

THOMISTIC MORAL ARGUMENTS

B. Kyle Keltz

THOMAS AQUINAS IS often mentioned in the conversation regarding the moral argument for God's existence. Those that mention Aquinas usually cite his *Quarta Via* ("Fourth Way")¹ as an example of an argument that attempts to use morality as evidence that points to the existence of God. For example, William Lane Craig mentions that

Aquinas's Fourth Way is a type of moral argument. He observes that we find in the world a gradation of values: some things are more good, more true, more noble, and so forth, than other things. Such comparative terms describe the varying degrees to which things approach a superlative standard: the most good, most true, and so forth. There must therefore exist something that is the best and truest and noblest thing of all. Aquinas believed that whatever possesses a property more fully than anything else is the cause of that property in other

1. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (ST) I, 2, 3.

Kyle Keltz teaches introductory philosophy at South Plains College in Levelland, Texas. He received his MA (Apologetics) from Southern Evangelical Seminary, where he is also currently working on his Ph.D. degree in Philosophy of Religion.

things. Hence, there is some being that is the cause of the existence, goodness, and any other perfection of finite beings, and this being we call “God.”²

So, as many suggest, Aquinas’ argument can be used as a moral argument because it argues that the hierarchy of goodness, truth, and nobility in the world points to the existence of God, Who “is the best and truest and noblest thing of all.”

However, recently scholars have argued that a proper understanding of Aquinas’ metaphysics entails that God cannot be thought of as a moral agent.³ This raises the question of whether Aquinas’ Fourth Way was intended as a moral argument. Surely Aquinas would not attempt to use morality as a hierarchy that finds its perfect exemplar in God if Aquinas did not think that God could be properly thought of as a moral agent.

In regard to this question, in this article I will discuss Aquinas’ philosophy and its relation to the moral argument for God’s existence. First I will briefly explain how contemporary scholars formulate and defend the moral argument. This will help to contrast the contemporary argument with Aquinas’ Fourth Way. Next will be a discussion of the defense of Aquinas’ Fourth Way and an explanation of how it is not meant as a moral argument for God’s existence. Then I will provide alternative arguments from Aquinas’ writings that, in stark contrast to the contemporary arguments, argue that morality must exist because God exists. Lastly, I will discuss the apologetic uses of these arguments and suggest that they can supplement classical apologetic approaches by providing philosophical evidence for the reality of sin and the human need for a Savior.

2. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 104.

3. See Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (New York: Continuum Books, 2006), 84-105; and Richard G. Howe, “Does Morality Need God in Order to Be Objective? The ‘Yes and No’ Answer of Thomism” (paper presented at the 67th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, Georgia, November 17-19, 2015), accessed July 21, 2016, http://richardghowe.com/index_html_files/Morality.pdf.

THE CONTEMPORARY MORAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

The moral argument for God's existence is defended by many Christian scholars today including David Baggett, Paul Copan, William Lane Craig, C. Stephen Evans, Mark D. Linville, and Jerry L. Walls.⁴ A general formulation of the argument would look similar to the following:

1. There are objective moral facts.
2. God provides the best explanation of the existence of objective moral facts.
3. Therefore, (probably) God exists.⁵

The defense of the first premise usually entails emphasizing the proper basicity of objective morality or the unintuitive consequences of rejecting objective moral facts. The second premise is defended by explaining that moral facts cannot be objective unless there exists an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God. Without a perfectly moral, all-powerful, and all-knowing Lawgiver, it seems that there cannot be a moral standard that is binding on humanity. If God is not perfectly moral, then He might promulgate unjust laws, judge transgressions unfairly, or unjustly pardon those who deserve punishment; if God is not all-powerful, then He may fail to punish every transgression of the moral law; and if God is not all-knowing, then He might not know of each transgression of the moral law. Thus, if objective moral facts exist, then God must (or most likely) exist(s) because these facts could not exist without Him.

4. David Baggett and Jerry L. Walls, *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Paul Copan, "The Moral Argument," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Chad Meister and Paul Copan (New York: Routledge, 2013), 422-432; Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 172-183; C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 107-148; and Mark D. Linville, "The Moral Argument," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 391-448.

5. This formulation is from C. Stephen Evans, "Moral Arguments for the Existence of God," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2014 Edition), ed. Edward Zalta, accessed July 22, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/moral-arguments-god>.

THE SUPPOSED THOMISTIC MORAL ARGUMENT FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

Aquinas' Fourth Way is very brief and assumes that the reader is familiar with medieval scholastic metaphysics. Because of this it is often misunderstood. It says:

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But "more" and "less" are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaph. ii*. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.⁶

There are two main steps to this argument. The first is establishing that a gradation of certain qualities points to a superlative source of these qualities. The second is showing how this points to God's existence.

6. *STI*, 2, 3; 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 (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Enrique Alorcon, accessed July 27, 2016, <http://www.corpusthomicum.org/>). All English quotes from the *Summa Theologiae* are from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, first complete American ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

Aquinas' Use of 'Good', 'True', and 'Noble'

Before briefly explaining these two steps it will be good to discuss what Aquinas is mentioning when he says 'good', 'true', and 'noble'. To many modern readers, these words will invoke notions of morality. For example, today 'good' is often thought to mean 'moral excellence', 'true' can mean 'loyal' or 'truthful', and 'noble' may be associated with 'righteousness'. However, this is far from what Aquinas is mentioning in the Fourth Way.

Here Aquinas is using the adjectives 'good' (*bonus*), 'true' (*verus*), and 'noble' (*nobilis*) as metaphysical terms, not moral terms. Following Aristotle, he believes that being is something that cannot be a genus.⁷ In other words, there are no species or subcategories that can be added to being. However, Aquinas says that the word 'being' does not fully communicate all of the aspects of being.

So Aquinas discusses several terms that are interchangeable with being that can describe it in differing ways. The terms he discusses are 'thing', 'one', 'something', 'good', and 'true'.⁸ These are known as the 'transcendentals' because they are common to all beings and, like the concept of being, cannot be genera.

For example, Aquinas argues that the 'good' is 'that which is desirable' and that goodness and being are similar concepts:

The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. i): "Goodness is what all desire." Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is actual. Therefore it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it exists; for it is existence that makes all things actual, as is clear from the foregoing. Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really.⁹

Here Aquinas is not only saying that the good is that which is desirable, but also that things are only desirable as far as they are more or less perfect examples of their kind. So goodness and being are interchangeable concepts because something is less desirable the less

7. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate (De Ver.)*, 1, 1.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *ST I*, 5, 1.

actual it is. Goodness describes being as it corresponds to the power of the will.¹⁰ Likewise, something is more ‘true’ as far as it is a more or less perfect example of its kind. So truth and beings are interchangeable concepts because something is less true the less actual it is. Truth describes being as it corresponds to the power of the intellect.¹¹

So while discussing the Fourth Way, Aquinas is not referencing morality when he uses the terms ‘good’, ‘true’, and ‘noble’.¹² Instead, he is simply referencing differing aspects of the concept of being. Knowing this makes it easier to understand the two steps of defending the Fourth Way.

Defending the Fourth Way

As mentioned above, the first step to defending the Fourth Way is to establish that a gradation of certain qualities points to a superlative source of these qualities. As Aquinas mentions, the world we observe is full of things that have differing grades of goodness, truth, and excellence. This is just another way of saying that the world consists of a hierarchy of beings, which consists of beings that possess differing degrees of being.

The reason that this hierarchy of beings points to a superlative source is due to the nature of contingent beings. In an earlier work, Aquinas makes a similar argument to the Fourth Way that explains why he thinks a hierarchy of contingent beings needs a superlative source. He says that

whenever something is found to be in several things by participation in various degrees, it must be derived by those

10. *De Ver.*, 1, 1.

11. *Ibid.*

12. It is acceptable, and best for avoiding confusion with modern readers, to translate the word *nobilis* to “excellent” instead of “noble”. The context shows that Aquinas is certainly referring to excellence when he uses the word *nobilis*. This is especially because when Aquinas makes similar arguments elsewhere in his writings, he mentions transcendentals and not moral qualities. For a good discussion concerning Aquinas’ use of the term *nobilis*, see John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 471-472.

in which it exists imperfectly from that one in which it exists most perfectly: because where there are positive degrees of a thing so that we ascribe it to this one more and to that one less, this is in reference to one thing to which they approach, one nearer than another: for if each one were of itself competent to have it, there would be no reason why one should have it more than another.¹³

Aquinas is saying that if something only has a finite amount of being (e.g. goodness, truth, or excellence) then being is accidental to that thing. This means that being cannot be an essential part of anything that has a finite amount of being.

This points to the necessity of a superlative source of being that determines and causes the essences of all contingent beings and leads to the second step in defending the Fourth Way. If being were a part of the essence of things, then “there would be no reason why one should have it more than another.” For example, an oak tree cannot be more or less a tree. As long as it stays intact, it will always fully be a tree because ‘treeness’ is a part of its essence. So if being were a part of the essences of things, then there would be no gradation of being in things because all things would possess being to the fullest degree.¹⁴

However, we do not find this to be the case and instead find a hierarchy of beings that have differing finite amounts of being. For example, rocks have less goodness than plants because rocks are not alive; plants have less goodness because they cannot move themselves like non-human animals; and animals lack the rational and volitional powers found in humans. But since being is not a part of the essence of contingent things, the amount of being they possess must be efficiently and formally caused by something external to themselves. Their forms must exist in a source that efficiently actualizes them. This necessitates a superlative source of being because there cannot be an infinite regress of beings that have a formal cause of their being. To cause something contingent requires joining a form (e.g., the blueprint of a house) with matter (e.g., the materials for building a house). If at any time the form of a thing were to cease to exist, then the thing itself would cease to exist because matter without form is

13. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei (De Pot.)*, 3, 5.

14. Edward Feser, *Aquinas: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010), 107.

nothing but pure potency, which is basically nothing. Thus, if all of the beings in an infinite chain of formal causality receive their forms from something else, the chain itself is an impossibility. None of the beings in such a chain produce their ability for formal causality, and thus, as a whole, they would all be causally impotent. There must be something that lacks a formal cause and is not limited in being by an essence to act as the source of all formal causality. But the only thing that can meet this requirement is a being in which its essence is identical with its existence. Such a being would lack the need to receive being and would possess infinite goodness, truth, and excellence. And as Aquinas famously says, “this we call God.”

The Fourth Way Is Not a Moral Argument for God’s Existence

As mentioned above, Aquinas’ Fourth Way is often cited as an example of the moral argument for God’s existence. It should now be clear why this is mistaken. Aquinas’ use of the terms ‘good’, ‘true’, and ‘noble’ is in reference to the different aspects of being as opposed to moral qualities. This alone is enough to show that those who think that Aquinas’ Fourth Way is a moral argument are mistaken.

However, there are at least two more significant reasons why the Fourth Way differs from moral arguments for God’s existence. The first reason regards the line of reasoning in the Fourth Way. As shown, this argument emphasizes the existence of a hierarchy of beings with varying degrees of perfection and determines that there needs to be a superlative source for these perfections. This line of reasoning would be rendered incoherent if the terms that Aquinas uses were meant to reference moral qualities. This is because Aquinas would be arguing that the differing degrees of morality found among humans needs a superlative source that possesses an infinite amount of morality. But this seems to be incoherent. To be moral is to obey moral rules. But this means that the degree of which someone is moral is determined by the amount of moral rules that exist and how many of those rules are being followed. This seems to entail that God could only be infinitely moral if He obeyed an infinite amount of moral rules. If He has created a natural law with a finite amount of rules, then it seems that it could be possible for a human to follow all of the rules and thus have the same degree of morality as God. This of course would be an unorthodox conclusion that Aquinas would certainly reject.

This leads to the last, and probably most important, reason why the Fourth Way differs from moral arguments for God's existence. The last reason is that the conclusions of contemporary moral arguments are not compatible with Aquinas' metaphysics. As shown above, the general form of moral arguments emphasizes that unless God is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful, then objective moral facts cannot exist. They conclude that because objective moral facts do exist, then God must exist (and be all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful). However, it was already shown that Aquinas is not necessarily referring to morality when He uses the term 'good'.

For Aquinas, something is good if it is a desirable instance of its kind. Accordingly, something becomes more perfect the more it actualizes its final cause. Humans are called good if they make moral decisions; that is, they choose actions that they ought to do because such actions are conducive to their flourishing as humans. The form 'humanity' limits their essences and determines which actions will or will not cause them to flourish. Given this, it seems that God cannot be a moral agent because God's essence is unlimited and He does not have a final cause.¹⁵ As shown above, the Fourth Way demonstrates that God's essence is existence, and God therefore is Pure Existence. This entails that God is not limited in His essence as are human beings, who must choose actions that perfect their natures, which are determined by their essences. Moreover, an implication of Aquinas' *Quinta Via* ("Fifth Way") is that God does not have a final cause. This means that there cannot be any final cause that God is working toward to perfect His nature. As Pure Actuality, God is infinitely perfect from eternity. Thus, there cannot be any actions that He ought to choose based on His essence.

15. "Morality has to do with a human choosing an action that perfects the human towards what a human *ought* to be by virtue of the kind of thing a human is, i.e., because of his nature. What is morally good for a human to do is tethered explicitly to what it is to *be* a human. We can see, therefore that not only is morality unique to humans among sensible creatures, but it also follows that God is not a moral being. This is so because God does not choose a course of action to perfect Himself as He aims at a *telos*. God does not have a *telos* and cannot be perfected because He already is infinite being itself—*ipsum esse subsistens*; substantial existence itself" (Howe, "Does Morality Need God in Order to Be Objective? The 'Yes and No' Answer of Thomism").

The reason Aquinas thinks that perfect justice can be attributed to God is because God is Infinite Goodness and infinitely wise. Aquinas mentions that

Since good as perceived by intellect is the object of the will, it is impossible for God to will anything but what His wisdom approves. This is, as it were, His law of justice, in accordance with which His will is right and just. Hence, what He does according to His will He does justly: as we do justly what we do according to law. But whereas law comes to us from some higher power, God is a law unto Himself.¹⁶

Since God is perfect, He can do no evil because evil is the privation of good.¹⁷ An evil action is an action that falls short of what it should be. God cannot do evil because anything He does is perfect in accord with His infinite power and wisdom.¹⁸ Regarding justice, Aquinas argues that God can only be said to possess distributive justice as opposed to commutative justice.¹⁹ God cannot be commutatively just because this is a justice between equals, which God has none. But God can be distributively just because to be so is for an authority to determine and distribute what each under its authority is due. So as Creator, God determines the essences of His creatures and actualizes them. But God cannot be unjust because this would mean that He somehow does not give one of His creatures what He, in His infinite wisdom and power, has willed it to have, which is impossible. So although God is not bound by a set of moral rules, He cannot do evil and is perfectly just. Thus, Aquinas' metaphysics seems to eliminate the possibility of God being a superlatively moral being.

THOMISTIC MORAL ARGUMENTS

So much for the possibility of a Thomistic moral argument for God's existence, but as mentioned above, this does not mean that Aquinas' philosophy is lacking in arguments involving God and mo-

16. *ST I*, 21, 1, ad 2.

17. *ST I*, 48, 1; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* (*SCG*) III, 7; Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Malo* (*De Malo*), 1, 1.

18. God can neither will evil (*ST I*, 49, 2; *SCG I*, 95) nor sin (*ST I-II*, 79, 1; *De Malo*, 3, 1).

19. *ST I*, 21, 1; *SCG I*, 93.

rality. Aquinas makes arguments regarding objective morality, but he does so in the reverse way from contemporary moral arguments for God's existence. Instead of using the existence of objective morality to argue that God exists, he uses the existence of God to argue that objective morality exists.

An Argument for the Moral Law

Aquinas' Five Ways (along with extensive knowledge of his metaphysics) include the conclusions that God has no efficient cause and is an Uncaused Efficient Cause (Second Way), God has no formal cause and is an Uncaused Formal Cause (Third Way), and that God has no final cause and is an Uncaused Final Cause (Fifth Way). These arguments show that God is ultimately the cause of and providentially guides everything in the universe.²⁰ God determines the essences of everything in the universe (formal causality), actualizes these essences (efficient causality), and guides them to their purposes (final causality).²¹

Aquinas believes that the only purpose the universe can have is God's goodness because God, Who is simple, can ultimately only will His own goodness.²² However, in willing His own goodness, God can choose to will things from eternity that are directed toward His goodness as their end.²³ Aquinas says that this is similar to choosing to ride a horse to take a short trip when all that is necessary is walking on foot.²⁴ God can choose to create a universe directed to His goodness when all that is necessary is willing His own goodness.

20. *ST I*, 22, 1; *SCG III*, 17.

21. "It is necessary to attribute providence to God. For all the good that is in created things has been created by God, as was shown above. In created things good is found not only as regards their substance, but also as regards their order towards an end and especially their last end, which, as was said above, is the divine goodness. This good of order existing in things created, is itself created by God. Since, however, God is the cause of things by His intellect, and thus it behooves that the type of every effect should pre-exist in Him, as is clear from what has gone before, it is necessary that the type of the order of things towards their end should pre-exist in the divine mind: and the type of things ordered towards an end is, properly speaking, providence" (*ST I*, 22, 1).

22. *SCG I*, 80.

23. *ST I*, 19, 2; *SCG I*, 75.

24. *SCG II*, 31.

The important thing in this line of reasoning is that God must direct all things to His goodness. In other words, God must order the universe to glorify Himself and communicate His goodness to His creatures.²⁵ What this entails is that God must create a world guided by an eternal law, which includes a moral law.²⁶ Using this reasoning, a Thomistic argument for a moral law can be formulated as follows:

1. God rules the world by an eternal law.
2. The eternal law must include a natural moral law.
3. Therefore, God rules the world by a moral law.²⁷

Although this argument has only two premises and a conclusion, its explanation is complex. However, there is an upside in that the Five Ways have already established the majority of what needs to be proven for this argument to work.

Premise one of this argument states that God rules the world with an eternal law. This follows from God's role as the Ultimate Final Cause of the universe that is established in the Fifth Way. God is the Ultimate Final Cause (i.e., the ultimate purpose) of everything in creation. Since He created everything for a purpose, it is a logical necessity that He order the universe to this purpose. Otherwise, He would be both willing and not willing the same thing at the same time, which is a contradiction.²⁸ Therefore, God rules the world through the plan in His intellect and by a decree of His will.²⁹ This is what is known as the eternal law.³⁰

God's providential ordering is called a law because it meets all of the requirements Aquinas mentions are needed for something to be a

25. *ST I*, 19, 2, ad 2; *SCG I*, 86.

26. *ST I-II*, 91, 1-2; *SCG III*, 114.

27. Austin Fagothey, *Right and Reason: Ethics in Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: C. V. Mosby Company, 1959), 170-176.

28. Fagothey, 171.

29. *ST I*, 22, 1, ad 3.

30. “. . . a law is nothing else but a dictate of practical reason emanating from the ruler who governs a perfect community. Now it is evident, granted that the world is ruled by Divine Providence, as was stated in the FP that the whole community of the universe is governed by Divine Reason. Wherefore the very Idea of the government of things in God the Ruler of the universe, has the nature of a law. And since the Divine Reason's conception of things is not subject to time but is eternal, according to Prov. 8:23, therefore it is that this kind of law must be called eternal” (*ST I-II*, 91, 1).

law: it is a command pertaining to reason,³¹ its purpose is for the common good,³² it originates from a competent authority,³³ and it is promulgated.³⁴ It is a command because it is not a suggestion or a piece of advice, but a decree of God's will. It pertains to reason because it originates in God's intellect and is meant to guide His creatures to their ends by the means of the law. It is for the common good because it is the means by which all things in nature are meant to reach their perfection and purpose. It obviously comes from a competent authority because it comes from God, whom is the infinitely perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-wise Creator and Sustainer of all things. It is promulgated by God in that He has embedded the law in the very essences of His creatures. Finally, it is an eternal law because it is a command of God. God is unchangeable, so anything that He wills, He necessarily wills from all eternity. In other words, there never was a time when God was not willing the eternal law.

The second premise states that the eternal law must include a natural moral law. The natural law, for Aquinas, is the participation of creation in the eternal law. It is called the natural law because created things obey the law simply by virtue of their natures. Austin Fagothey explains this when he says that

In all things in nature there are constant and uniform inclinations to attain definite ends. It is natural for the sun to light and heat the earth, for flowers to grow and bloom, for fish to swim and birds to fly, for man to think his thoughts and share them with his fellows. They are simply obeying, the law stamped on their natures by their Creator. Here we see the eternal law at work in creatures, the divine reason and will guiding them to their ends. Here we see the temporal effect of the eternal law.³⁵

It might seem strange to modern readers what Fagothey is explaining here. Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics does not subscribe to the modern concept of 'laws of nature'. Modernists believe that matter is passive and that the way it behaves is determined externally by

31. *ST I-II*, 90, 1.

32. *ST I-II*, 90, 2.

33. *ST I-II*, 90, 3.

34. *ST I-II*, 90, 4.

35. Fagothey, 172.

physical laws.³⁶ Modern empiricists define physical laws as ‘regularities in nature’.³⁷ In other words, there are forces in the universe that act on matter in regular ways, and this is why objects act the way they do and where we get our physical laws. However, Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics holds to a powers theory of causation. So Aquinas believes that things always act the way they do because they are acting in accord with the powers inherent in their natures.³⁸

Regarding the natural law, Aquinas believes that God guides inanimate objects to their ends physically. Inanimate objects are incapable of thinking and willing and therefore have no choice but to act in accord with their natures. So for example, the sun always heats and flowers always grow, all else being equal, because of the nature of the sun and its powers, and the natures of flowers and the powers they possess. Flowers and the sun have no choice but to do these things so they are physically guided to their ends. God physically guides things though not externally, but internally by sustaining things in existence as they act in accord with the natures He has determined for them.³⁹

However, God cannot physically guide rational beings to their end because this would violate the free choice that rational beings possess. Thus, God must guide rational beings to their end using a moral law. As should be expected, participating in the moral law comes naturally to rational beings because the moral law is known through the faculty of the intellect. Rational beings participate in the moral law by acting (or not acting) in accordance with reason in performing actions that perfect their natures (e.g. actions that are conducive to flourishing).

Of course, the conclusion of this argument logically follows from premises one and two. So the conclusion is true given that we have successfully defended the premises. Thus, if God rules the universe through His eternal law, He must include a moral law so as to govern rational beings. So given that God exists, it is certain that so also does a moral law.

36. Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Piscataway: Transaction Books, 2014), 69.

37. *Ibid.*

38. For a contemporary defense of this view of causality, see Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 42-71.

39. *ST I*, 103, 1, ad 3.

An Argument for the Sanction of the Moral Law

An argument that follows from the existence of the moral law is an argument pertaining to the command aspect of the moral law. Specifically, this argument emphasizes that God's moral law is not a suggestion, and as a law it must be sanctioned. This argument can be formulated as follows:

1. God must assign a perfect sanction to the moral law that is applied in this life or the life to come.
2. This sanction does not apply in this life.
3. Therefore, this sanction applies in the life to come.⁴⁰

This argument takes less explaining than the argument for the moral law. The first premise includes that God must sanction the moral law. This is necessary for at least two reasons. One is that without a sanction, the law would not be a command. If there is no penalty for breaking the law, then it becomes something closer to a suggestion or advice. If the moral law were a mere suggestion, then there would be nothing to stop rational beings from ignoring it. If this were so, then God would be failing in His providential goal to guide all things to their end. Thus, God must sanction the moral law so that it has the power of a command.

A second reason why this is necessary is because the law is meant to guide rational beings with free will. The law is not physical and cannot force rational beings to obey it, so a sanction must be used in order to persuade rational beings to choose to obey it. Similar to the first reason, if the law is not a law but a suggestion, then there would be no reason why rational beings should heed the law.

So God must sanction the law, but the sanction must also be a perfect sanction. Aquinas believes that God's ordering of the universe must be perfect because God is perfect.⁴¹ So this means that God's sanction must also be perfect. So it must be both sufficiently strong to persuade rational beings to obedience and also hold a proper balance between punishment and reward.⁴²

40. Fagothey, 203-205.

41. *ST I*, 103, 1.

42. Fagothey, 204.

This leads to the second premise, which emphasizes that there is not a perfect sanction on the moral law in this life. There are natural sanctions on the moral law in this life. As mentioned above, obeying the moral law is conducive to flourishing, so disobeying the moral law will naturally lead to bad consequences. However, the natural sanction in this life is not a perfect sanction. Fagothey also explains that

Poetic justice is not always done. Too often the good suffer and the wicked prosper all life long. This occurrence is accidental in the sense of being nonessential, but not in the sense of being infrequent. Few violate the whole natural law, and the punishments for breaking part of it are offset by the rewards for keeping the rest. . . . Unforeseen calamities play a large part in life and they are not distributed according to one's moral condition. It may be true in general that "crime does not pay," but in many particular instances it pays well. Earthly sanctions are too weak against strong temptations; one may find a bad conscience easy to live with for a million dollars dishonestly gained. For some sins, as suicide, there can be no sanction in this life.⁴³

Experience shows that there is no perfect sanction in this life. Too often those who disobey the moral law actually gain from their disobedience. This cannot be a perfect sanction because these natural consequences are sometimes avoidable. Thus, the perfect sanction of the moral law must take place in a life beyond this one.

This might appear to be an underwhelming conclusion. However, the weight of this argument is shown when determining what a perfect sanction must be. We have already seen that God is the ultimate purpose of all creation. This means that the last end of humanity is God. God's eternity along with humanity's last end entails that humanity's purpose is to be with God forever. Since God is guiding all things in the universe to their perfection, He must be guiding human beings to this end in this life.

It seems that the only possible perfect sanction would be the loss of a human's last end, which is to be with God forever. The reason why is because of the nature of this end. If humans were able to obtain their last end without obeying the natural law, then disobeying it

43. Fagothey, 203.

would have little consequence in the long run. Any type of temporal punishment would be nothing compared to an eternity spent with God. Anyone could disregard the moral law in this life, submit to a finite punishment, and then enjoy an eternity with God. But if this were so, then the moral law would not be perfectly sanctioned. Its sanction would lack the strength to persuade rational beings to obedience.⁴⁴ Thus, the punishment for disobeying the moral law must be the loss of an eternity spent with God. There can be no greater reward nor can there be no greater punishment for mankind.

IMPLICATIONS FOR APOLOGETICS

If given sufficient attention from Christian scholars and apologists, I believe that these Thomistic moral arguments can be beneficial to apologetics. At the least, these arguments can play a major role in classical apologetic systems that progress from arguments for God's existence to the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. They can fill the gap between the existence of God and the resurrection of Jesus by demonstrating the need for a Savior.

The first of these arguments can be used to provide a demonstration of the reality of sin in people's lives. If there is a moral law, then it is easy to reflect and know that each one of us has broken it. Moreover, if this argument is combined with the additional argument that disobeying the moral law results in condemnation, then this will demonstrate the necessity for a Savior. As C. S. Lewis says,

It is after you have realized that there is a Moral Law and a Power behind the law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power—it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk.⁴⁵

Of course, there is no argument that can show what, if anything, God will do for the condemned. But this is a perfect philosophical bridge to presenting the evidence for and explaining the implications of Jesus' resurrection.

A major effect these arguments could have is that they could help to focus apologetic arguments on the Gospel message itself. Sometimes

44. Fagothey, 205.

45. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 31.

apologists can get bogged down while trying to defend the existence of God. It is very likely that if this happens, unbelievers who end the conversation at this point will go away with their preconceived notions of what the Christian God is supposed to be like. Following the New Atheists, unbelievers may go away from the conversation thinking they have successfully avoided arguments for the existence of an over-jealous, white-haired deity who sends bears to maul kids when they say bad things about him.

If the classical apologetic approach were to expand from the existence of God and the resurrection of Jesus to include the existence of sin and the necessity of a Savior, then the entire apologetic conversation could be framed around the Gospel message. This would not only emphasize God's love in that He wants us to live with Him in eternity, but it could also amplify the significance of what Jesus' did for unbelievers when they are faced with the reality of their condemnation.

All of this can be philosophically proven apart from the aid of the Bible. So amazingly, the Five Ways coupled with these moral arguments have the ability to not only demonstrate the existence of God, but also the existence of the moral law and the consequences we all face for breaking that law. Thus, without referring to the Bible, one can prove that sin exists and that we are in need of a Savior of some sort. This is yet more philosophical evidence that the Bible comes from a Source beyond its many authors.

CONCLUSION

It is a shame that contemporary scholars go no further than to label Aquinas' Fourth Way as a medieval prototype of contemporary moral arguments for God's existence. This is a shame because not only is this an incorrect view, but also Aquinas has so much more to offer contemporary philosophical and apologetic argumentation. As shown, Aquinas did not formulate the Fourth Way as a moral argument for God's existence. His understanding of the term's 'good', 'true', and 'noble' are not the same as most modern readers assume. Instead of concluding that a most moral being exists based on the existence of objective morality, Aquinas' Fourth Way concludes that an infinitely perfect Being exists based on the hierarchy of metaphysical perfection found in reality.

Aquinas does not use objective morality to prove that God exists and instead uses God's existence to prove that objective morality exists. He argues that a moral law must exist because God must guide rational beings to their purpose without overriding their free will. Additionally, Aquinas argues that the only sanction God could use for the moral law is the reward or loss of an eternity spent with God.

Given the demonstration of the Five Ways, these moral arguments can have a major impact on apologetics. They can supplement the classical apologetic approach by providing a philosophical bridge between arguments for God's existence and the historical evidence for Jesus' resurrection. On one hand they can demonstrate the reality of the moral law and sin in people's lives. On the other they can amplify the significance of Jesus Christ's work on the cross for condemned sinners. It is my prayer that gifted Christian communicators will study these arguments and include them in their evangelistic and apologetic efforts.