THOMAS AQUINAS: SUMMA THEOLOGIAE

http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/aquinas1.html

complete text at http://www.newadvent.org/summa/

Thomas Aquinas is perhaps the greatest and certainly the most famous example of that intellectual movement which we call medieval scholasticism. Born into a noble Italian family in 1224 or 1225, Thomas was earmarked by his parents to pursue a respectable ecclesiastical career as abbot of the Benedictine monastery at Monte Cassino, thus improving both the family fortunes and his own.

Thomas had other ideas. In 1244 he joined the Dominican order. Like the Franciscans, the Dominicans were a mendicant order. Their original function was the control of heresy through preaching. (Hence their real name - Ordo praedicatorum or "order of Preachers" - the more popular label "Dominicans" being derived from the name of their founder, St. Dominic.) By the middle of the Thirteenth century they were gaining a reputation for learning and piety, but neither of these qualities was precisely what the noble house of Aquino had in mind when they thought of Thomas' future.

Their response to Thomas' decision was swift and direct. They kidnapped him back from the Dominicans and held him captive for about a year, meanwhile plying him with various temptations including a naked woman. Thomas persevered, however, and they finally acquiesced. Shortly thereafter, the Dominicans sent their newly-recovered recruit off to Paris.

Paris was an exciting place to be in 1245. Scholars were rediscovering Aristotle, asking if and how his philosophy could be reconciled with Christian revelation. Thomas was destined to produce one great answer to that question.

Thomas' most significant work is his Summa theologiae or 'summary of Theology,' a gigantic work which attempts to present all of Christian theology as systematically as possible. Thomas worked on it from 1266 through 1273. Then, when he was nearly finished, he underwent an experience so intense that, as he himself explained, everything he had written seemed like straw. He completely stopped writing and died three months later. Thomas was canonized in 1323.

The Summa theologiae is written in a form common to treatises of that age. All of theology is divided into its major topics. These, in turn, are divided into subtopics described by Thomas as 'questions.' The first "question" in the Summa theologiae deals with the nature of Theology itself, the second with God's existence.

The 'questions' are in turn divided into what Thomas calls "articles," specific queries concerning the topic being explored in that particular "question." (Thus, confusingly enough, what Thomas calls "questions" are actually general topics, whereas what he calls "articles" are really what we would mean by the word "questions.") These "articles" form the basic unit of the Summa theologiae, and they proceed according to an invariable form. A specific query is made, then a section beginning with the word videtur ("it seems that") offers arguments for what will
later turn out to be the wrong answer to that query. Next, a brief section beginning with the words sed contra ("but on the contrary") introduces a different answer. A section labeled responsio ("response") finally presents arguments for what Thomas considers the correct view. The question then closes with a refutation of the arguments presented in the videtur section.

The following selection consists of the prologue and first two questions of the Summa theologiae. Some articles of the first question are omitted, but those included are given in their entirety, so that the reader can see how the work (and Thomas' mind) is constructed.

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**Prologue**

Since a teacher of catholic truth should instruct not only the advanced but beginners as well - as St. Paul says, "Like babes in Christ I fed you milk and not meat" (I Cor. 3:1) - our intention in this work is to convey the content of the Christian religion in a way fit for the training of beginners. We have seen that novices in this study are greatly hindered by the various writings on the subject. They are hindered partly because of the multiplication of useless questions, articles and arguments in these writings; partly because the order in which essential material is delivered in these writings is determined, not by the nature of doctrine itself, but by the books on which the writings are commenting; and partly because frequent repetition has bred boredom and confusion in the minds of hearers.

Eager to avoid these and other pitfalls we shall now attempt to examine the content of sacred doctrine briefly and clearly, so far as the material allows, twisting in God's aid.

**Question 1: Sacred doctrine, what it is and what it includes.**

In order to contain our investigation within limits, we must first investigate sacred doctrine itself, asking what it is and how far it extends. Ten questions must be asked.

1. Whether it is necessary
2. Whether it is a science
3. Whether it is one or many
4. Whether it is speculative or practical
5. How it compares with other sciences
6. Whether it is wisdom
7. What is its subject
8. Whether it is argumentative
9. Whether it should use metaphorical or symbolic language
10. Whether the sacred scripture containing this doctrine is to be interpreted according to several senses.

**Question 2: Concerning God, whether God exists**
As to this question, there are three points of inquiry:

1. Whether God's existence is self-evident
2. Whether it can be demonstrated
3. Whether God exists.

**Article 1: Whether God's existence is self-evident.**

Thus we proceed to the first point. It seems that God's existence is self-evident, for those things are said by us to be self-evident the knowledge of which is naturally within us, as is the case with first principles. But, as John of Damascus says, "The knowledge of God's existence is naturally implanted in all things." Therefore God's existence is self-evident.

Furthermore, those things are said to be self-evident the truth of which is obvious once the meaning of the words is clear. For example, when we understand the means of the words "whole" and "part," we immediately realize that every whole is greater than its part. Once we understand the meaning of the word "God," however, it immediately follows that God exists. The words itself signifies "that being a greater than which cannot be signified." That which exists in fact and in the mind is greater than that which exists in the mind alone. Thus, since the moment we understand the meaning of the word "God" he exists in our minds, it follows that he must also exist in fact. Thus God's existence is self-evident.

Furthermore, it is self-evident that truth exists, for whoever denies the existence of truth simultaneously concedes its existence. If truth does not exist, then it is true that truth does not exist; yet if something is true, then truth exists. God, however, is truth itself. "I am the way, the truth and the life" (Jn. 14:6). Therefore God's existence is self-evident.

But on the contrary, no one can think the opposite of what is self-evident, as Aristotle remarks. One can, however, think the opposite of the proposition "God exists," for, as the Psalm says, "The fool says in his heart, 'there is no God.'" (Ps. 13:1, 52:1). Thus it is not self-evident that God exists.

Response: It must be said that a thing can be called "self-evident" in two-ways, in itself and in relation to us. A proposition is self-evident when its predicate is included in the definition of its subject. For example, in the proposition "man is an animal," the idea of "animal" is included in the definition of "man." Thus if everyone knows the definitions of both subject and predicate, the proposition will be self-evident to all, as is the case with the first principles of demonstration, the terms of which are so common that no one is ignorant of them, such as "being" and "nonbeing," "whole" and "part," etc. If, the proposition may be self-evident in itself, but not to them. Thus it happens, as Boethius says, that some things are common conceptions of the mind" and are self-evident "among the learned only, such as that incorporeal beings do not occupy a place."

I say, therefore, that this proposition, "God exists," is self-evident in itself, since the predicate is the same as the subject. For God is his own existence, as will be seen later. Nevertheless, because we do not know what is involved in being God, the proposition is not self-evident to us,
but needs to be demonstrated through those things that are more evident to us though less evident to themselves, namely God's effects.

To the first argument, therefore, it must be said that a general and confused knowledge of God's existence is naturally infused within us, for God is man's beatitude and man naturally desires beatitude. What man naturally desires he naturally knows. This is not to know God's existence specifically, however. It is one thing to know that someone is approaching and quite another to know that Peter is approaching, even though that someone may actually be Peter. Many people think that the perfect good of man called "beatitude" is wealth, some imagine it to be pleasure, and so on.

To the second argument it must be said that he who hears the name "God" may perhaps not know that it signifies "something greater than which cannot be conceived," since some people have thought of God as a body. Granting, however, that someone should think of God in this way, namely as "that being a greater than which cannot be conceived," it does not follow on this account that the person must understand what is signified to exist in the world of fact, but only in the mind. Nor can one argue that it exists in fact unless one grants that there actually exists in fact something a greater than which cannot be conceived. It is, however, precisely this assertion the atheist denies.

To the third, it must be said that the existence of truth in general is self-evident to us, but it is not self-evident that this particular being is the primal truth.

**Article 2: Whether God's existence is demonstrable.**

We proceed thus to the second point. It seems that God's existence is not demonstrable, for it is an article of faith. What is a matter of faith cannot be demonstrable, for demonstration allows one to know, whereas faith, as Paul says, is in "things not seen" (Heb. 11:1). Therefore God's existence is not demonstrable.

Furthermore, the central link in any demonstration is a definition; yet we cannot know what God is, but only what he is not, as John of Damascus says. Therefore we cannot demonstrate God's existence.

Furthermore, if God's existence were demonstrable, this could only be through his effects; yet his effects are not proportionate to him, for he is infinite, his effects are infinite, and there is no proportion between the two. Therefore, since a cause cannot be demonstrated through an effect which is not proportioned to it, it seems that God's existence cannot be demonstrated.

But on the contrary Paul says, "The invisible things of God are understood by the things that are made" (Romans 1:20). Such could not be the case unless God's existence could be demonstrated by the things that are made, for the first thing to be understood about a thing is whether it exists.

Response: It must be said that there are two types of demonstration. One is through the cause, is called a demonstration propter quid, and argues from what is prior in an absolute sense. The other is through the effect, is called a demonstration quia, and argues from what is prior
according to our perspectives; for when an effect is better known to us than its cause, we proceed from the effect to knowledge of the cause. In situations where the effect is better known to us than the cause, the existence of the cause can be demonstrated from that of the effect, since the effect depends on the cause and can only exist if the cause already does so. Thus God's existence, though not self-evident to us, can be demonstrated through his effects.

To the first argument, therefore, it must be said that God's existence and other things about him which (as Paul says) can be known by natural reason are not articles of faith but preambles to the articles of faith. For faith presupposes natural knowledge just as grace presupposes nature and perfection presupposes something which can be perfected. Nothing prohibits what is demonstrable and knowable in itself from being accepted on faith by someone who does not understand the demonstration.

To the second it must be said that, when a cause is demonstrated through its effect, the effect substitutes for the definition of the cause within the demonstration. This is particularly true in arguments concerning God. When we prove that something exists, the middle term in the demonstration is what we are taking the word to mean for purposes of the demonstration, not what the thing signified by the word actually is (since the latter, the actual nature of the thing in question, is determined only after we determine that it exists). In demonstrating that God exists, we can take as our middle term definition of what this word "God" means for us, for, as we shall see, the words we use in connection with God are derived from his effects.

To the third, it must be said that perfect knowledge of a cause cannot be derived from an effect that is not proportionate to the cause. Nevertheless, the existence of the cause can be demonstrated clearly from the existence of the effects, even though we cannot know the cause perfectly according to its essence.