

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Anselm believes God to be “something than which nothing greater can be conceived.” What do you think he means by this phrase? Is this how God is typically thought of?
2. What does it mean to say that something exists in the understanding?
3. Why would existence in reality be greater than existence in the understanding? Can you think of anything that would be greater if it existed in the understanding than if it existed in reality?
4. What is Anselm’s distinction between two different ways of conceiving in chapter IV? Can we really conceive of something than which nothing greater can be conceived in the way Anselm thinks we can?

The Existence of God

SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was a Dominican monk and widely considered to be the greatest Christian philosopher to have ever lived. Aquinas is famous for interpreting Aristotle’s corpus and developing Aristotelian doctrines in a way that was consistent with the teaching of the Church. He is well known for his discussion of the relationship between faith and reason, as well as his development of proofs for the existence of God.

Summa Theologica,
Question 2, Article 1*Against the Ontological Argument*

... Now once we understand the meaning of the word “God” it follows that God exists. For the word means “that than which nothing greater can be meant.” Consequently, since existence in thought and fact is greater than existence in thought alone, and since, once we understand the word “God,” he exists in thought, he must also exist in fact. It is therefore self-evident that there is a God. . .

Reply. . . . Someone hearing the word “God” may very well not understand it to mean “that than which nothing greater can be thought,” indeed, some people have believed God to be a body. And

even if the meaning of the word “God” were generally recognized to be “that than which nothing greater can be thought,” nothing thus defined would thereby be granted existence in the world of fact, but merely as thought about. Unless one is given that something in fact exists than which nothing greater can be thought—and this nobody denying that existence of God would grant—the conclusion that God in fact exists does not follow . . .

Summa Theologica,
Question 2, Article 3*Whether God Exists*

Objection 1. It seems that God does not exist. For, if one of a pair of contraries were **infinite**, it would completely obliterate the other. But, when we use the word “God,” we mean “something infinitely good.” Therefore, if God were to exist, nothing would be bad. But there are bad things in the world. Therefore, God does not exist.

From *Summa Theologica*, translated by Ronald Rubin. Reprinted by permission of the translator.

Objection 2. Moreover, if we can account for something on the basis of a few original causes [*principia*], we ought not to use many. But it seems that we can account for everything that we find in the world on the basis of various original causes even if we suppose that God does not exist. Nature can be taken as the original cause of natural things, and human reason and will can be taken as the original cause of purposeful acts. There is therefore no need to say that God exists.

On the other hand, the book of *Exodus* depicts God as saying, "I am who am" [*Exodus* 3:14].

Reply. There are five ways to prove that God exists.

The first and clearest way derives from facts about change. Surely, as our senses show, some things in the world do change. But everything that changes is made to change by something else. For a thing only undergoes a change inasmuch as it has a *potentiality* for being that into which it changes, while a thing only causes change inasmuch as it is *actual*. To cause change is just to draw something out of potentiality into actuality, and this can only be done by something that is in actuality. (Thus, something actually hot, like fire, makes wood which is potentially hot become actually hot, thereby changing and altering that wood.) But, while a single thing can simultaneously be in actuality with respect to one property and in potentiality with respect to another, it cannot simultaneously be in actuality and potentiality with respect to the one and the same property. (While that which is actually hot may simultaneously be potentially cold, that which is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot.) It is therefore impossible for a thing that undergoes a change to cause that change, or for something to change itself. Therefore, whatever undergoes change must be changed by another thing. And, if this other thing undergoes change, it also must be changed by something else, and so on. But this cannot go back to infinity. If it did, there would be no first cause of change and, consequently, no other causes of change—for something can be a secondary cause of change only if it is changed by a primary cause (as a stick moves something only if a hand moves the stick). We must therefore posit a first cause of change which is not itself changed by anything. And this everyone understands to be God.

The second way derives from the nature of **efficient causation**. In the world that we sense, we find that efficient causes come in series. We do not, and cannot, find that something is its own efficient cause—for, if something were its own efficient cause, it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. But the series of efficient causes cannot possibly go back to infinity. In all such series of causes, a first thing causes one or more intermediaries, and the intermediaries cause the last thing; when a cause is taken out of this series, so is its effect. Therefore, if there were no first efficient cause, there would be no last or intermediary efficient causes. If the series of efficient causes went back to infinity, however, there would be no first efficient cause and, hence, no last or intermediary causes. But there obviously are such causes. We must therefore posit a first efficient cause, which everyone understands to be God.

The third way, which derives from facts about **possibility and necessity**, is this: In the world, we find some things that can either exist or fail to exist—things which are generated and corrupted and which therefore exist at some times but not at others. It is impossible, however, that everything has being of this sort. If something *can* fail to exist, there must have been a time at which it *has* failed to exist. Therefore, if everything could fail to exist, there would have been a time at which nothing existed. But, if there had been such a time, there would not be anything in the world now—for something can begin to exist only if brought into existence by something that already exists. Therefore, if there once had been nothing in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to come into existence, and there would be nothing now. Therefore, not every entity can fail to exist; there must be something in the world that exists of necessity. But, if something exists of necessity, either this necessity is or is not caused by something else. And the series of necessary beings whose necessity is caused by another cannot possibly go back to infinity. (The reasons are those that were used to show that the series of efficient causes cannot go back to infinity.) We must therefore posit something that is necessary per se—something that does not owe its necessity to anything else but which causes the necessity of other things. And this everyone understands to be God.

The fourth way derives from the gradations to be found in things. Some things are found to be better, truer, or more noble than others. But something is said to have more or less of a quality according to its distance from a maximum. (Thus, the hotter a thing is, the closer it is to that which is maximally hot.) There is therefore something maximally true, good, and noble. And this thing must be the greatest being—for, as Aristotle says in *Metaphysics II* [993b25–30], those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being. But, as Aristotle says in the same work [993b25], the greatest thing of a kind is the cause of everything of that kind (as fire, the hottest thing is the cause of everything hot). There therefore is something which is the cause of being, of goodness, and of whatever other perfections there may be in things. And this we call God.

The fifth way derives from facts about the governance of the world. We see that even things that lack consciousness, such as physical objects, act for a purpose. They almost always act in the same way, and they tend towards what is best. And this shows that they achieve their ends, not by chance, but on purpose. But something that lacks consciousness can tend towards an end only if directed by something with consciousness and intelligence. (Thus, the arrow must be directed by the archer.) There therefore is some intelligence which directs everything in nature towards an end, and this we call God.

Reply to the First Objection. As Augustine says [in *The Enchiridion*], since God is supremely good, He would allow bad things to exist in the world only if He were so powerful and good that He could even bring good out of bad. It is therefore an indication of

God's infinite goodness that He permits bad things to exist and draws good things out of them.

Reply to the Second Objection. Since nature works for a definite end under the direction of a higher agency, we must trace whatever nature does back to God as its first cause. Similarly, we must trace purposeful acts back to a cause higher than human reason and will—for these can change or go out of existence, and, as has been shown, we should trace everything that can change or go out of existence back to an original cause [*principium*] which is unchangeable and necessary per se.

KEY TERMS

Infinite
Efficient causation
Possibility
Necessity

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Aquinas offers a reply to the Ontological Argument in *Summa Theologica*, Question 2, Article 1. What does he think is wrong with the argument?
2. According to Aquinas, there are five ways to prove that God exists. What are these five ways?
3. Why can't the chain of causes "go back to infinity," according to Aquinas?
4. How would you assess Aquinas's claim that "if something *can* fail to exist, there must have been a time at which it *has* failed to exist"? Can you think of any counterexamples?
5. Could there be something besides God that exists necessarily? Could the universe exist necessarily?
6. Does an object that "tends toward an end," as Aquinas puts it, require some intelligence to direct it?