

11 If this is his argument, then he might be read as presenting an argument which can be formally stated so as to include what logicians refer to as a 'quantifier shift fallacy'. He would be arguing that, if there is a time at which everything perishable perishes, then there is a time when everything perishable has perished. Formally speaking, this argument is invalid and can be compared to 'All roads lead somewhere, so there is some (one) place (e.g. Rome) to which all roads lead'. My argument in this article, however, is that Aquinas's argument is not to be read along these lines. Be that as it may, though, note that being able to present an argument by means of an invalid form is no proof of its invalidity. Any two premise argument of the form 'P, Q, therefore R' is formally invalid. But it is surely valid to argue: 'If all persons are mortal, and if Mary is a person, then Mary is mortal', which can be represented as 'P, Q, therefore R'. We can even make the 'All roads lead somewhere' argument come out as valid on a suitable interpretation. As my colleague Gyula Klima has pointed out to me, 'Every road leads to a place, therefore there is a place to which every road leads' is formally invalid; but if we know that, on the intended interpretation of the terms 'road' and 'place' and 'leads to' in a particular context, the phrase 'a place' has to refer to Rome, then we can conclude that under this specific interpretation the inference is materially valid and can be turned into a formally valid inference by explicating the intended interpretation and by adding 'and that place is Rome' to the premise.

12 Cf. his text *De Aeternitate Mundi.*

13 *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Shlomo Pines, Chicago,1963), II.1.

14 In *De Caelo*, I, lect.29, n.283.

15 Cf. John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C., 1984), Chapter VIII.

16 *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.15. I quote from Anton Pegis's translation of *Summa Contra Gentiles* I (Notre Dame, 1975).

17 In generous correspondence with me, John Wippel observes that, unlike its parallel in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas's Third Way does not explicitly claim that a thing that is able to be or not to be depends in some way for its being there on something else (i.e. that the Third Way is not, in its first part, invoking the notion of efficient causation). Yet, it is clear from what Aquinas writes generally that he regards things able to be or not to be as causally dependent for their existence, which inclines me to suggest that we are well within our rights in taking him to be reasoning causally in the first part of the Third Way. Professor Wippel thinks it best to read the Third Way with no reference to texts such as *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.15. I think it perfectly proper to allow such texts to interpret the Third Way for us. Professor Wippel thinks that there are temporal referents in the Third Way (because of Aquinas's use of the words *quandoque* and *aliquando*) which suggest that Aquinas is offering an essentially different argument from the one in the *Contra Gentiles*. But I see no reason for taking the Third Way's words *quandoque* and *aliquando* in a seriously temporal sense so as to call into question my reading of the Way. Aquinas says that something able to be or not to be *quandoque non est* (at some time is not). All this need be taken to mean

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is that something able to be or not to be is something which comes to be. A question to ask then is 'How does it come to be?'. And I take Aquinas to be assuming in the Third Way that it comes to be by virtue of something else. In the Third Way Aquinas says that, if everything is able to be or not to be, *aliquando fuit in rebus* ('once upon a time there was nothing'). But he cannot mean by this that there might have been a time when there was nothing, since he takes time to be a measure of change, since he takes all created things to be changeable, and since he cannot, therefore, have believed in a time without anything. The meaning of *aliquando fuit in rebus* in the Third Way is surely along the lines: 'There would not be anything'.

18 I quote from the translation of the *Compendium Theologiae* translated by Cyril Vollert SJ (St. Louis, Mo, and London, 1949).

19 For a concise account of Aquinas on perishing (written with an eye on his teaching that the human soul cannot perish), see Herbert McCabe, 'The Immortality of the Soul', in Anthony Kenny (ed.), *Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays*.

20 Those who favour this reading frequently find Aquinas to be guilty of the 'quantifier shift fallacy' to which I refer in Note 11. For they take him to be arguing: 'If there is a time before which everything able to be or not to be is (was) not, then there is (was) a time before which everything able to be or not to be is (was) not'. But I do not find reason to suppose that Aquinas's Third Way is arguing along these lines, for reasons which I give below. At this point I would also ask the reader to bear in mind what I say about validity in Note 11.

21 *Summa Theologiae* Ia,46,2 ad 7.

22 This position of Aquinas is much in evidence in what he teaches about God's simplicity. Cf. especially *Summa Theologiae*, Ia,3,4.

23 Aquinas holds that there can (theoretically) be an infinite series of causes in that, for example, there can (theoretically) be an infinite number of ancestors for any given person. But there cannot, he thinks, be an infinite series of causes where the effect in question is the sheer existence of something. He holds that a world consisting only of contingent particular causes needs the concurrent activity of a universal cause for their existence and activity at all times, for there would otherwise be nothing to account for them being in the first place. That seems a cogent position to me, but one's response to it will depend on the extent to which one is struck by the question 'How come something rather than *nothing*?'. This is not the place to address that question. I have attempted to do so in, for example, 'The Mystery of God: Aquinas and McCabe' (*New Blackfriars* (July-August 1996) and 'Aquinas, God and Being' (*The Monist*, 1998).

24 John Duns Scotus, *Reportatio I A*. I quote from William A. Frank and Allan B. Wolter, *Duns Scotus, Metaphysician* (West Lafayette, Ind, 1995), p. 43.

25 For comments on earlier versions of this paper I am very grateful to my colleagues Gyula Klima and Brian Leftow. As I have noted, I am also grateful for comments from John Wippel.