



YOU CAN
UNDERSTAND
AQUINAS

A GUIDE TO THOMAS'
METAPHYSICAL JARGON

Totus Tuus Maria

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So, you want to understand Thomas Aquinas.

Good for you! The theology of the Church—to adapt a quotation from Gregory the Great—is like a river, broad and deep, shallow enough here for the lamb to go wading, but deep enough there for the elephant to swim.

Aquinas will take you to the broad and deep.

Perhaps you've tried reading one of his Summa's in the past only to set it down shortly after picking it up. Don't worry, you're not alone. One of the main reasons many modern people fail to stick with Aquinas is that he uses some complex metaphysical terms that they aren't familiar with. This book exists to introduce you to those terms which, we believe, will make Aquinas much easier to read and understand.

So, let's get underway.

Being and Essence

You can't read Aquinas without coming across the term 'being.' Of course, all of us use that word in everyday language. We talk about human beings, or, being unable to understand Aquinas!

For Aquinas, anything that exists is a being. You, dear awesome person reading this book, are a being. The stone you pick up at the beach is a being, and so is the rainbow you see in the sky.

Even the dream you had last night can be called a being, because it existed in your mind. But humans, stones, rainbows, and dreams are different kinds of beings, which leads us to another important philosophical term, ‘essence.’

‘Essence’ refers to what a being is.¹ You, reader, are human. That is your essence. For our purposes in this book, ‘essence’ can also be called ‘nature.’ The traditional definition of human is rational animal. When you understand what a rational animal is then you understand human nature or essence. Animal is the genus, or general category, to which humans belong. As animals, humans are material, living, and sentient beings. But what, traditionally, separates the human species from other species of animal is that humans have the power of reason or intelligence.

Essence determines what kind of being something is, for example, human as opposed to feline or canine. Therefore essence limits existence. To be a human—a rational animal—carries with it many limitations. Humans cannot fly in the air like birds, or breathe underwater, like fish. The essence of a thing also determines whether or not it is the kind of thing that can exist on its own or must exist in something else. This leads to our next set of important philosophical terms, ‘substance’ and ‘accident.’

Substance and Accident

Suppose, for instance, you meet a person named Mary, who is five feet tall, knows (and teaches) biology, and is the mother of one child. The property of being five feet tall, which we call a

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer, 2nd rev. ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), 30-32.

quantity, can only exist in a material being. Similarly, knowledge of biology, which is a quality, can only exist in an intelligent being. Finally, being a mother, which is a relation, only exists for as long as both Mary and her child exists. This is because the relation of being a mother has a foundation in two beings.

Quantities, qualities, and relations, though different, are collectively referred to as ‘accidents.’ The essence of an accident—that is, the kind of thing an accident is—is something that must exist in something else. In contrast, it belongs to the essence of a substance not to exist in something else, but by itself.² So, human, which expresses Mary’s essence, is a substance because it is the kind of thing to which it belongs not to exist in something else, but by itself. Cat is another example of a substance, and so is the metal Gold.

While Human, Cat, and Gold are kinds of substances, an individual person, such as Mary, is an example of what we call a primary substance. Mary is a primary substance because she is an actually existing human being, in which accidents, such as knowledge and being five feet tall, exist. Mary has what Aquinas calls real existence, which is existence in the world that exists outside of our minds—the world of mountains and trees, and other people. In contrast, a dream we have during the night only has cognitional or mental existence, for it only exists in our mind.

² “Since being is not a genus, then being cannot be of itself the essence of either substance or accident. Consequently, the definition of substance is not—‘a being of itself without a subject,’ nor is the definition of accident—‘a being in a subject’; but it belongs to the quiddity or essence of substance ‘to have existence not in a subject’; while it belongs to the quiddity or essence of accident ‘to have existence in a subject.’ *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 77, a. 1, reply to objection 2.

Without real existence we can only think or talk about a substance (or essence) in an abstract way —that is, to the extent we can understand it in our mind. For example, Tyrannosaurus Rex is a kind of substance—a large, bipedal, carnivorous dinosaur. But this is an example of an essence that does not have real existence. Although we have some understanding of its essence from studying its fossils, these dinosaurs no longer exist and have been extinct for millions of years.

So, to sum up, this human (Mary) or this cat (Fluffy) refers to a primary substance, whereas Cat or Human is what we call ‘secondary substance,’ which is related to the essence of a thing. While it might be tempting to think that God is the most primary substance of them all, that would be incorrect. God is not a primary substance.³ This is because, a substance always refers to some kind of essence, such as Human or Cat, to which it belongs not to exist in something else, but by itself.⁴ However, after the five ways, Aquinas argues that God does not have an essence that limits His Being.⁵ Instead, he argues that God’s existence is identical to His essence.⁶ This leads to an important distinction between ‘necessary being’ and ‘possible being.’

³ “A substance is a thing to which it belongs to be not in a subject. The name thing takes its origin from the quiddity [the essence], just as the name being comes from to be [to exist]. In this way, the definition of substance is understood as that which has a quiddity to which it belongs to be not in another. Now, this is not appropriate to God, for He has no quiddity save His being. In no way, then, is God in the genus of substance.” *Summa contra gentiles*, Book I, chapter 25, paragraph 10; trans. Anton C. Pegis, in Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles: Book One God* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 128.

⁴ “The word substance signifies not only what exists of itself ... but, it also signifies an essence that has the property of existing in this way—namely, of existing of itself; this existence, however, is not its essence.” *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 3, a. 5, reply to objection 1.

⁵ ST, I, q. 3, a. 4.

⁶ He expresses this by saying “it is impossible that in God His existence should differ from His essence.” ST, I, q. 3, a. 4.

Necessary and Possible Being

The description Aquinas uses to refer to God is Subsistent Being Itself (Ipsum Esse Subsistens).⁷ Let's examine this description more closely.

God is appropriately called Being, because, as mentioned earlier, anything that exists is a being. But unlike Mary, whose human essence limits her being, God does not have an essence that limits His being. This means that God is Being Itself, not human being, or feline being. Finally, we use the term 'subsistent' to describe a being that is capable of existing, not in another, but by itself. Because Being Itself does not exist in anything else, God is Subsistent, which completes the description 'Subsistent Being Itself.'

If Aquinas is correct that God is Subsistent Being Itself then God exists necessarily. In other words, God is a Necessary Being, which means it is impossible for God not to exist. There are two reasons for this. First, as Being Itself, God does not require a cause to give Him Being because He is Being. Second, as Being Itself, God does not have an essence that can lose its existence, as in the case of the essence Tyrannosaurs Rex, which no longer has real existence.

When it is possible for a being to exist or not exist, Aquinas calls it a possible being. Possible beings are also called contingent beings, because their existence is dependent on a cause. Indeed, one of the ways Aquinas argues to God's existence is through the contingent existence of possible beings. To put it very simply, if the universe and all the beings in it have being contingently then

⁷ ST, I, q. 4, a. 2, and q. 11, a. 4.

they must rely on a cause for their existence. And this cause must be a non-contingent or necessary being.

One way we become aware of contingent existence is through the fact that primary substances undergo different kinds of change. Let's consider that next.

Substantial and Accidental Change

Over time, a primary substance, such as Mary, will undergo change. Some of these changes will be in quantity, quality, and relation, and therefore they are called accidental changes. For example, growing in height, learning something new, and becoming a mother are all accidental changes. These kinds of changes make Mary exist in a new way, but do not change Mary's essence, for Mary remains a human being throughout all of them. However, as we will discuss below and in the dialogue, Aquinas will argue that a cause external to Mary is required to explain how she exists in a new way when she acquires a new accidental property.

Not all changes are accidental, however. Some kinds of changes are substantial, as when Mary dies, for example. Mary is a rational animal—a living substance—but upon death her bodily remains are no longer a living substance. Another example of a substantial change would be when scientists convert one substance, such as bismuth (a metallic element next to lead on the periodic table), into a different substance, such as gold. This can (and has been) done in particle

accelerators.⁸ Because Gold and Bismuth are different with respect to essence, this is an example of a substantial change. Maybe we owe the Alchemists an apology...

Substantial changes also require causes to explain the new substantial existence that is acquired after the change has taken place. For example, a new human being comes into existence when sperm and egg join and undergo a substantial change. We use the term 'generation' to signify the new substance that is coming into existence, and the term 'corruption' to signify the old substance or substances that are passing out of existence. Aquinas argues that the fact that a thing is generated—such as you from your parents—tells us something, indirectly, about your existence—that it is contingent. Indeed, anything that undergoes a substantial change—that comes into existence or passes out of existence—is a contingent being.

Substantial and accidental changes are only possible, because primary substances have the potential to change, which leads us to another set of important philosophical terms, 'potentiality' and 'actuality.'

Potentiality and Actuality

When Aquinas uses the word 'motion,' he means more than an object moving in space. He uses the word 'motion' to describe any kind of change. When your fingernails grow, that's motion.

⁸ John Matson, "Fact or Fiction?: Lead Can Be Turned into Gold: Particle accelerators make possible the ancient alchemist's dream—but at a steep cost" *Scientific American* (January 2014). <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/fact-or-fiction-lead-can-be-turned-into-gold/>, accessed on August 15, 2017.

When water freezes into ice, that's motion. When your hair is lightened by the sun (or hair dye!), that's motion.

Within this definition of motion, we find the concepts of potentiality and actuality (also called potency and act). Something in motion is in the process of being reduced from potentiality to actuality.⁹ Actuality is what the being currently possesses. Potentiality is the ability of the being to become something else. For example, if I am dying my hair from blond to brown, in actuality it is blond. It has the potentiality to become brown, but it is not brown yet. The process of dying my hair is the process in which my hair's potential for brownness becomes actual; my hair is moved from potentially brown to actually brown.

Most of us would no doubt agree that motion is a very common process in the world, and movement is caused by a mover. But in order to understand Aquinas's five ways, we must ask ourselves, "Have I ever seen something move or change itself, or have I only seen things whose change was caused by something outside themselves?" When your hair lightens, it does so because of the sun or hair dye. When water becomes ice, it does so because of the cold temperature. These things are moved from potentiality to actuality by something outside of themselves.

Those examples are pretty obvious, though. Let's take a look at something less obvious—the free actions of human beings. It seems that humans are capable of moving themselves when they act freely. After all, how can my action be free if I am moved by another? Aquinas does not deny

⁹ ST, I, q. 2, a. 3.

human freedom and he agrees that there is a sense in which you can say humans are self-moved. However, his point is that humans are not entirely self-moved. The reason is that no being can be (at the same time) in a state of actuality and potentiality with respect to the same thing. For example, suppose I decide to study the Chinese language. First, I have to know it exists before I can choose to study it. There was a time as a child when I didn't know about the Chinese language at all, but I had the potential to learn about it. It was only after I heard Chinese that this potential was actualized by another (the person speaking Chinese). Only after this actualization of my potentiality could I then choose to study the Chinese language. At that point, I knew Chinese existed but I did not understand the words and grammar of the language. I had the potential to learn the words and grammar, but I could not actualize this potential all by myself—for no being can be (at the same time) in a state of actuality and potentiality with respect to the same thing. Therefore, to learn Chinese I must be moved by another—a teacher, who actually knows Chinese. It is because humans cannot actualize their potential all by themselves—but only with assistance from external causes—that humans are not entirely self-moved.

Because, as Aquinas argues, all things (except for God) have potentiality, ultimately, all things are dependent on God to actualize them. And, although it might seem paradoxical, God actualizes humans in such a way as to make human free choice possible. Here is an analogy. You can drive a car anywhere you choose, but you cannot drive at all without gasoline (or some kind of energy source). Similarly, God supplies you with the “energy” (the actuality) that you need to make a choice, but leaves it up to you to choose what you want. So, even in the case of free human acts, humans are moved by another (God) but in a way that makes free action possible.

God does not need to be moved by another because, as Aquinas argues, God is pure actuality. God does not change but rather causes other things to change. As the unmoved mover, God has no unrealized potential. If ever we admit that a being has potential, then we know that being is not God. We must keep tracing the causes further until we do finally get to that one last mover. That one last mover—the unmoved mover—is pure actuality, having no potential and lacking nothing; that one last mover is the being for whom existence and essence are identical.¹⁰ That being—and only that being—is the one that we can call ‘God.’ Attributing the name ‘God’ to any other being is a mistake.

Linear and Hierarchical Series

The examples given above, about learning Chinese, and dying one’s hair are series of causes that are linear. In this type of series, one independent object interacts with another independent object and causes it to move, similar to a series of dominos. These changes take place over a period of time, whether short or long. Dye, for example, is applied to hair, and after a few minutes it changes color.

The examples of causal series just mentioned are also accidental, because the thing that has been moved is not continually dependent on its mover. For example, once I learn how to speak Chinese I can continue to speak it even if I never see the teacher who taught me Chinese again. Similarly, once my hair has changed color—because of the application of hair dye—my hair will

¹⁰ ST, I, q. 3, a. 4.

not immediately revert to its old color when I throw out or destroy the remaining hair dye and applicator.

But there is a different kind of causal series, called an essential or hierarchical one, which is very important for our understanding of God. This kind of series is one in which the thing moved is continually dependent on the mover. In fact, every member of an essential causal series is dependent on each and every cause prior to it. Imagine, for example, that you see Thomas Aquinas's great works sitting on a table. These books are able to be positioned as they are because there is a table underneath them. In turn, the table is able to hold the books because it is supported by the floor. The floor rests on a foundation that lies on the earth. Everything in the series is essential to the end result: the book sitting on the table. If you took away the table, the book would not be sitting on it. And if the house no longer had a foundation, then the floor, the table, and even the books would ultimately collapse.

Examining a hierarchical series helps us to see God as the First Mover. When we consider a series of causes that all exist at the same time, we immediately recognize that something holds the series together. The table holds the book; the floor holds the table; the foundation holds the floor; and the earth holds the foundation. But, who holds the earth? Gravity, we might answer. But, what keeps gravity in existence? Eventually, in every hierarchical series, we trace the causes back to a first cause, a power that supports and holds everything together in existence. That power is God.

Four Causes and Five Ways

Because there are different kinds of causes, there will be different ways of establishing that God exists. Aquinas was influenced by Aristotle, who discussed four different kinds of causes: material, formal, efficient, and final.¹¹ Each of the five ways involves one or more of these causes, and so a short explanation of them will be helpful.

The easiest way to understand the four causes is to think of a Sculptor producing a statue. The material cause is the stuff out of which the statue is made. Statues can be made out of different kinds of material—wood or metal, for instance. But let's go for the classic ancient Roman statue, which would be made out of marble.

The formal cause is that which makes it the kind of statue it is. When you look at a statue usually you can tell fairly quickly if it is a statue of a lion or human being or something else. It is the shape of the statue that tells you what it is a statue of, so in this case the shape is the formal cause. Usually, however, the formal cause will not be the shape of a thing. It is in this case because a statue is a human artifact, which is made to embody a shape.¹² A block of marble without a shape is not a statue. However, different natural substances, such as gold and lead can have the same shape when made into coins, for example, but they are not the same kind of substance. Gold is an excellent conductor of electricity, lead is not. So, it is not the shape that makes gold and lead different substances. Neither does matter (the material cause) make them different kinds of

¹¹ Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, Chapter 3, and *Metaphysics*, Book V, Chapter 2.

¹² Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, and *Metaphysics*, Book V, Chapter 4.

substance. Both gold and lead are material substances and thus being material is something they share in common. Instead, what accounts for the difference between gold and lead is that they have different formal causes.

The formal cause is something intrinsic to an individual substance, which gives it the necessary properties that it has. In the case of living things, Aristotle had a special name for the formal cause—the soul.¹³ A piece of gold and a dog are both material substances, but the dog is alive, while the gold is not. It is the soul, which is internal to the dog that accounts for why dogs are living substances. A carcass on the side of the road is not alive precisely because it does not have a soul.

Although it might be tempting to identify the formal cause with essence, Aquinas argues that the full essence of a material substance must take into account both the formal and the material causes.¹⁴ This is because, in the case of material substances, neither the material cause nor the formal cause by itself is a complete substance. Only together do they make a complete substance.¹⁵ However, when considering the relationship between these two kinds of causes, the formal cause is the active and primary cause responsible for making something to be the kind of substance it is, whereas the material cause is the passive and secondary cause. In this way, we can say that form is actuality and matter is potentiality, as discussed above.

¹³ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Book II.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer, 2nd rev. ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), 34-6.

¹⁵ This is Aristotle's doctrine of hylomorphism; see *On the Soul*, Book II.

Returning to our example of the statue, the efficient cause, is what is primarily responsible for producing the statue. The marble changes into a statue because the Sculptor hammers and chisels a shape into the marble. Now, although it is the chisel that actually touches the marble and removes stone, the chisel is merely an instrumental cause, which is incapable of any causal power without the Sculptor to wield it. Aquinas in his *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, describes the efficient cause as “that from which there is a beginning of motion or rest.”¹⁶ Clearly, then, it is the person who initiates the act of sculpting. While it is true to some extent to say that the human person chiseling the marble is the efficient cause, Aristotle counsels us to be more precise.¹⁷ Not every human being knows how to sculpt a statue out of marble with hammer and chisel. Only those humans who possess the art of sculpting, which is a kind of knowledge, are able to do so. But the art of sculpting only exists in a person, so the most precise answer is that the Sculptor (the person possessing the art) is the efficient cause.

The final cause is that for the sake of which all was done. It is the aim or the goal of the process. In this case, the final cause is the statue itself. The final cause guided the process from start to finish, exerting influence over the material, formal, and efficient causes. For example, marble was chosen because it is a good material out of which to make a statue—whereas pudding would have been a poor choice for a statue. And some kind of shape had to be selected and put into the marble, because an uncarved piece of marble by itself is not a statue. The Sculptor is the efficient cause. Lastly, the statue itself, which is the goal of the art of sculpting, is the final cause. Thus all four causes are necessary to give a general explanation of how statues are produced.

¹⁶ *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, Book II, Lecture 5, no. 5, section 180, trans. Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spath & W. Edmund Thirlkel in *St. Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* (Indiana: Dumb Ox Books, 1999), 95.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, Chapter 3.

The Structure of the Five Ways

As mentioned earlier, each of the five ways involves one or more of the four causes. The general structure of each way is to highlight something a thing possesses that it could not have given itself and therefore that must have been caused in it by another. Then it is argued that in addition to any natural causes that are involved, a cause resembling what is commonly called 'God' is necessary. Let's briefly outline this structure in each of the five ways.

The first way begins by trying to account for some kinds of accidental changes we experience through our senses, such as the person, who moves a hand that moves a shovel. Because no being can be (at the same time) in a state of actuality and potentiality with respect to the same thing, this way eventually argues, through a hierarchical causal series, to a first efficient cause that is pure actuality.

The second way focuses on efficient causality in general, arguing that the hierarchical order of efficient causes we experience demands a first uncaused efficient cause.

While similar to the first way, the second way is broader. Thomas says that it is impossible for a thing to be the efficient cause of itself. Therefore, instead of focusing on accidental changes in a substance, as in the first way, the second way can be used to argue for a first cause of substances themselves.

The third way focuses on how efficient causality is related to existence. Substances that are generated, such as Mary, only possess existence contingently, not necessarily. This way

eventually argues that only a being that exists necessarily through itself can explain why anything exists at all.

The fourth way is particularly tricky. It involves exemplar causation, which is related to the formal cause. To understand it, let's return to the example of the statue. The material and formal causes of the statue, the marble and the shape, are intrinsic to the statue. They are part of the actual statue just like eyes and nose are part of a human being. However, in this case, the efficient cause, the Sculptor, is extrinsic to the statue. But isn't it true that the Sculptor had in mind what kind of statue he or she wanted to produce before beginning the project? Suppose the Sculptor wanted to produce a statue of a three-headed lion. The shape that exists in the Sculptor's mind, prior to making the statue, is called the exemplar cause. It is that in the likeness of which something is made.¹⁸ The Sculptor tries to bring the shape of the Statue into conformity with the shape in his or her mind (the exemplar cause). For this reason, the exemplar cause is called the extrinsic formal cause. In the fourth way, Aquinas argues that the gradations or degrees of goodness we see among the things of the world indirectly show us that these things only possess being in a limited way. This way eventually argues to a cause that is unlimited or maximal being, which is both the efficient and exemplar cause of the being of all things.

Finally, the fifth way focuses on the final causality exhibited by non-intelligent natural things, such as an electron, which has a natural inclination to be attracted to the proton. When studying the fifth way, along with other texts of Aquinas that help to clarify it, it becomes clear that when

¹⁸ ST, I, q. 35, a. 1, reply to objection 1.

something non-intelligent has a natural inclination to act for an end (a goal) that is good an intelligent cause external to it is needed to explain why it has that natural inclination.

Reasoning to God's Existence

The astute reader of this book will notice that, strictly speaking, no definition of God has been given above. Indeed, even Aquinas himself ends each of the five ways only with a short sentence, expressing something along the lines of "and this we call God." Some would argue that lacking a definition of God invalidates all of the five ways, but this is not so.¹⁹ Earlier in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas had argued the following: "When the existence of a cause is demonstrated from an effect, this effect takes the place of the definition of the cause in proof of the cause's existence."²⁰ He goes on to say that the question of essence only comes after the question of existence has been settled. Let's clarify this with an example.

Suppose, upon returning to your home after a vacation, you notice that the back door to your house is open. Normally, it is locked. Thomas argues that "From every effect the existence of its cause can be demonstrated."²¹ Indeed, doors do not unlock themselves, so there must be cause for the effect (the open door). At this point, the effect takes the place of the definition of the cause. That is, we are looking for the "door-opener," to put it generically, even though we don't know the essence of the cause. It could be that a human picked the lock. Or perhaps, the door was

¹⁹ For a good article on this, see Victor White, "Prelude to the Five Ways" in Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*: critical essays, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 25-44; especially 40-43.

²⁰ ST, I, q. 2, a. 2, reply to objection 2.

²¹ ST, I, q. 2, a. 2.

accidentally left unlocked and the wind blew it open. However, later, when the hidden safe is found open and empty, it is clear the “door-opener” was an intelligent being.

Similarly, each of the five ways reasons to a cause, such as the Necessary Being, or the Uncaused Cause, etc. When all of the five ways are added together a cause that is Perfect, Unchanging, Uncaused, Intelligent, and Necessary Being, and which is the cause of the existence of all things, comes into focus. This description, while not a definition, clearly resembles the Creator God of Christianity and some other monotheistic religions.

In the end, if Aquinas is correct that God is Being Itself, then no definition of God is possible. To define something is to break it down in to simpler concepts. For example, human can be broken down into rational and animal. But not everything can be defined because then there would be an infinite regress. So, eventually, we must come across something that is most foundational in reality and therefore cannot be broken down any further. Being is that which is most foundational in reality and therefore Being—and thus Being Itself, which is God—is indefinable.

Diving Deeper

If you've enjoyed what you've read and are ready to dive deeper, here are two suggestions on how to do that:

1. Be sure to get our upcoming book, *Does God Exist: A Socratic Dialogue on the Five Ways of Thomas Aquinas*, which will be available in early 2017.
2. Subscribe and listen to the podcast, *Pints With Aquinas (PWA)*. The whole premise of PWA is this: If you could sit down over a pint of beer with Thomas Aquinas and ask him any one question, what would it be? Every episode of PWA revolves around a question Aquinas addresses in the *Summa theologiae* or some other writing. Think of the podcast as an attempt to take Thomas down from out of the ivory tower of academia to chat with you and me, the riffraff. Learn more at PintsWithAquinas.com