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The Theology of Thomas Aquinas, Selected Topics

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The Possible and the Necessary

In Question 2, Article 3, St. Thomas argues for the existence of God according to five ways. In this paper, I want to look at the third way, which argues from the possible and the necessary. The argument starts by noting that it is possible for some things to either exist, or not exist. We know this to be true because we see them generated and corrupted, which means that there is a time before their generation that they did not exist, and that their existence does not last forever. If all things had the possibility of nonexistence, then there would have been a point in the past before anything existed at all, which means nothing would have existed. However, if this were the case, nothing would exist now because the things that exist now came into being because of things that already existed. In the time before anything existed, there would be nothing through which to bring anything else into existence. Therefore, because things currently exist, there must be something for which nonexistence is impossible. That is to say that its existence is necessary.

The next step of the argument has to do with the cause of this being's necessity, which is either from another, or not. If it is from another, then we have the problem of an infinite series of necessary beings, similar to what was dealt with in the case of efficient causes in the second way. Therefore, there must be a necessary being that does not have the cause of necessity from another, but is necessary in itself, and this being is God.

Thomas' argument runs into some difficulty with the modern scientific concept of being. The law of the conservation of matter and energy states that the total amount of combined matter and energy in the universe never changes, although matter can be changed into energy and energy into matter. What Thomas saw as generation and corruption is now seen as just the rearrangement of matter and energy into various forms due to the processes of physics,

chemistry, and biology. When the dominant scientific view was that the universe always existed, then the universe as a whole could be seen as the necessary being. However, as the evidence for the so called “Big Bang” increases, Thomas’ argument gains new life. If the universe did not exist before the Big Bang, then it cannot be the necessary being. The question of what brought the universe into existence is one that has not been solved by modern science, and some scientists think that it cannot be solved by scientific means. The Big Bang is so cataclysmic that it is doubtful science can ever “see” anything before the initial moment, if there is indeed anything to see. It takes reasoning such as Thomas provides here in order to think about what might be responsible for the existence of the universe.