

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS (1225–1274)

Philosophy and religion

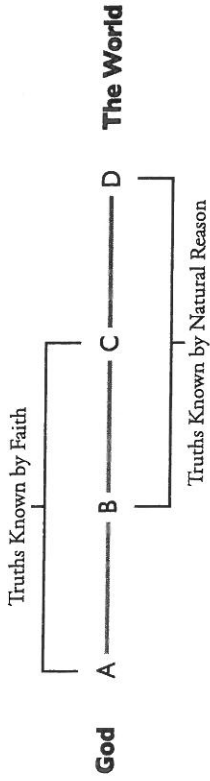
Thomas Aquinas was born around 1225 in Lombardy, Italy, to the Countess of Teano. When he was just five years old, Aquinas was sent to the monastery Montecassino to study with Benedictine monks. He would remain there until the age of thirteen, when, due to great political unrest, Montecassino became a battle site and he was forced to leave.

Aquinas was then transferred to Naples, where he studied at a Benedictine house that was affiliated with the University of Naples. There, he spent the next five years learning about the work of Aristotle and became very interested in contemporary monastic orders. In particular, Aquinas became drawn to the idea of living a life of spiritual service, as opposed to the more traditional and sheltered lifestyle he was accustomed to seeing with the monks at Montecassino.

Thomas Aquinas began to attend the University of Naples around 1239. By 1243, he had joined an order of Dominican monks in secret, and received the habit in 1244. When his family learned of this, they kidnapped him, held him captive for a year, and tried to make him see the error of his ways. Their attempt did not work, however, and when he was released in 1245, Aquinas returned to the Dominican order. Between 1245 and 1252, Aquinas studied with the Dominicans in Naples, Paris, Cologne (where he was ordained in 1250), and eventually returned to Paris to teach theology at the University of Paris.

At a time when the Catholic Church had an overwhelming amount of power and people struggled with the notion of having philosophy and religion coexist, Thomas Aquinas brought faith and reasoning together. He believed that knowledge, whether obtained

through nature or through religious studies, all came from God and could work together.



PROOFS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Throughout his life, Aquinas wrote an incredible number of philosophical texts that touched on many different subjects, ranging anywhere from natural philosophy and the work of Aristotle to theology and the Bible. His most famous and extensive work, *Summa Theologiae*, provides the most detail in terms of Aquinas's philosophical views. Aquinas began *Summa Theologiae* sometime after 1265 and wrote it until his death in 1274.

Summa Theologiae is broken up into three parts, with each part featuring its own subdivisions. It is in Part 1 that Aquinas's most famous philosophical text, the Five Ways, is found. In this, Thomas Aquinas sets out to prove the existence of God.

Aquinas begins by acknowledging that though philosophy is not a requirement in promoting God's knowledge, it can help theology. He then tries to answer the following questions:

1. Is "God exists" self-evident?
2. Can this be demonstrated?
3. Does God exist?

Aquinas then provides five proofs that show the existence of God. With his Five Ways, Thomas Aquinas combines the ideas of theology with rational thought and observations from the natural world, in order to prove the existence of God.

Proof 1: The Argument of the Unmoved Mover

We can see that there are things in this world that are in motion. Anything that is in motion was put in motion by something else that was in motion. And that object is in motion because it was put into motion by another object that was in motion, and so on and so forth. However, this cannot infinitely keep going backward because there would never be an original mover (and thus, there would never be the subsequent movement). So there must be an unmoved mover that is first, and that is understood to be God.

Proof 2: The Argument of the First Cause

Everything is caused by something, and nothing can be caused by itself. Every cause is the result of a previous cause, and that previous cause was the result of another previous cause. This cannot infinitely keep going backward because if there is no initial cause, then there are no subsequent causes. So there must be an uncaused first cause, which is understood to be God.

Proof 3: The Argument from Contingency

We observe in nature that things come to exist and then cease to exist. However, everything that exists needs to come from something that exists, and if it is possible for something to not exist, then it wouldn't exist before, and it wouldn't exist now. So there must be a being whose existence does not rely on the existence of others, and this is understood to be God.

Proof 4: The Argument from Degree

We observe that beings have varying degrees of characteristics (more good, less good, more noble, less noble, etc.). These varying degrees are being compared to a maximum (the noblest, the best, etc.), and according to Aristotle, the greatest state of being is when there is the greatest state of truth (the maximum). So there has to be a cause to the perfections we find in beings, and this perfection or maximum is understood to be God.

Proof 5: The Teleological Argument

We observe unintelligent and inanimate objects in nature acting toward a purpose, even if these objects are not aware of this fact (such as the food chain or the processes of sensory organs). Though unaware, these objects are clearly acting toward a purpose according to a specific plan, and therefore, there must be a being guiding them that has the knowledge to direct them toward their purpose. This is understood to be God.

ETHICS AND THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

In the second part of *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas creates a system of ethics based on the work of Aristotle. Like Aristotle, Aquinas believed that a good life is described by attempting to reach the highest end. And like Aristotle, Aquinas also spoke of virtue. To Aquinas, there were cardinal virtues that all other forms of virtue came from. These were justice, prudence, courage, and temperance.

While these cardinal virtues are a template for a moral life, according to Aquinas, they are not enough for one to reach true fulfillment. While Aristotle believed that the highest end was happiness and that the way to achieve this was through virtue,

Aquinas believed the highest end was eternal blessedness, which was achieved by a union with God in the afterlife. It is by living through these cardinal virtues that one moves toward true fulfillment.

Aquinas made a distinction between an eternal happiness that could only be reached in the afterlife, and an imperfect happiness that could be reached in this life. Because eternal happiness is a union with God, there is only an imperfect happiness in this life since we can never know everything there is to know about God in this life.

THE IMPACT OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

Thomas Aquinas had an incredible impact on Western philosophy. During his lifetime, the church was extremely influenced by the works of Plato and had dismissed the importance of Aristotle. Aquinas, however, came to realize just how important Aristotle was and incorporated Aristotle's work into Catholic orthodoxy, forever changing the shape of Western philosophy. In 1879, the teachings of Thomas Aquinas became incorporated into official church doctrine by Pope Leo XIII.

HARD DETERMINISM

There is no free will

Hard determinism is the philosophical theory that, because every event has a cause, all human action is predetermined and therefore choices made by free will do not exist. Though the assertion of the hard determinist that nothing can occur without a cause may seem rational, the conclusion that no one ever acts freely has sparked much debate in the philosophical world.

THE FOUR PRINCIPLES OF FREE WILL AND DETERMINISM

In order to better understand hard determinism, it is necessary to analyze four general principles involved in the discussion of free will and determinism:

1. **The Principle of Universal Causation:** This states that every event has a cause. In other words, if "X causes Y" is true, then X and Y are events; X precedes Y; and if X happens, Y has to happen.
2. **The Free Will Thesis:** This states that sometimes people act freely.
3. **The Principle of Avoidability and Freedom:** If a person acts freely, then he could have done something other than what he in fact did. Yet, if no one could have done anything other than what he in fact did, then no one ever acts freely.
4. **The Auxiliary Principle:** This asserts that if every event has a cause, then no one could have done anything other than what he in fact did.