

THE PROOF FROM DECREES OF PERFECTION

St Thomas outlines the Fourth Way of proving the existence of God like this :

“[T]here is found in things something more and less good, something more and less noble, and other such as these (perfections). But 'more' and 'less' are said of diverse things according as they approach something which is *most* such, as more hot is hot which more approaches what is most hot. Hence, there is something which is truest, and best and most noble, and consequently in the highest degree, being, as Aristotle says (*Metaphysics* I, ch. 1, 993b 30).

“But what is *most* such in some genus is the cause of all which are of that genus, as fire which is most hot is the cause of all those which are hot, as said in the same book (*ibid.* 993b 25). Therefore there is something which is to all beings the cause of be, of goodness and of whatsoever perfection.” (*Summa Theologiae* I, q. 2, a. 3 ; and cf. *Summa Contra Gentes* I, c. 13, n. 34) [my emphases].

As the Third Way considered the *be* of things, their existence, this Fourth Way considers their *essences*. For, as we shall see, the essences of things are perfections.

Perfections

The first point to be made is that 'perfection' in philosophy is used in a special sense which reflects its etymological meaning, *fulness or integrity of being*. Whatever signifies some fulness of being, or entity at any level, is a perfection. So heat, life, wisdom, goodness, animality, humanity, love, truth, unity, beauty, power, virtue, existence (*be*), action (*do*), colour and shape, are all instances of perfection. The rock has a certain perfection ; it exists. The plant has a greater perfection ; it lives. The dog has an even greater perfection than either of these for it knows.



The list of perfections embraces a great variety of realities. Some such as heat, life, colour and shape signify a limited perfection for they are found only in certain modes of being. Other perfections are found in, or follow, all being. They transcend any limitations and are known, accordingly, as transcendental perfections. In Lesson 2 we considered the transcendental perfections *One*, *Something*, *True* and *Good*, perfections which attach immediately to every existing being by the very fact (*ipso facto*) of its existing. There are other transcendental perfections which are so only mediately, such as beauty, nobility, intelligibility and appetibility.

There is no limit in the formal reason or definition of transcendental perfections and for this reason they are known as *pure* perfections. Perfections limited to particular beings, such as vegetativity, animality, equinity, felinity, caninity and humanity, and those capable of existence only in material things, such as heat, colour, hardness, elasticity, shape, and so on, are known as *mixed* perfections since their perfection involves an inherent limit. To summarise—

| | | | |
|------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| | [TRANSCENDENTAL | [<i>immediately</i> , the | - one, something, |
| | [(<i>PURE</i>) found in all | [properties of being | true & good |
| | [being, & then either : | [| |
| | [| [or | |
| PERFECTION | [| [<i>mediately</i> | - as e.g., beauty, |
| fulness of being | [or | | intelligibility, |
| is either : | [| | nobility etc. |
| | [LIMITED (<i>MIXED</i>) | | |
| | [found only in certain | | - as quantity, heat, |
| | [modes of being | | heat, shape, colour, |
| | | | equinity, felinity, etc |

St Thomas's proof in this Fourth Way addresses only *transcendental* perfections.

Let's consider a transcendental perfection such as *goodness*. Trees, dogs, cats, men and indeed all things in the universe, though they differ in kind, are (all of them) good. Hence these many diverse things are united in this ; they all share in goodness. But this cannot happen without some cause extrinsic to them which unites them with this perfection. And this cause cannot itself be a compound with goodness because otherwise it, too, would need a cause of its union with goodness. Therefore the ultimate cause of this perfection is one that is *goodness itself*.

Here is the proof rigorously formulated.

FACT :

Things differ in their transcendental perfections for some are of a higher, others of a lower degree, in beauty, in goodness, in nobility, etc. While they are diverse (as things) they are united in this that they share the one perfection (e.g., goodness, beauty, nobility, etc.).

PRINCIPLE I

Diverse things not according to themselves are united but there must be some cause of their union. (*The Henological Principle*) But different things are united in this that each manifests the same transcendental perfection (goodness, beauty, nobility, etc.). Therefore, there must be some cause, extrinsic to each, of their union with this perfection.

PRINCIPLE II

And if this cause should itself share in this perfection, it too must do so in virtue of a further cause uniting it to the perfection. But this process, since it involves causes subordinated *per se*, cannot proceed to infinity otherwise there would be no ultimate cause of the union merely a series of

conveyors.

CONCLUSION :

Therefore, there is a cause of such perfections as goodness, unity, truth, beauty, etc., which is not a composite with them, but is itself goodness, unity, truth, beauty, etc., simply or purely so. And this fulfills the definition of God.

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Here is another formulation of the proof elaborated by St Thomas in the *Summa Contra Gentes* II, 15.

If some attribute is found in different things (apart from what each has by nature) it does not befit them according to what each is properly but befits them through some cause.

That which has not a cause is first and immediate for which reason it must be *per se* (through itself) and according to what it is properly. But it is impossible that some one attribute befit two (and each of them) according to what is proper to one only, for what is said of something according to what it is properly does not exceed it, as to have three angles equal to two right-angles does not exceed triangle of which it is predicated, but is convertible with it.

What befits something from its nature (and not from something extrinsic) cannot be in it in a lower degree. For example, whether a creature is a draft horse, Shetland pony, quarter horse, thoroughbred or pit pony it is equally a horse. It may be more noble or less noble, it may be a better or worse horse, but it is still a horse. Any triangle whether equilateral, isosceles, right-angled or oblique, no matter what its individual character, is equally a triangle. In other words, what is said of something according to what is proper to it fulfils its definition.

But if some attribute is found in different things (apart from what each has by nature) it does not befit them according to what each is properly but befits them through some extrinsic cause. If this attribute is found in many then either—

- the one is cause of the attribute in the other as well as what is proper to it—as fire is the cause of its own heat as it is of the heat in those things proximate to it ;

or,

- some third is the cause of the attribute in each of the many—as fire is cause of the light in two, three or more candles to which it is imparted.

But be (existence) is said of everything which is. Accordingly, it is impossible that there be some two neither of which would have a cause of be but it must needs that—

- that the one be to the other the cause of be,

or,

- that both the two in question be through some third cause.

Therefore it is necessary that from that to which no thing is a cause of be, everything which exists in any manner at all should be.
