

THOMAS AQUINAS, ARISTOTLE, AND THEIR CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ‘GOD’

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Abstract: The prime mover’s notable god-like characteristics, such as pure actuality, omnipotence, and unchangeability constituted the further blend of the figure into many religions, often as God. The most prominent is Thomas Aquinas’ modification of prime mover into God of Christian Theology, heavily based upon Aristotle’s metaphysics. However, there is no evidence in line with the that Aristotle’s prime mover is intended as God; Rather, Aristotle, as an advocate of science and physics, does not cite omnipotent power in any other instances. This essay intends to investigate the extent to which Aristotelian metaphysics is modified through the hands of influential philosopher Thomas Aquinas and evaluate the extent to which Aquinas’ *five ways* is reliant on Aristotle’s fundamentals, examining the bilateral interactions between Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology made possible by the interphase of Thomas Aquinas. This essay concludes that while Aquinas’ modifications have significantly influenced Christian theology, the original concept of Aristotle’s Prime Mover does not explicitly represent a deity. The relationship between Aristotelian and Christian thought reflects a nuanced interaction, where Aquinas built upon Aristotle’s foundations to support religious beliefs. Thus, the validity of ancient religious concepts remains tied to the authenticity of Aristotle’s assertions.
Keywords: Theology; Prime mover; Actuality; Causality; Metaphysics; Belief

1 INTRODUCTION

Christianity and Greek philosophy emerged from their own lineages, gazing across at each other beyond the Mediterranean Sea. Not much later, they would be brought together by the conquest of Alexander the Great during the 4th century BCE. This period soon fostered the two originally independent systems of thought to communicate, exchange, and merge with each other, forming diverged lineages of thought that are interdependent and intertwined [1]. The introduction begins with a brief overview of the two distinct subjects prior to their first encounter of each other. In the Middle East, Christianity was undergoing its early stage of development. The Council of Jerusalem was established in 50 CE, and Acts 15 addressed the inclusion of Gentiles, allowing Christianity to spread throughout the diverse Roman Empire. Following this, there was nearly a century of turbulence, with Emperor Nero ordering mass arrests and brutal executions of Christian minorities. Nearly 250 years later, tolerance of Christianity was granted by Emperor Galerius in 311 CE, leading to its integration with Roman society and government. Upon becoming the state religion in 380 CE as a means of unification, theological controversies grew more predominant, especially concerning how Christ’s divine and human natures related to each other, compounded by early disputes regarding Christ’s identity: a Son of God or, by contrast, God Himself [2]. Christian theologians would soon borrow from great Greek philosophers to answer these questions.

Across the Mediterranean, Greece was in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War and several other conflicts, witnessing the decline of Athenian power and the dominance of Sparta as Macedon ascended. Not long before, Socrates had been trialed to death, leading Plato to found his own Academy outside Athens. By the later third century BCE, the dominance of Neoplatonism grew prevalent, with Aristotle as a prominent figure. Prior to Alexander the Great’s conquest, which occurred around 336-323 BCE, Aristotle had largely dominated the philosophical landscape of Greece [3]. His works: *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, and *Nicomachean Ethics* being highly regarded. The exchange and spread of Hellenistic culture were accelerated through Alexander the Great’s conquests. Upon assuming the throne of Macedon, Greek language and architectural styles were quickly adopted throughout, while local elites of overtaken cities, including those in India and Persia, were often replaced intentionally by Macedonian and Greek administrators. In this way, Greek populations, particularly those of high-class thinkers and administrators, were displaced across Eurasia, fostering the dissemination of Hellenistic thought [4]. This foreshadowed an interaction between Christianity, which was already dominant in the Eastern Mediterranean, and Greek philosophy, whose significant cultural lineage interested outsiders.

2 INTERACTIONS UPON FIRST MEETING

It is important to note, though, that Aristotle is not the only philosopher who made his way into Christian theology; Plato’s thoughts were redrafted and cultivated into the foundational stones of Christianity long before Aristotle. Plato’s theory of the Forms, which posited the existence of an eternal, unchanging realm of perfect ideals, was moderated into the fundamentals of Christian metaphysical concepts, such as the nature of God and the distinction between the material and spiritual worlds [5]. Specifically, in Plato’s thought, the material world is a shadow or imperfect copy of the true, eternal reality of the Forms. This dualistic system of worlds was soon enveloped by Christians to become the earthly

and the heavenly realms: an eternal, transcendent reality beyond the physical world. In the same way, Plato's ideas about the soul being immortal and preexistent before birth supported Christian contentions regarding reincarnation and beauty. The influence of Plato on early Christianity is perhaps most evident in the writings of Augustine of Hippo, one of the most important early Christian theologians. Deeply influenced by Plato, Augustine's concept of God as the ultimate source of all goodness and truth, as well as his views on the nature of evil as a privation of good, draw heavily from Plato [6].

In some ways, the references to Platonic ideas are similar to those of Aristotelian thought. Observably, both systems of thought are drawn into the arena of theology, whether or not they were consented to by the philosophers. However, we may safely suppose that the two great figures are unlikely to supplement theology and its myths, given Plato's detrimental comments regarding propaganda and rhetoric, as well as Aristotle's determination of physics. Some modifications came later from Thomas Aquinas, notably from the Stoic school of Greek philosophy, which claimed that suffering and adversity are part of God's will. This school denoted that Christ embodied the divine reasons for which all things were created [7]. Additionally, Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr, in his *First Apology and Second Apology*, believed that God represented ultimate truth and that philosophy was a gift from God, while Clement of Alexandria posited similarly in *Stromata*.

Overall, the conceptualization of God is rather hybrid across the enduring legacy of theological evolution. This essay selects, above all, Aristotle's contributions to the conceptualization of God, as they are the most dominant and explanatory: not only through pure thinking but also grounded in the reasons of physics. In other words, Aristotle performs an excellent job of justifying the existence of God through the issue of infinite regress observed in astrophysics, making it one of the most appealing sources for Christian theologians. On the other hand, the works of Thomas Aquinas remain among the most frequently visited and discussed texts on the conceptualization of God, as various other perspectives, like the Gnostic, soon became divergent comprehensions and streams of belief. This essay will then discuss whether the modification of the prime mover into God was substantial and examine whether the two conceptions are reliant on each other to be true. However, it should be cautioned that "God" discussed in this essay is not the subject of God in any system of religion, but rather the partial vision at the time of Thomas Aquinas.

3 INTERSECTIONS OF THEOLOGY AND ARISTOTLE

By the time, almost all philosophers realized some form of a god-like predecessor of nature or origin. For Plato, it was "the One"; for Aristotle, it was "the Prime Mover." Others preferred "the Wise" or "Zeus," in simple terms. These conceptions of God were indeed fruitful and aspiring to the theologians of Jerusalem, in need of a conception of Jesus Christ, the god figure of their religion. For Aquinas, Aristotelian philosophy, already paramount, was calling for incorporation upon his own thoughts that would greatly serve Christian theology. In this way, he incorporated the Greek philosopher's thought in various forms, from *Quaestiones de duodecim quodlibet*, where he portrayed the teachings of Aristotle, to the *Summa Theologica*, the most influential work of medieval philosophy and theology, where Aquinas drew heavily from Aristotle's perceptions of the Prime Mover to formulate his own *Quinque Viae*, or five proofs of God's existence.

The Prime Mover, as described by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics*, is the ultimate force of motion, drawing everything toward its purpose without itself moving or changing. It is pure *energeia* (actuality) with no *dynamis* (potentiality). Standard causes involve change from potential to actual (e.g., bronze to statue). The Prime Mover, being purely actual, cannot undergo such change [8]. Aristotle justifies the existence of a Prime Mover by astrological observations, citing that the heavenly spheres only undergo changes in the sense of cyclical motion and are neither generated nor destroyed. In this way, astrology can suggest that the movement of the spheres is the fundamental material cause of any action. For example, the Earth is the material cause of an earthquake or rain, while the orbital motion is the material cause of sunrise and sunset, both of which lead to other actions. However, Aristotle claims a lack of a cause for the orbital spheres. If each sphere is moved by the push of its outer sphere, there would be no cause of movement for the outermost sphere [9]. This unexplained phenomenon is then termed by the philosopher as the problem of infinite regress [10].

Now we go to the ideas of Thomas Aquinas, specifically his five ways in three articles of the *Summa Theologica*. Five existences of God are justified by the theologian: the Prime Mover, the First Cause, the Necessary Being, the Absolute Being, and the Grand Designer [11].

Aquinas's First Way is an adaptation of Aristotle's core idea of the Prime Mover. Both thinkers agree that motion requires a mover and that an infinite chain of moved movers is impossible, necessitating a first, unmoved mover. However, for Aristotle, the Prime Mover moves things as a final cause, towards their ultimate goal or purpose. But for Aquinas, the God of the First Way moves as an efficient cause, an active force that initially pushed things into motion, more like the first cause described by Plato in his work on Forms. This difference allows Aquinas to later argue for a God who actively intervenes in creation rather than one who simply contemplates it from afar.

The Second Way has some, but no nominal, parallel in Aristotle's argument for the Prime Mover. While Aristotle's physics acknowledges chains of causes (like a father causing a son), he did not phrase it merely as a first cause because he believed the universe was eternal. For Aristotle, if the world has always existed, the chain of causes can be eternal and requires no absolute beginning, but only the celestial bodies as an exception, or the origin of the universe. Aquinas, however, rejects this. He argues that even in an eternal chain, every cause is dependent on a prior cause to be currently active; without a first, independent cause, the entire chain would collapse. Here, Aquinas diverges by asserting a God who is not just the first in a sequence, but the ongoing sustainer embedded within all causal activity.

The Third Way builds on an Aristotelian metaphysical distinction but reaches a conclusion Aristotle never envisioned. Both philosophers distinguish between contingent things and necessary things. Aristotle's cosmos includes necessary beings, the heavenly spheres and the Prime Mover itself, which are potential and indestructible. Aquinas, however, argues that if everything were merely possible, there would have been a time when nothing existed. Therefore, there must exist a being that is necessary *per se*, not caused by another. Aquinas's version is unique in that this necessary being is identified with the God of the Bible, who revealed Himself to Moses as the very ground of existence itself.

The Fourth Way is more Platonic in origin. Aristotle's metaphysics holds that actuality is prior to potentiality and that things are measured by a maximum. Aquinas applies this logic to transcendental properties like goodness, truth, and nobility. He argues that because we observe degrees of these qualities in objects, there must exist a maximum that is the cause of all lesser instances. This concept of a supreme being as the source of all perfections is foreign to Aristotle's Prime Mover, which possesses only the perfection of thought, not moral attributes like goodness in the Christian sense.

The Fifth Way seems Aristotelian, as Aristotle's physics is teleological; everything acts toward an end or purpose. However, Aquinas observes that natural bodies lacking intelligence act for an end, implying direction by an intelligent being. While Aristotle would agree that nature is goal-directed, he would not attribute this to a single, transcendent designer. For Aristotle, the purposefulness of nature is intrinsic to the forms of things themselves; an acorn becomes an oak because that is its nature, not because an external mind guides it. Aquinas, however, interprets this natural teleology as evidence of divine governance. In this way, he takes Aristotle's concept of internal final causality and transforms it into evidence for an external divine intelligence: a God who rules, guides, and perfects the world.

In summary, Aquinas draws from Aristotle the logical tools to argue for a first principle: the rejection of infinite regress, the priority of actuality over potentiality, and the teleological structure of nature. Yet in every one of the Five Ways, Aquinas modifies Aristotle's thought to better suit Christian theology. Aristotle's Prime Mover is the conclusion of a cosmological argument about motion; Aquinas's God is the answer to questions about existence, perfection, and moral order. Where Aristotle provides a philosophy of an eternal cosmos moved by an abstract intellect, Aquinas provides a theology of a created world governed by a personal, omnipotent, and benevolent God.

4 INTERACTIONS AND INTERDEPENDENCE

One may wonder how the two perceptions, one philosophical and one theological, are reliant and dependent on one another. This continues to be the question as the observation of infinite regress has been better challenged by astrophysicists nowadays; Modern thinkers like Hume and Nietzsche are also able to challenge the necessity of God from more dimensions. One of the questions may be: Does Aquinas' God still prove to be true if Aristotle's infinite regress is proven false? And vice versa.

We look at some examples first. There are two prevalent modern refutations from the discipline of physics. First, modern physics has proven the possibility of the movements of planets, or spherical bodies in Aristotle's arguments, to be caused by the Big Bang. Now, the outer celestial bodies are indeed not moved by unmoved forces but by the remnants of momentum from the Big Bang. This provides grounds for us to claim that we may be able to discover every cause for each movement or motion in the chain of causality, ultimately deterring the problem of infinite regress and, thus, the necessity of Aristotle's Prime Mover. In this case, Aquinas' First Way and Second Way may equivalently be falsified. If the infinite regress is falsified, there will be a physical cause for all motions, thus both the Prime Mover and the First Mover are dismissed. However, the other three Ways remain unharmed.

Second, modern physics has also shown that the fundamental premise of the First Cause Argument, that every event must have a cause, is false. The phenomenon of radioactivity is one such example of an event that has no cause. While it is possible to predict the half-life of radioactive materials, the exact moment when an individual atom will decay cannot be predicted. The decay of an individual atom is an example of an uncaused event, and defenses from theologians as of now are circular and unsound. In this case, however, Aristotle's Prime Mover is not necessarily falsified. Compared to the theoretical and metaphysical claim that all events must have a cause, Aristotle's infinite regress extends to a much larger scale. We may argue that if the cause of the universe cannot be proven nonexistent, the Prime Mover may still be explanatory.

Other challenges include that of Hume: Hume argues that "necessary existence" is meaningless because we can always conceive of anything, including God, not existing, unlike mathematical truths, which we must accept. He then contends that if God could possess unknown qualities making His existence necessary, the universe might possess the same, and we cannot prove otherwise simply because we can imagine it being different [12]. This directly points out the logical fallacy of Aquinas' Third Way of God, the Necessary Being; but as much as the challenge exists, Hume's argument does not weaken Aristotle's metaphysics of the Prime Mover one bit, suggesting that Aristotle's argument is independent from some of Aquinas' Ways. Similarly, since Aquinas' Third, Fourth, and Fifth Ways are all stated by logic and justified by rhetoric, we can say that challenges to the authenticity or weakness of Aquinas' later Ways do not put Aristotle's argument to challenge.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we can summarize by examining the Ways of God in Aquinas' assertions. While each builds upon Aristotelian metaphysics, only the first two draw significantly from Aristotle's reasoning of the Prime Mover. While these being proven false may not necessarily invalidate Aristotle, given that Aristotle's justification of the Prime Mover

is partially grounded in physics and minimally in logic and rhetoric, the dependence of Aristotelian metaphysics on Aquinas' theology is small. Conversely, we may observe that if Aristotle's justification of the Prime Mover is falsified, the First and Second Ways of Thomas Aquinas are immediately invalidated. Hence, we can still claim that, as a modification of Aristotle's metaphysics, Aquinas' portion of Christian theology is highly dependent on the authenticity of Aristotle's assertions.

It is important to note that, Aristotle's influence on Christian theology has not been confined to metaphysics. His many other works regarding ethics and the natural world are often overlooked portions of thought where interaction with religion is sought. While we may be able to dismiss religion's replication of that of God, Aristotelian philosophy remains keenly relevant as a fundamental to human belief.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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