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*The Existence of God  
Arguments from Hierarchy and Order*



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# *The Existence of God*

## *Arguments from Hierarchy and Order*

### **St. Thomas' Fourth Way to Demonstrate God's Existence: God Is Supreme Being, the Cause of All That Partakes of Being**

The fourth way of St. Thomas is perhaps the most profound and beautiful of his five proofs of the existence of God. By the same token it is much more difficult to fully grasp, because it is more metaphysical and abstract. St. Thomas states the argument as follows:

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 book II of the *Metaphysics*. 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.

St. Thomas begins with the observation that there are many grades of perfection in the world. Some bodies are inanimate, while others are living. Among the latter there are some which are vegetables and others which have the higher perfection of sense knowledge, and above these we find ourselves, creatures endowed with intellectual knowledge and free wills. Even among minds and wills there are many grades of knowledge and goodness, and the same is true of human acts, some of which are more noble, heroic, and generous than others. There are also many grades of beauty and goodness in things, for not all works of art and literature are equally profound, nor are all the works of nature equally beautiful. Although all of nature is marvelous in its own way, the natures of things display grades of perfection, marvel, and order. The world presents itself to us in hierarchical form, with tiers of greater and lesser perfection. This is one of the most fundamental principles of sound philosophy, and there is no one who does not continually experience its truth.

Now the greater the beauty, goodness, and truth of a thing, the greater and more noble is its being, for being is the cause of all other perfections.<sup>1</sup> There are different

grades of being because each *partakes* more or less of beauty, goodness, truth, nobility, and ultimately of being itself. In philosophical language, this partaking more or less of being and other perfections is called "participation." *To partake* or *participate* means that things have beauty, goodness, truth, and being *in part*, according to their own manner and grade of being. If something is good, but does not contain all goodness in itself, then it *partakes of goodness*, or is *good by participation*. It has some limited goodness, but not to its fullest possible extent.

Some simple examples will help to illustrate the point: If a piece of metal is put in a furnace, it will partake of the heat of the furnace. The metal "participates" or shares in the heat of the fire which made it hot. The fire of the furnace is hot not by participation, but by its own nature. That is, the very nature of fire is to be hot, unlike metal. Of course, compared to the heat of other fires, the fire of the furnace does not have heat according to the fullest possible extent of heat. In this sense, it too *partakes* of heat.

Let us take another example. If we came into a house of many rooms heated by one large woodstove or furnace, we should feel it gradually getting warmer, room by room, as we approached the room in which the furnace or woodstove was located. And in that room itself it would get progressively hotter as we approached the furnace, until we actually opened it and put our hand inside! Even if we had never seen fire before, we would infer that the rooms and the stove were hot *by participation*, sharing the heat of the fire in different degrees, whereas the fire must be hot *through its own nature or essence*.

Another example would be if we came into a large palace and heard music, and we found that the sound got louder as we approached a particular room serving as concert hall. If we entered the concert hall, the sound would increase until we put our ears right up to the pipes of the organ, or the strings of the piano, which are the sources of the sound. The other rooms were *sharing* in the sound of those strings or pipes.

Or let us imagine several beautiful landscape paintings by artists of varying quality. We would say that the landscape paintings were more or less beautiful by how much they participated in the beauty of the landscape, whereas the real landscape was beautiful *through itself*. All the beauty of art is a participation or limited imitation of the beauty of the natural order.

In another example, let us think of a great professor, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, who imparts his knowledge to students according to their talents and application. We

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<sup>1</sup> For this reason traditional philosophy refers to beauty, goodness, and truth as transcendental properties of being, for they transcend any particular category of being, extending to all of being.

would say that these students *share* or *participate* in the philosophical knowledge of their master. Such participation in Thomism has its source in St. Thomas, the master and founder of Thomism. However, St. Thomas himself is excellent in philosophy to the extent that he too *shares* or *participates* in the truths of the natural order by grasping the first principles that govern that natural order. Science in general is nothing but the mind's *participation* or small share in the truths of the natural order.

Another example is a Beethoven symphony performed by various conductors and orchestras with varying degrees of perfection and beauty. These different performances are better or worse insofar as they are closer or further from the ideal that was in the mind of the composer. They *participate* in the ideal beauty in the mind of the composer.

Even in the Church we see that its members have many different grades of sanctity and heroic virtue, beginning with the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, the Apostles, John the Baptist, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Ignatius, St. Theresa, etc., down to its more mediocre members. Our Lady is the fullness of sanctity in a creature, but nevertheless, she cannot equal the sanctity of her Son, the source and model of all sanctity, of which all the saints participate and which they strive to imitate. The sanctity of Christ's humanity, in its turn, participates in the uncreated sanctity of His divinity, which is holy by essence, and not by any participation whatsoever. It is clear that all the participated sanctity in the Church derives from the essential sanctity of Jesus Christ.

Even in being itself we see many different grades of perfection, from minerals to vegetables, irrational animals, and finally, rational animals. These different levels or grades are like the different rooms in a house heated by one stove, or like the various landscape paintings, or the pupils of St. Thomas, or the saints who are disciples of Jesus Christ. All of these examples illustrate the same pattern. Things which participate in heat, sound, knowledge, truth, beauty, or sanctity all derive their participation from some first thing that possesses that quality in an essential way (or at least in a more essential way), and which is their adequate cause. St. Thomas formulates this as a general principle: **those things which share or partake in a limited way of being, goodness, truth and beauty, are caused ultimately by that which is essentially being, goodness, and truth.**

The reason for this is based on the principle of causality. What is lesser cannot be the adequate or sufficient cause of what is greater, but, on the contrary, what is greater is capable of producing what is lesser. For no one can produce in another what he does not have himself (either in the same or in a higher form). The agent cause must already have the perfection that it gives to another. No one can give what he does not have. I cannot give you ten dollars

if I do not have them. I cannot teach if I do not already understand the subject. I cannot give form to a painting unless I already have the form in my mind's eye. If this principle is applied to the myriad perfections in the world and the different grades of being, we see that the *various grades of perfections in finite things must come from a First Being which is maximally perfect in being, truth, goodness and beauty.*

The fact that one room is hotter than another cannot be explained by itself, but only by its proximity to a source of heat which is hot through itself. Likewise, the fact that one creature has more nobility of being than another must come from having received a greater share or participation from a Source of Being, a First Being which is full and unlimited being through itself alone. That is to say, the existence of a hierarchy of things which *share* more or less in being, beauty, goodness, and truth, implies the existence of something that *is* being, beauty, goodness, and truth *by essence*, and not just *in part* (by participation). And this First Being which is Being by essence—unlimited Being—and the source of all other limited beings, is what people mean when they say God.

Finite things which share more or less in being and goodness are like limited containers of being, or cups which hold a certain measure of being and goodness. The size or capacity of the container determines the degree of participation or perfection. Now it is impossible that everything is a container which has *received* its being and its goodness and its truth from another, for there would be an infinite regress. Therefore, there must exist some first being which has *not received* its being and goodness and truth from another, and which therefore does not *share* in being, truth, and goodness, but *is* essentially Being, Goodness, and Truth.<sup>2</sup>

The existence of these various containers of being, goodness, truth, and beauty imply that there is another reality which is their cause—some being, goodness, truth, and beauty which is not limited by a finite container of a particular mode of being. Such unlimited being is Being by essence, the absolutely necessary Being whose being and necessity come from itself and not from another. This Being by essence cannot be said to *have* being, but rather *is* being, and must therefore have in itself all the perfections of being, unlimited by any finite essence. God is like an ocean of unlimited being and unlimited perfection.

In contrast, we say of things in our world that they *have* being, not that they *are* being. This is because we see that their being is *received*. They have a certain essence or way of being, and when their particular way of being is *actu-*

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that this reasoning is valid only for every *pure perfection*. A pure perfection is one which does not imply any imperfection. Size, for example, is not a pure perfection, for it implies the limitation of matter. Thus there is no first magnitude which is the source of all magnitude, or first color which is the source of all color.

alized (actually brought into being) they begin to be.<sup>3</sup> St. Thomas's argument is that it is impossible that everything that exists only *have* being according to different grades of perfection. In order to avoid the dead end of an infinite regress, there must be something that *is* being in order to be the cause of all which *has* being. Thus there must exist some absolutely necessary being, who is being of himself, and hence goodness, nobility, beauty, and truth.

Creatures have a limited measure of the perfections of being, but God has (or rather, is) *all* of the perfection of Being, without any limitation. This is a very important conclusion, for not only does God exist, but He contains every pure perfection in a super-eminent way. Pagan religions, on the other hand, conceived of gods who were more or less perfect or powerful, but who were all nevertheless limited by the fates, by the other gods, and by their own moral imperfections and weakness. In other words, these gods of paganism do not correspond to what reason can know of God: that He is Being, Goodness, and Truth by essence.

### ***There Is Only One God***

It is easy to demonstrate now that only one God can exist. There can be many things which participate in being according to different grades or measures, but there can only exist one Being by essence, which contains every perfection without any imperfection, and which we call God. For if there were two or more gods, these gods would have to differ in something so as to be distinct. But a difference would mean that one would have to have something that the other did not. Therefore one of them would have to be imperfect, lacking in some perfection possessed by the other, and could not be God.<sup>4</sup> There can only be one absolutely perfect Being, who is Being by essence and not by participation. Polytheism is fundamentally (and rather obviously) contrary to reason.

### ***God Is "He Who Is"***

In the Old Testament, when God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and told him to lead the Jews out of Egypt into the Promised Land, Moses asked God for the revelation of His Name:

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Ex 3:13-15).

God revealed Himself to Moses under the name Yahweh, which means "He who is." It is most astonishing that God revealed to the relatively uncultured Jewish people of around 1400 BC the most profound aspect of His meta-

<sup>3</sup> This is true of both accidental and substantial being.

<sup>4</sup> St. Thomas gives this demonstration in the *Summa of Theology*, I q. 11, a. 3.

physical nature, that He *is Being* by essence, whereas all other things *receive* being. God revealed Himself as the Lord of Being who can give being to other things because He is all perfection of being. St. Thomas cites this Scripture passage and comments:

Moses was taught this sublime truth by the Lord. By this God showed that his proper name is HE WHO IS. All names are given to signify the nature or essence of something. Therefore it follows that the divine Being Itself is His very essence or nature.<sup>5</sup>

The divine name "Yahweh" (HE WHO IS) was revealed to Moses to teach that God is Being by essence, and thus has dominion over all finite and created being as its Lord and infinite Source.

### ***God Is the Creator***

The fourth way of St. Thomas has many important conclusions, such as the fact that God is Being by essence, He is all perfection, and there exists only one God. These lay the groundwork for the great truth of creation: God is the source of all limited perfections and participated being.<sup>6</sup> Wisdom 13:1-3 emphasizes the power of reason to reach the Creator:

For all men who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know him who exists, nor did they recognize the craftsman while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world. If through delight in the beauty of these things men assumed them to be gods, let them know how much better than these is their Lord, for the author of beauty created them. And if men were amazed at their power and working, let them perceive from them how much more powerful is He who formed them. *For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.*

As the source of all perfection, God must possess any pure perfection that exists, especially in the spiritual order, in an essential and infinite way.<sup>7</sup> For example, life is a perfection which can be possessed in varying degrees of participation. Therefore, all created life comes from a first Living Being that is Life by essence, who has every

<sup>5</sup> *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, c. 22.

<sup>6</sup> St. Thomas uses the reasoning of the fourth way to prove the doctrine of creation in his Commentary on the Apostle's Creed, a. 1.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that this does not happen with regard to material perfections, such as size, heat, or light, for these qualities necessarily imply imperfection because they can only exist in material things. God is not the hottest heat, or the greatest magnitude, or the brightest material light, because He is immaterial and these perfections can only exist in matter. God is the source of all dimension, heat and light, without Himself being in dimension, being hot, or being light. Nevertheless, God is great in a much higher way—in that He fills the entire cosmos, giving it being. Likewise, He burns with infinite charity, and the infinite light of His wisdom fills the cosmos.

perfection of life, without any imperfection. This truth of reason is confirmed by the Bible, which speaks of God as the “living God,” and “the Life” (Jn 14:6). The life of God is not contained in any body, for that implies imperfection, nor does His life involve any change, for the First Cause is immutable. Rather, God’s life is His infinite knowledge and His infinite love.

Knowledge is also a pure perfection, meaning that it is not dependent on or limited by material being as size or shape is. Knowledge of universal truths cannot be produced by a particular, limited organ like the brain, so intelligence in this sense is proper to the immaterial intellect. Now men participate in the light of intelligence in a limited way (some more and some less acute) but do not possess it absolutely. Therefore this limited intelligence must ultimately proceed from a First Intelligence, which is Intelligence by nature, and which includes in itself every perfection of knowing. In other words, reason can know that God is omniscient, a truth also taught throughout Scripture.

The capacity to love is also a pure perfection, for it arises from the will, which is the second faculty of the immaterial soul (along with the intellect) and which is not materially bounded by any organ. Now men possess the capacity to love, which is realized in varying degrees. This imperfect capacity to love must come from some first being who is Love by essence. Scripture tells us that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8), the First Lover who is Love without any measure or limitation, Infinite Love.

God must therefore be a personal God in that He has (or is) intelligence and free will,<sup>8</sup> and He acts freely out of love and wisdom because He so chooses.<sup>9</sup> God cannot be merely some kind of impersonal “Force,” for He would then be less perfect than His intellectual creatures. If God was only a force, to create man with an intellect and will He would have to give what He does not possess. And what a poor God He would be, reduced to a kind of force of gravity or energy field.

### ***Summary of St. Thomas’ Fourth Way***

The world presents itself to us in hierarchical form, with tiers of greater and lesser perfection. The different grades indicate that things *partake* more or less of beauty, goodness, truth, nobility, and ultimately of being itself. In philosophical language, this partaking more or less of being and other perfections is called “participation.” To *participate* means that things have beauty, goodness,

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<sup>8</sup> A person is an individual with a rational (possessing intellect and will) nature.

<sup>9</sup> Natural reason is capable of knowing that God is a personal God, although it is not able to know that this personhood consists in three divine Persons, for the mystery of the Trinity is known exclusively by revelation.

truth and being *in part*, according to their own manner and grade of being.

Created things are like limited containers or cups which hold a certain measure of being and goodness. The size or capacity of the container determines the degree of participation or perfection. However, it is impossible for everything that exists to have *received* its being, goodness, and truth from another, for that would be an infinite regress. Therefore, there must exist some first being which has *not received* its being and goodness and truth from another, and which therefore does not *share* in these things, but *is* essentially Being, Goodness and Truth: God. The being of God is not limited by any finite container, but is an ocean of unlimited being and perfection. Creatures have *some* of the perfections of being, but God has (or rather, *is*) *all* of the perfection of Being.

### **St. Thomas’ Fifth Way to Demonstrate God’s Existence: The Order of Nature**

The first four proofs of God’s existence were very philosophical, abstract, and difficult to grasp. The fifth way is much more intuitive, and takes its starting point from the order of nature. St. Thomas states the argument as follows:

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that they achieve their end not fortuitously, but by design. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore, some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

It is evident that nature works for an end in irrational creatures because animals, plants, and natural bodies always or almost always operate in the same way, so as to obtain the end that is fitting to them. However, order and purpose necessitate reason, but irrational creatures lack reason to order themselves to their ends. Therefore, all irrational natural things are ordered to their ends by an Intelligent Being who governs the order of nature, and this we call God.

A cursory look at nature shows us that irrational things are ordered according to laws so that they behave in fixed ways, which are both determinate and fitting for the natural cycle. Natural things are ordered to natural ends, and this precise order is especially evident in living things. Who does not marvel at the sublime organization of the reproductive system of living things, the code of DNA, the budding of plants in spring, the workings of the eye and the nervous system, the circulation of blood, the beauty of flowers and other living things, or the instincts of birds to

fly thousands of miles and to build nests in extraordinary ways?

Even the laws governing inanimate things, such as gravitation, are incredibly fine-tuned. Scientists speak of an “anthropic” principle, which refers to the fact that the laws of nature seem perfectly chosen and remarkably coordinated to support a world capable of sustaining human life. For example, if the gravitational constant were slightly larger the universe would collapse, or if it were slightly less the universe would expand too much, which would not allow galaxies and solar systems. Why are the laws of nature *formulated or ordered* exactly as they are? It is enough to observe that they are indeed ordered, and as such, they must ultimately be the product of Intelligence and Will, which acts for an end (the final cause).

Science can never answer the ultimate question of why the world is ordered as it is, for this question moves beyond simple observation and categorization into the realm of metaphysics. Indeed, every scientist must presuppose that the universe is orderly and does not happen completely by chance. If everything were by chance, there would be no point in the scientific search to understand the *order* of nature. Since there is an order, there is a finality or purpose, for order implies the ordering of means to ends. And this ordering implies that an Intelligence established this order, for marvelous order does not come about by chance, and irrational things cannot order themselves. It is absurd to think that the world is the result of a cosmic lottery in which the whole natural order somehow came up the winner,<sup>10</sup> but even then we would still have to posit a Designer who arranged for the cosmic lottery.

Order always implies intelligence. Imagine if scientists were scanning other planets for evidence of intelligent life and came upon a minimal show of order, like a series of rocks placed in a simple geometric pattern. They would be sure that these rocks were placed in that pattern by some form of intelligent life. What would they think if these rocks were placed in the form of a pyramid, or a Greek temple like the Parthenon, or a Gothic cathedral? There would be no doubt that these were the result of intelligent disposition. No one would be foolish enough to think that the temple was simply the result of chance forces of wind and rain, aided perhaps by some sort of natural selection. But the simplest life form on earth—an amoeba—manifests a design incalculably more intelligent and marvelous than any work of human art or architecture.

St. Thomas Aquinas, in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics*, speaks of nature as a divine art implanted in the very essence of natural things. In order to make a boat or a shoe, for example, a craftsman has to prepare his materials, cut them and fasten them together according to a pre-conceived plan, and treat them so that the materials and the form can last and endure. But the divine art works in a much more perfect way. It gives an intrinsic impulse to the materials themselves so that they naturally tend to make themselves into the products pre-designed by the divine artist. The tree naturally tends to sprout leaves and flowers and fruits all by itself, from within! Now if a boat or shoe is obviously the result of intelligent design, how much more so the divine art which makes its natural products make themselves and conserve themselves for their allotted time.

Finally, for the sake of argument, let us suppose that all forms of life came from the workings of chance variations and natural selection, as the Darwinists would have it. Even in such a hypothesis (which we most certainly do not concede), the development of all of nature’s varied riches could only come about in the context of natural laws that are perfectly suited to produce this most fitting, marvelous, and absolutely mind-boggling result. Well, what is the cause of those perfectly calculated natural laws? Could they be anything other than the work of divine intelligence and power?

### ***Proof of God’s Existence from the Moral Order***

A variation of the fifth way of St. Thomas can also be seen in the moral order. Every man finds in his conscience a moral law which he himself has not written or contrived, but which his reason discerns. This law tells him to do good and avoid evil, and it reproves him for every transgression whether he likes it or not. He may try to efface this moral law by repeated crimes, but the story of Macbeth illustrates that the moral law has its revenge on those who seek to obliterate it, murdering sleep through a tormented conscience.

Many people say that the natural moral law is nothing but the codes and conventions devised by various cultures for their own self-preservation. But could it ever be right to repay a benefactor with treachery and calumny, no matter what culture one lives in? Is it merely conventionally wrong to torture or murder an innocent and defenseless human being, or to sexually abuse children? What cultural conditioning would approve of incest or patricide, or blasphemy against our Creator, or genocide? Conscience bears witness to us that its dictates are absolute. If we infringe it, we feel guilt, not for having broken society’s conventions (which can never demand an ultimate fidelity), but for having broken a law which we sense to be fundamentally objective and universally binding. We may try to justify

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<sup>10</sup> See St. Thomas, *Expositio in Symbolum Apostolorum*, a. 1: “No one can be found so foolish that he does not believe that natural things are governed, provided for and disposed in order. For they proceed in a certain order and according to certain times. We see the sun, the moon and the stars and other natural things conserve a definite course, which would not be the case if they occurred by chance. Therefore, if someone does not believe that God exists, he is foolish.”

ourselves by denying it, but this is nothing more than a denial of the witness of our own conscience.

There is a moral law written on the hearts of men, and this undeniable fact must be explained by the principle of causality. The existence of a law implies the action of a lawgiver, an intelligence which established the law. Since the natural moral law transcends the will of any particular human being—for it judges all alike—it can only be explained by a lawgiver who is the creator of human nature. How could there be a moral order, if there were no first or supreme Legislator?<sup>11</sup> Both the physical laws of irrational nature and the moral law that binds the rational creature in conscience give mute witness to the existence of a Supreme Intelligence who orders and governs all creatures by means of these laws written into nature itself.

Law can be defined as the dictate of reason, established to serve the common good, promulgated by the person who has authority in a given society.<sup>12</sup> It is not by accident that the spontaneous wisdom of the human race speaks precisely of natural *laws*, whether physical or moral. If natural laws are truly *laws*, and not merely unaccountable repetitions of some strange chance, then they must be dictates of some intelligence in service of the common good of nature, promulgated by One who has authority over both human and irrational nature. Such Authority is precisely what men mean when they speak of God.

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<sup>11</sup> This argument is beautifully formulated by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*.

<sup>12</sup> See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 90, a. 4.