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A Contextual and Philosophical Analysis of Aquinas' Fourth Way

ABSTRACT: The task of this essay is a reconsideration and rehabilitation of the fourth way of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*. The argument *ex gradibus* is first presented with attention to the philosophical-theological context of the five ways, in addition to matters of historical context. It will become clear that the arguments are enthymematic and should thus be read charitably in connection with other aspects of Aquinas' philosophy (cf. Copleston 1976; Fogelin 1990; Kerr 2001). Moreover, in contrast to the prevailing sentiment that the fourth way should be read primarily in a Platonic light (cf., e.g., Van Steenberghe 1980), I argue that the fourth way should rather be read in connection with other crucial aspects of Aquinas' metaphysics of being (cf. Urban 1984). Finally, I reconsider some of the fundamental aspects of the argument, e.g., the 'principle of the maximum' (cf. Flew 1966, Kenny 1969, Van Steenberghe 1980, Doolan 2008). The upshot is a clearer understanding of what Aquinas actually means in the fourth way, which in turn enables a more informed evaluation of the argument itself.

KEYWORDS: participation • *esse* • essential • metaphysics • efficient causality • formal causality

Introduction

The Five Ways of St Thomas' *Summa Theologiae* are among the most well-known arguments for the existence of God, though today they often viewed as outmoded and untenable. What I want to suggest is that in the philosophical and theological evaluation of these arguments, crucial contextual and historical aspects have been overlooked, rendering the critiques suspect. Furthermore, I think there may be ways of recuperating and recovering these arguments, such that they can be made intelligible for a contemporary scientific audience.

I begin with attention to historical, hermeneutical, and methodological points regarding the five ways as a whole. It will become clear that the arguments as presented have the purpose of giving general instruction to novices, rather than providing a fully articulated and finished set of arguments for the existence of God. It is concluded that the arguments are enthymematic,

and thus should be read in the light of other aspects of St Thomas' philosophy, particularly in the *Summa Theologiae*¹.

Then I present and explain the argument itself, in light of other aspects of Aquinas' philosophy of being. Because of the abbreviated nature of the fourth way, it shall become clear that the argument is densely loaded with philosophical concepts which may not be immediately apparent to the 'uninitiated', as it were. After I present the argument, I turn to some major issues raised in criticism of the fourth way, and consider possible responses, in particular the notion of participation and how one might think about this ancient concept today.

As another point of historical interest, and in contrast to the prevailing sentiment that the fourth way should be read primarily in a Platonic light², I suggest that the fourth way should rather be read in connection with other crucial aspects of Aquinas' metaphysics. Finally, I engage in a philosophical analysis of the 'principle of the maximum', the foundational principle of a metaphysics of participation, and provide a defence of it for a contemporary audience. The upshot is a re-evaluation of the fourth way, with attention to historical and contextual factors, informing a philosophical and theological evaluation of this metaphysical argument.

I

Though the *quinque viae* are read and studied by many novice theologians and philosophers, it is very often the case that the five ways are published independently of anything else that St Thomas ever wrote. In undergraduate teaching, it is common to address the five ways independent of the greater context of Aquinas' writings, in fact, even with no other knowledge of St Thomas' thought at all. Such an isolated treatment is problematic and misleading, for it gives rise to the impression that St Thomas intended these arguments to be ultimately decisive 'proofs' for the existence of God and that they are presented as such. However, as Copleston is careful to emphasise, the five ways are for neophyte students, not the 'critical minds of mature

¹ See F. Copleston, *A History of Medieval Philosophy*, New York 1972; *idem*, *Religion and Philosophy*, Dublin 1974; *idem*, *Thomas Aquinas*, New York 1976; R. Fogelin, *A Reading of Aquinas' Five Ways*, "American Philosophical Quarterly" 27 (1990), pp. 305–13; F. Kerr, *Theology in Philosophy: Revisiting the Five Ways*, "International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion", 50 (2001), pp. 115–30.

² See F. Van Steenberghe, *Thomas Aquinas and Radical Aristotelianism*, Washington, D. C. 1980; J. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite to Uncreated Being*, Washington, D. C. 2000.

philosophers³. As St Thomas himself notes in the preface to the *Summa*, the purpose of the text is to provide instruction for beginners.

Furthermore, though the term *viae* is correctly translated as 'ways', the term should not be taken as synonymous with proof. Such a term is too strong. As Fogelin⁴ and Kerr⁵ argue, the five ways serve as abbreviated ways of pursuing five distinct arguments for the existence of God. St Thomas, rather than presenting fully developed arguments, is offering initial presentations of sundry ways according to which one could argue for God's existence. In the mediaeval world that Aquinas inhabited, his contemporaries would have more readily understood certain ideas implicit in his writing, such as appeals to causality and certain assumptions underlying the argument⁶.

It would also be both mistaken and methodologically uncharitable to isolate the five ways from the context which makes them intelligible, that is, the overall picture of Aquinas' metaphysics. Indeed, his concepts such as those of motion, act, and *esse* are both substantial and subtle, and a modern intuitive view of such concepts will not suffice in order to understand them. One may see this especially with regard to causality. In order to understand and fairly to read the five ways, one must have an awareness of the overall philosophical picture of which they are a small if significant section.

The arguments must also be viewed in light of the rest of the *Summa Theologiae*⁷, especially the objections that precede it. In fact, one of the objections is based upon the idea that in explaining the workings of nature, one need not appeal to any other principle; nature is self-explanatory. Thus one of the motivations for the five ways is a rejection of this principle, perhaps what might be called the naturalistic principle, or the idea that there is no need to invoke anything outside the natural realm to explain the workings of the world. The underlying theme of the five ways, according to Fogelin⁸, is that the naturalistic hypothesis fails. The existence of the universe and the phenomena that one can observe in it indicate that it cannot be self-sufficient, self-explanatory, uncaused, or otherwise independent of any supernatural principle. In these five related ways, one can pursue arguments for the existence of God beginning from premises which are *not* based on divine revelation⁹.

³ F. Copleston, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 116.

⁴ R. Fogelin, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁵ F. Kerr, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁶ R. Fogelin, *op. cit.*, *passim*; F. Kerr, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁷ F. Copleston, *Thomas Aquinas*, p. 130.

⁸ R. Fogelin, *op. cit.*, p. 306, 312.

⁹ F. Copleston, *Thomas Aquinas*, *passim*; R. Fogelin, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

Indeed, it was of great concern to St Thomas and others in his Christian world to be able to argue that God's existence can be proved to those who do not accept the truth of Sacred Writ, reasoning rather from commonly accepted premises. The professors in the nascent universities of Christendom especially emphasised this methodology as they sought to play their own respective roles in curbing the spread of Islam, whether intellectual, political, or otherwise. Such as these were also interested in converting philosophers who were practitioners of Islam, in addition to others who did not share a Christian religious outlook. Obviously they would pay little heed to the Bible, hence the importance of secular sources. The goal of the fourth way is to establish the fact that there must be a transcendent cause of the being of each individual creature, from which one can infer the existence of the Christian God. One should bear in mind that it is both methodologically appropriate and desirable that the five ways should be elaborated¹⁰.

II

In order to begin the exposition of the fourth way, it will be quoted in full and subsequently discussed step by step.

Quarta via sumitur ex gradibus qui in rebus inveniuntur. Invenitur enim in rebus aliquid magis et minus bonum, et verum, et nobile, et sic de aliis huiusmodi. Sed magis et minus dicuntur de diversis secundum quod appropinquant diversimode ad aliquid quod maxime est, sicut magis calidum est, quod magis appropinquat maxime calido. Est igitur aliquid quod est verissimum, et optimum, et nobilissimum, et per consequens maxime ens, nam quae sunt maxime vera, sunt maxime entia, ut dicitur II Metaphys. Quod autem dicitur maxime tale in aliquo genere, est causa omnium quae sunt illius generis, sicut ignis, qui est maxime calidus, est causa omnium calidorum, ut in eodem libro dicitur. Ergo est aliquid quod omnibus entibus est causa esse, et bonitatis, et cuiuslibet perfectionis, et hoc dicimus Deum.

The fourth way is taken from the gradations which are found in things. For some things are seen to be greater or less good, true, and noble, and thus of other things in a similar way. But greater or less are predicated of different things according to which they approximate in various ways to something which is maximal, just as what is more hot approximates to that which is maximally hot. Therefore there is something that is most true, and good, and noble, and as a consequence

¹⁰ F. Copleston, *Religion and Philosophy, passim*; idem, *Thomas Aquinas, passim*; R. Fogelin, *op. cit., passim*; F. Kerr, *op. cit., passim*.

something which is a most being, for whatever things are maximally true, are maximally being, as it is said in *Metaphysics* II. Moreover, what is said to be maximally in some genus is the cause of all things which are of that genus, just as fire, which is maximally hot, is the cause of all hot things, as it is said in the same book. Therefore there is something which is the cause of being, and goodness, and of every other perfection in all beings, and this we call God¹¹.

Thus proceeds St Thomas' argument *ex gradibus*¹².

One can discern the following pattern in the fourth way. First, one observes that there are things which exemplify a perfection 'in their different ways', as St Thomas puts it. Though he does not address this point in detail, one should note that a 'perfection' can be classified in one of two ways. First, there is a perfection which is merely gradable, such as an amount of money. In another sense, there is a true perfection which is not only gradable but also admits of a fully actualised principle. St Thomas is referring to the latter sense.

In this first premise, St Thomas is stating that for some x s, if x exhibits some perfection p to degree D and x^* possesses p to degree D^* , then there must be some perfection P which is maximally, perfectly P . Even though St Thomas does not use the term, he means that the x s participate in P in virtue of possessing p . Because the x s both exhibit the same perfection, the source of that perfection must be the same. Furthermore, the source of that perfection would of necessity be the (absolute) standard of that perfection. This is pursuant to the Platonic premise that diversity presupposes unity¹³. Thus he concludes that if some things are true and good, then there is something else which is most true and most good. Whenever one finds gradations of the same perfection, such as goodness, in different types of things, there must be a maximum of that perfection¹⁴.

Next, St Thomas notes that if something is most true, it is also most in being. Aquinas has already concluded that there must be a most true, a most good, etc. Thus he concludes that if there is something which is most true, there is something which is most being. For support for his conclusion, he

¹¹ *Summa theologiae* I.2.3; my translation, to which I have made slight modifications based on the translation of F. Freddoso.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ R. Te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in St Thomas Aquinas*, trans. A. Runia, New York 1995, p. 190.

¹⁴ J. Bobik, *Aquinas' Fourth Way and the Approximating Relation*, "The Thomist" 51 (1987), pp. 17–36; G. Doolan, *Aquinas on the Divine Ideas as Exemplar Causes*, Washington, D.C. 2008, *passim*.

cites the second book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, in which the latter argues that truth and being are convertible; insofar as something is true, something *is*¹⁵.

Now in the final step of the fourth way, Aquinas introduces another crucial idea, that the maximum in a genus is the cause of all the things in that genus. This appears to be controversial, not least of all for the fact that the notion of causality which St Thomas has in mind seems unclear, at least to the modern reader.

In any case, if that which is the maximum in a series of things is the cause of the perfection in all other things, then the maximum being, which was demonstrated to exist by the second step, must be the cause of the being of other things. This is both an exemplar cause and an efficient cause. Thus anything which has being does not receive being from itself, but from the maximum being. Just as things possess goodness or truth to a certain degree, they also possess being to a certain degree, but not completely¹⁶.

Let us examine Aquinas' notion of exemplar causality in further detail. This form of causality is a species of formal causality. For St Thomas, form is the principle of intelligibility of a substance or a feature; it lends some structure to matter. Thus when the intellect apprehends a particular form, it can be said to understand what a particular thing is; one has the idea of it in one's mind. But this idea can also be a principle of generation, or an idea according to which something exists. In this case it is similar to a blueprint or a pattern. In this instance the form serves as an exemplar. One could also understand an exemplar as an idea in the mind of an artist. One executes a work of art according to the idea in one's mind¹⁷.

Furthermore, the mere possession of an idea is not sufficient for that idea to be an exemplar. As Doolan explains, an exemplar is not simply a formal likeness or resemblance. Rather it is an idea that is imitated¹⁸. In turn, this also means that the idea must be productive. That is, things must be made according to the idea, and in turn these things which are made must imitate the exemplar in some way. Thus an exemplar stands not only as that according to which something is produced, but also as that in imitation of which another thing is produced. This is because, as Aquinas notes in q. 44, in cases in which more than one entity is seen to possess the same perfection, there must be a common source of that perfection, to wit, the exemplar cause¹⁹.

¹⁵ R. Te Velde, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–3.

¹⁶ J. Bobik, *op. cit.*, *passim*; G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, ch. 1, *passim*. See also M.-C. Perret, *La Notion d'Exemplarité*, "Revue Thomiste" 41 (1936), pp. 446–69.

¹⁷ *ST I*, q. 15; G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–5.

¹⁸ G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, ch. 1, *passim*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*; *ST I*, q. 44.

Such terms as 'production' are evocative of efficient causality. Indeed, exemplar causality presupposes and is integrally connected with efficient causality. For Aquinas, an efficient cause is an extrinsic principle which is responsible for the movement from potency to act²⁰. The exemplar requires efficient causality in order that certain things may receive the determinate form of the exemplar. The exemplar is productive precisely by means of the agency of an intelligent actor. Thus it becomes clear that exemplar causality is a species of formal causality, one which involves the action of intelligent agents, guided by ideas. Indeed, only such agents could possess intentional mental contents that would allow for production according to an idea. This pattern is applied to God and His creation: God creates according to the ideas in His Mind. These ideas are not simply various plans that God has for different sorts of creatures, but are the different ways in which God understands Himself as capable of being imitated, that is, multifarious manners in which one can possess being to a greater or lesser degree²¹.

However, one might object, saying that appeals to exemplar and thus formal causality are both otiose and unmotivated. Why should one posit these mysterious exemplar causes? One might also say that a proper understanding of efficient causality is sufficient for the understanding of a cause and the effect thereof.

As John Haldane has noted, it is not so easy to jettison exemplar (or at least formal) causality. In order to see why exemplar causality and efficient causality are so linked, one may more generally consider formal causality and efficient causality. Efficient causality can only bear so much of the explanatory burden of the economy of causality. One cannot explain causes and effects solely in terms of efficient causality; there must be other aspects of causality at work. That is, even if one grants that efficient causality can explain the interaction of two distinct objects, formal causality is still necessary to the explanation as well²².

This is because efficient causality is always causality according to a particular form; thus one cannot maintain a sense of efficient causality without, and indeed without presupposing, a notion of formal causality. Even at the microscopic level, an explanation of a physical reaction involves discussion of particles, atoms, molecules, *etc.*, all of which presuppose a formal notion. Indeed, as Haldane writes, "Efficient causality is the vehicle for the communication of form"²³. Efficient causality and formal causality

²⁰ See F. Suarez, *Disputationes metaphysicae*, 17,1.

²¹ G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, ch. 1, *passim*.

²² J. Haldane, *A Return to Form in the Philosophy of Mind*, "Ratio" 11 (1998), *passim*.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 269.

are not to be viewed as two opposing versions of causality; rather they are integrally connected, with the possibility of efficient causality presupposing formal causality. As Haldane continues, “what form brings is order, but it does not do so by pushing this way or that. Its existence is testified to not by force detectors but by the fact that what exists, and how existents act, exhibit natural order”²⁴.

Thus one can see how exemplar causality and efficient causality are linked. One observes various things which possess actually certain perfections. These perfections are possessed *per aliud*; it is neither necessary nor essential to a particular being to possess some perfection, such as goodness. Therefore, there must be an *extrinsic* cause which actualises the formal property which is actual in a being, in other words, an efficient cause is needed. As Doolan writes, “implicit in the notion of exemplarism is the notion of efficient causality, for if something is made in the likeness of an exemplar, there must be a *maker* to make that thing – there must be an efficient cause. [...] without efficient causality there can be no exemplarity”²⁵. But there is exemplarity, as we have seen. Thus these formal exemplars are efficiently caused²⁶.

The fourth way is designed to establish that, with regard to exemplarity, there must be a transcendent cause of the being of each individual creature, which would be the exemplar, or the maximum being, *maxime ens*. These receive that being from another source, which St Thomas calls God. This move might be disputed, however. It may be the case that even if St Thomas’ arguments succeed, they do not establish the existence of the God of traditional theism. True, it must be noted that the very last move of St Thomas’ argument, which in its own right is a premise, is an inference to the best explanation. Aquinas moves from the existence of a maximal cause of being to the identification of this being with God²⁷.

If one understands the meaning of a maximal being, however, one will be more inclined to think that the argument at hand does attain to the Judaeo-Christian God. The maximal being too is a being the essence of which is identical with *esse*. Fully actualised *esse* as such, according to St Thomas, is pure act and thus unlimited. Therefore the maximal being is infinite. Furthermore, there can be only one infinite being. If there were two infinite beings, there would be no way to differentiate between the two

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 276.

²⁵ G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, pp. 73–4.

²⁶ J. Haldane, *op. cit.*, p. 269, 276; G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, pp. 73–4.

²⁷ R. Fogelin, *op. cit.*, *passim*; F. Kerr, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

of them. Hence this maximal being is also infinite and unique. This lends further credence to the identification of the maximal being with God²⁸.

Furthermore, the reader will recall that the five ways are primarily philosophical arguments resting upon the evidence of human reason alone, unaided by divine revelation (at least apparently). Hence the theological question is left open. One could imagine a theatre in which several celestial competitors vie for the laurel of being named the maximal cause of being. Of the available options for the identity of the maximal being, the God of traditional theism is the one that most fits the description. Though this last move as we have noted is defeasible, the idea of a 'most being' is consonant with the idea of the Judaeo-Christian God²⁹, as well as the idea of an agent who creates the very being of all other creatures and upon which they rely for their being, indeed, the efficient cause of the being of each creature, pursuant to the third premise. Really, this is very close to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob³⁰.

Having explained the fourth way, it remains to examine it in further detail and to examine the sundry difficulties that appear in regard to the argument. Before that, however, it has often been noted that the fourth way is particularly Neoplatonic in nature. It is important to address this characterisation of the argument, and to see whether it is particularly helpful or accurate.

III

I should like to pursue a brief discussion on the topic of the argument for the existence of God located in St Augustine's *De libero arbitrio*, which bears an apparent resemblance to the fourth way, and since some scholars, such as Van Steenberghen have stressed the Neoplatonic nature of the argument *ex gradibus*³¹. Furthermore, Wippel³² notes that the first stage of the fourth way may rest upon a Neoplatonic idea as well, the idea that in order to comprehend gradations in things, one must have some knowledge of this 'impressed'³³ upon one's mind. Though Wippel himself does not seem to endorse this view, claiming that it does not fit well with Aquinas' Aristotelian epistemology, it is still mistaken to believe that this could be a possibility that St Thomas has in mind in his argument. As will become clear, the goal of

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ See *Exodus* 3:14.

³⁰ R. Fogelin, *op. cit.*, *passim*; F. Kerr, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

³¹ F. Van Steenberghen, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

³² J. Wippel, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

³³ *Ibidem*, 474.

the fourth way is very different, and still integrally connected with Aquinas' own metaphysical system³⁴.

Considerations of the sort just mentioned have led to the idea that the fourth way is something of a Thomistic ontological argument, as opposed to the other four arguments which are primarily *a posteriori*. The temptation is to draw an analogy between the fourth way and more or less ontological arguments, such as those which come from St Augustine (*De lib. arb.* II), St Anselm (*Proslogion*), and René Descartes (*Meditations*). But the line of argumentation in the latter is not the same as that of the former, nor is it meant to establish precisely the same conclusion. To make such a supposition is to miss the point of the fourth way. In clarifying their differences, one will begin to see more clearly the thrust of the fourth way.

Augustine observes that in various things, one can determine that some have a property to a greater degree than others. Furthermore, however, it is also possible in principle for many entities to possess a property to a greater degree. Indeed, it is possible for an entity to be to a greater degree. However, one could only know that this is possible if one had in oneself some innate knowledge of the infinite; otherwise, one could not make such a judgement³⁵.

Augustine begins from similar premises to those employed in the fourth way. But the concern in the former's writing is not so much with the perfections in things but with the discernment by the perceiver. St Augustine is not deviating from a realist path; rather, he is emphasising the unmistakably palpable character of the principle he wishes to establish through reflection on thought. The very fact that one can know that some things are limited is to know that in principle, they could be greater with respect to some perfection. But one cannot know that something is limited unless one already possesses deep within oneself the innate knowledge of an (actual) infinite. Thus the movement is not from a better to best but is actually a sort of meta-point, abstracted from the context of the discussion. The following example will help to illustrate this. St Augustine's argument is similar to a biblical passage from Genesis, in which Adam and Eve hide from God because they are aware of their nakedness. In order to adapt the point, one would not argue from a more or less clothed to a fully clothed being, but would rather say that by the very fact that one can know what nakedness is, then one has an idea of what it means to be clothed as well, an idea which of course humanity in its pristine, sinless state did not know³⁶.

³⁴ *Ibidem, passim.*

³⁵ Augustine, *De libero arbitrio*, book II, *passim*.

³⁶ See *Genesis* 1.

St Thomas, however, is arguing from a better to a best, or rather, to an absolute. This is made clear by his reference to Aristotle and the example of heat and fire. In the Augustinian argument, God is the all-encompassing being which provides the context for gradations in things but especially for the recognition of them. While this general sentiment is present in the fourth way, St Thomas is concerned with the perfections themselves as they are in the things themselves, while St Augustine is concerned with the overarching transcendent reality that must obtain for any recognition of the sort to take place.

One can note two further important points. First, just before he broaches the five ways, Aquinas explicitly rejects Damascene's thesis of innate knowledge of God, which would render an appeal to this sort of principle in the fourth way as out of place. But as we have seen, this is the very principle involved in St Augustine's argument. Secondly, elsewhere St Thomas only admits that the human person is implanted with a vague knowledge of God under the guise of beatitude, linked with one's desire for happiness³⁷. This, however, seems to suggest definite differences between the sort of knowledge that one has of graded things and the effect that it has on one. For instance, an innate knowledge of God which is manifested as a direction towards ultimate beatitude is primarily practical, whereas an innate knowledge according to which things can be judged greater or lesser is propositional knowledge with no immediate practical import³⁸.

Thus the arguments are very different and the Neoplatonic nature of the fourth way should not be misunderstood or overstated. Because St Thomas is concerned with the source of *esse* in created beings, it is very clear that the fourth way is of a piece with his overall metaphysical system, and not a departure from it.

IV

Returning to the fourth way in particular, we see that in the first premise, St Thomas observes that some beings are more or less good. He appears to be referring here to participation in the second sense, that is, the participation of a substance in an accident. However, this 'accidental' sense of participation does not preclude, but in a sense presupposes, that the perfection can be both participated and possessed substantially³⁹. St Thomas also notes that one identifies the same formal feature possessed by multi-

³⁷ F. Kerr, *op. cit.*, 117–21.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ R. Te Velde, *op. cit.*, p. 27–30.

farious things. All of them participate in, or take a part of, the perfection, but none of them possess it entirely, i.e., *per aliud*⁴⁰.

Furthermore, St Thomas claims that perfections are ‘found in things’. There is a basic difficulty with the meaning of the assertion that perfections are found in things, for St Thomas gives examples such as truth and goodness. How is it that these are discovered? They are not empirical properties and thus not capable of being apprehended by the five senses. Rather than mere sense data, I argue that St Thomas is referring to the perception of a form by means of the intellect, as in the apprehension of the form of ‘truth’ or ‘good’ in things. The intellect apprehends the intelligible form present in a substance. The formal cause of each perfection is responsible for the presence of the quality in the object itself. Indeed, one finds further support for this position from the following consideration. One of the examples which St Thomas offers in the fourth way is heat. He refers to the cause of heat, fire, not only as an efficient cause, but also as a formal cause, and indeed considers it an exemplar⁴¹.

The reason that a thing participates in an overarching perfection is because different things possess perfections to varying degrees. In addition, Aquinas reasons that one can talk about gradations of perfection only in relation to a maximum of that perfection. Thus a maximum is presupposed by the very idea of predications of more or less. As Te Velde explains, a perfection can vary by degree in one of two ways. The first is internal to a particular form⁴². So for instance, some things can be more or less blue, such as a shirt or a chair, but blue itself is the common perfection. In another sense, various forms themselves can admit of degrees, as in how blue and other colours approximate more or less closely to white. It seems that in the fourth way St Thomas employs the concept of degree in the former sense. The fact that one thing can exhibit a particular quality to a greater or lesser degree than another thing implies the same perfection, as well as a common maximum according to which one can measure such perfections⁴³.

Such comparison of more and less, however, presupposes a maximum. But something can be said to be a maximum in one of two ways. There is an absolute maximum, and that which one might call a hypothetical maximum. An absolute maximum is a maximum the exceeding of which is in principle impossible, whereas this is not so with regard to a hypothetical maximum.

⁴⁰ L. Urban, *Understanding St Thomas's Fourth Way*, “History of Philosophy Quarterly” 1 (1984), p. 288.

⁴¹ L. Urban, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 38.

⁴³ R. Te Velde, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

Such as fall under the latter are determined by practical standards of judgment, as in the case of Roger Federer, whose seventeen Grand Slam Titles are a maximum, but one that can (and possibly will) be exceeded⁴⁴.

The fourth way, however, relies upon the notion of an absolute maximum. An absolute maximum is necessary in order to provide the context for judging between more and less. In other words, it makes no sense to discuss more or less without presupposing a maximum. As Doolan explains:

Troy's Helen may have been the most beautiful woman ever to live, but it is possible in principle to be more beautiful than she. [. . .] things are truly beautiful – not because they approach Helen's beauty, but because they approach beauty itself. If the maximum of the fourth way were not an absolute maximum, it would itself require a standard⁴⁵. (Emphases added.)

As Bobik writes of this idea, 'if there are standards for standards, then, it seems, there can be no standard at all'⁴⁶. There is a threat of an infinite regress and an inability to judge at all regarding the degree of perfections; without an absolute standard, there is no basis upon which to base the claim that something is more or less good than another, and thus predications of 'more' and 'less' are vacuous⁴⁷. In other words, if there is a better there must be a best, or if there is a comparative there must be a superlative. Indeed, as St Thomas writes, "«more» and «less» are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum"⁴⁸.

However, one can discern *prima facie* two particular problems with the idea that comparison requires a maximum. For one, it seems intelligible to speak of more and less without recourse to a maximum. One can talk about greater and lesser quantities of money, for instance, without presupposing an absolute maximum or for that matter any determined upper bound. Furthermore, it is simply false that the fact that something is more or less hot implies there is something which is maximally hot⁴⁹.

As Van Steenberghen⁵⁰ and Doolan argue, the "principle that where there is a more and a less there must be a maximum" is false⁵¹. One might call

⁴⁴ J. Bobik, *op. cit.*, *passim*; G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁴⁵ G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–8.

⁴⁶ J. Bobik, *op. cit.*, p. 35. Cf. G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–8.

⁴⁷ J. Bobik, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁴⁸ It is this point which, in my opinion, leads scholars to believe that the fourth way is Neoplatonic. See *Ibidem*; G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, pp. 67–8.

⁴⁹ G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, pp. 74–5.

⁵⁰ F. Van Steenberghen, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁵¹ G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, pp. 74–5.

this the “Principle of the Maximum”⁵². Doolan continues, claiming that this principle is based upon the idea that creatures are totally dependent upon God, and that no such analogue obtains in nature. If this were true, it would not only severely undermine the argument, but also make it susceptible to the most ignominious charge of circularity⁵³. Thus one can ask two related questions. First, does the principle of the maximum hold? Secondly, are there independent grounds for supposing it to hold, without assuming that God exists?

One must note initially that St Thomas does not believe that the principle of the maximum holds for all perfections, such as speed. Such a consideration is based upon his analysis of that perfection, which need not here detain us. Instead, let us focus upon the principle in relation to the perfections of which Aquinas gives examples and the importance thereof, trying to determine whether the principle holds for them⁵⁴.

In no fewer than three locations (*De potentia dei*; *Summa contra gentiles*), St Thomas argues for this principle of the maximum⁵⁵. This principle is also closely linked with, and for our purposes essentially the same as, the Platonic idea that diversity presupposes a prior unity. As Urban describes it, the principle is that “In every genus, there is a maximum of [the] genus; and the maximum is the cause of all that is in that genus”⁵⁶. One will notice that the first clause corresponds to the first premise, and the latter to the third premise of the fourth way, as we saw above. In light of the background of the principle of the maximum, it appears that the mistake in the objection is the underlying assumption that more and less refer to the intensive magnitude of empirical properties, for St Thomas holds that the *per aliud* can be reduced to the *per se*. What does this mean⁵⁷?

For Aquinas, an entity can possess a property in one of two ways, either essentially or not; that is, *per se* or *per aliud*. With this distinction in mind, St Thomas presents an argument for the principle of the maximum in SCG II, which proceeds thus. First of all, if an entity possesses some property by its very nature, it either possesses the property maximally or not at all. For instance, a triangle by its very nature possesses the property of being three-sided. It either is three-sided, and thus a triangle, or it is not. There is no middle ground. However, a triangle possesses other properties that

⁵² L. Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

⁵³ G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁵⁴ L. Urban, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 287.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 281.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

may be added or subtracted from it, such as colour. If something essential is taken away from an entity, as in the case of a triangle, a change in nature, or essence, occurs. The quiddity of a thing changes altogether. However, if a property can be added or subtracted without a change in nature, then the change of properties is not primarily due to the nature of the entity, but rather to another principle⁵⁸.

Thus one can also think of predication of more or less in relation to one particular object itself, not only as a comparison between two objects. So for instance, at t_1 , x possesses goodness to degree \mathcal{D} , but at t_2 , x possesses goodness to a greater degree, \mathcal{D}^* . But if the essence of the being in question remains intact, then there must be a reason that the perfection can increase or decrease whilst the essence is not destroyed. Obviously the essence itself cannot be responsible. Thus one has reason to suppose that the principle responsible for the increase or the decrease of a particular perfection in a substance is not the substance itself, but rather an extrinsic (participatory) principle. Thus Urban: "Anything possessed by entities in varying degrees must have received that property from another which possesses that property *per se*; otherwise, the property would have sprung into existence from nothing. But what has the property *per se*, has it maximally"⁵⁹. That which possesses a certain property *per se*, therefore, is the exemplar of that property⁶⁰.

Doolan holds that there are no examples in nature of this exemplar relation, and that the principle upon which the argument rests is therefore undermined⁶¹. But is this so? A light bulb that has been in operation for some time may be hot to the touch, though it is not nearly as hot as a teakettle, the contents of which are above the boiling point. The latter is indeed hotter than the former, yet neither is quite as hot as fire itself. Furthermore, both can increase and decrease in heat whilst the natures thereof remain unchanged. Thus the property of heat is received *per aliud*. Rather than possessing heat as an accidental quality, such as a light bulb or a teakettle, it is the very nature of fire to be hot; it cannot b u t be hot. Thus fire is truly said to be the c a u s e of that which is hot, primarily as an exemplar, for in being hot, all other things imitate the pure, unadulterated form of heat and receive that form from the efficient causality of the exemplar⁶².

The reader will recall that St Thomas noted that perfections are to be found in things, perfections which are not empirical in nature. Thus the ap-

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 288.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁶² L. Urban, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

peal is to an intellectual perception of the formal features of a substance, not to the intensive magnitude of a perfection. As Urban notes, St Thomas makes reference to fire as a formal cause, in addition to the other types of causality it enjoys⁶³. Hence St Thomas is not talking about the empirical property of heat but rather the intellectual apprehension of the form of heat in a particular thing. And whilst the form of heat and the empirical character of heat are inseparable, they are nonetheless distinct in the intellect. Whilst it may be the case that there is no absolute maximum of heat in the sense that there is no maximally hot being, it is the case that the form of heat has an absolute maximum. As Doolan himself explains: “This gradation of perfection in things reveals their nature as limited beings because each possesses the perfection in a limited way and none is equal to it”⁶⁴. Thus the maximally hot thing would not possess the form of heat accidentally or only in a limited way, but rather fully and essentially, and thus be the cause of all hot things. Having considered these matters, one can conclude against Doolan that the principle of the maximum is tenable, and one can argue for it without assuming that God exists⁶⁵.

One must note, however, that in the fourth way, St Thomas does not clarify the type of ‘cause’ which he has in mind. But with the background knowledge of other aspects of his metaphysics, it takes little work to realise that in the first part, Aquinas is discussing participation, and thus exemplar causality, the special type of formal causality. Furthermore, efficient causality is at work as well. One reason is that, as we have seen, exemplar causality implies efficient causality; one entails the other. Furthermore, for Aquinas God is the efficient cause of the *esse* of individual creatures. Therefore, since St Thomas is discussing the cause of the being of creatures, he clearly has in mind efficient causality. Whilst scholars often quibble over the sort of causality with which St Thomas is concerned, claiming that both views of causality cannot be in play, the argument makes perfect sense construed as an argument both from exemplar causality and efficient causality.⁶⁶

Aquinas conceives of the *esse* of a substance as like that of a participated form. This allows St Thomas to say, among other things, that the maximal being is responsible for the being of individual creatures, for creatures possess an act of being, in addition to another principle. But if there is no real distinction of being and essence, then the argument is again at a loss. We saw this in relation to the foundation of Aquinas’ metaphy-

⁶³ L. Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

⁶⁴ G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁶⁵ L. Urban, *op. cit.*, pp. 287–8. Cf. G. Doolan, *op. cit.*, pp. 74–5.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 283, 286.

sics. The problem for the fourth way might be phrased this way. If the *esse* of a creature is not some distinct principle, not a distinct perfection, then there is no reason to suppose that it is caused or required to be caused by a maximal being.

Having examined the fourth way, however, this question can be cast in a new light. In the world, one observes various things which have being, from inanimate objects to highly complex and sophisticated creatures. Thus the mere possession of being does not of necessity determine the type of thing that something is; the mere act of being does not fix a creature's capacities, characteristics, *etc.* Thus, in addition to being, there must be at least one other principle the rôle of which is to determine or help to determine the identity of a particular being. And it is this principle, reasoning as St Thomas might, that one calls essence, or *essentia*. Whilst one might dispute the starting point that one observes goodness or nobility in creatures, it is surely indubitable that one observes being in various sorts of things, or apprehends the fact that other things just are. Furthermore, in keeping with the other three ways, the being of a creature depends upon the being of another. The being responsible for the limited being of individual creatures must be a fully actualised being, hence God.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to accomplish three major tasks. The first was to 'contextualise' Aquinas, that is, to identify key historical factors that would be relevant to the evaluation of his arguments. As we saw, there is reason to suppose that in contemporary setting, his arguments might be misunderstood, or certain implicit ideas might be missed. The second task was to argue, against certain currents in recent scholarship, that Aquinas' fourth way is not Neoplatonic, at least not in the way that is generally supposed. Indeed, I have argued for reading this argument not as a *sui generis* way, but as still integrally connected to the rest of Aquinas' *viae*. Finally, having discussed some of the background of the argument, I hazarded a rehabilitation of the argument which would meet contemporary objections and avoid concerns over sheer anachronism. Much more could be said, of course, but I submit that once the argument is contextualised and philosophical responses to contemporary criticisms are ventured, the argument can stand as a tenable and respectable argument to be considered in the present day. The hope is that this piece will contribute to recovering the concept of participation from the history of ideas and preserving its place in philosophical and theological discourse. 

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MATTHEW W. KNOTTS – doktorant w KU Leuven dzięki grantowi Flamandzkiej Fundacji Naukowej. Jego dysertacja doktorska zatytułowana *Prawda i Tradycja*, ma za zadanie wykazać obecność Augustyńskiej koncepcji iluminacji we współczesnej filozofii, zwłaszcza w hermeneutyce Gadamera. Analizuje w niej konkurencyjne, pozostające ze sobą w krytycznym dialogu, koncepcje prawdy i racjonalności z perspektywy teologicznej, filozoficznej i historycznej.

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