

LECTURE NOTES XX

St Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-74) is generally recognized as the greatest Christian medieval philosopher and theologian. His incorporation of (the pagan) Aristotle's thought into Christian doctrine is a fundamental character of his ideas.

Aquinas rejected Anselm's ontological argument (Summa Theologica, Question 2, Article 1) and offered his proofs, the 'five ways to prove that God exists'. In this lecture we shall examine his first three proofs that center on the notion of cause. Aristotle distinguished four kinds of causation: material, formal, efficient and final causes. Consider something that is produced by an agent such as a statue. Here the material cause is the substance or material that constitutes the statue; the formal cause is the pattern or blueprint determining the form of the result; the efficient cause is the agency producing the result; and the final cause is that for the sake of which the result is produced, i.e. the end towards which the production is directed. Aquinas three proofs, based on the notion of cause, are variations of the same pattern-the cosmological argument.

The first proof is based on the notion of *change*. Things in the world change and there are two conditions for something changing. One is that it has a potentiality for being that into which it changes and the other is that there is an actual cause of change-for example, paper has the potentiality of changing to ash but there has to be an actual fire to cause this change. Whatever changes has to have a cause of change that is prior to it-nothing can change itself, be the cause of its own change. The cause of change has to have its own cause (something that can potentially be fire has to have its own cause that produces fire and so on). We can thus recognize a sequence of causes and *this sequence cannot go back to infinity*-there must be a first cause of change which is not itself changed by anything. This first cause is God.

The second proof examines the notion of *efficient causation*. He recognizes that there are sequences or series of efficient causes and that it impossible for anything to be its own

efficient cause because the cause must be prior to its effect. The series of efficient causes cannot go back to infinity-there must be a first cause. If there is no first cause, there would not be intermediate causes and nothing would exist. But since there are intermediate causes of the series, there *must* be a first cause. This first cause is God.

The third proof is based on the notions of possibility and necessity. Possible things may or may not exist and if everything was possible, there would be a time when nothing existed. But if there were a time when nothing existed, then nothing would exist now (out of nothing comes nothing)-therefore there must exist a necessary being. This necessary being is or is not caused by something else and if it is caused by something else the sequence or series of causes cannot go back to infinity. There must be a necessary being that is its own cause-*causa sui*- who is God.

We shall return to Aquinas' fourth and fifth ways in subsequent discussion.