

**AQUINAS' FIVE ARGUMENTS IN THE 'SUMMA THEOLOGIAE' Ia 2.3**  
by Lubor Velecky (*Kos Pharos*; Kampen, 1994) (Studies in philosophical theology), 140 + xi pp. Unpriced.

The 'five arguments' of Lubor Velecky's title are, of course, the famous five ways by which, so it is usually thought, Aquinas tries to prove that God exists. But readers who look to this book for detailed analysis and discussion of the five individual arguments will be disappointed. Pp. 1–48 are occupied by general discussion of what is involved in arguing about the existence of God; on pp. 48–52 Dr Velecky gives a text and translation of the five arguments, and between pp. 53 and 67 he looks at them briefly, pointing out certain characteristics they all share. Velecky goes on to consider at length (pp. 68–112) how some recent authors (Anthony Kenny, Edward Sillem, Germain Grisez and Brian Davies) have treated the five ways. In the final chapter (pp. 113–138) Velecky explicitly turns from 'chasing up references and analysing medieval texts' in order to present 'an outline of a possible case for regarding Christian religion as a viable option even today *without basing the case on "purely philosophical proofs of God's existence"*.'

The words italicized here give the clue to why Velecky approaches his subject as he does. Aquinas' five ways are usually presented as outstanding examples of purely philosophical proofs of God's existence. Modern philosophers who uphold the existence of God have often turned to, or reformulated, one or more of the patterns of reasoning presented here; whilst those who defend agnosticism or atheism have frequently questioned the validity of these arguments. Velecky, however, believes that all these thinkers are mistaken both philosophically and historically. The foundation for Christian belief, he holds, is not a philosophical proof that God exists. Indeed, no such proof is possible. Rather, it is 'a person's determination to set out on a life-long pilgrimage of love.' But this act of personal choice, Velecky says, 'makes no sense' unless one assumes 'certain objective realities' such as the fact that God does exist. All that philosophical arguments can do is to give content to the notion of divinity. Velecky describes this view as 'fideism', and he argues that it was shared by Aquinas. Modern interpreters who see (or reject) the five ways as proofs of God's existence have missed the point.

Velecky's discussion therefore raises two main questions. Is fideism, as he proposes it, a coherent and convincing position? And did Aquinas adopt it?

In describing his fideism, Velecky seems undecided between two rather different views, which he does not clearly distinguish. The first might be called 'personal fideism'. It holds that the believer's own personal experience of God gives warrant for his belief. The warrant is strong but it is private, and the believer must accept that he is without any way of convincing someone who has never had a similar experience. The second view might be called 'relativist fideism'. It holds that each person's beliefs rest on his own 'basic perspective', and that the basic

perspectives of the Christian and the non-believer differ so greatly that philosophical debate between them about the existence of God is fruitless. Relativist fideism (at least, as advanced by Velevky) is hazy about truth. For instance, Velevky says of fideism, agnosticism and atheism that '[e]ach approach has such validity as it may within the context of the particular personal life', yet he also holds that each 'personal stance has its possible strengths but also its weaknesses' and suggests at times that there is some measure external to any individual by which truth may be judged. Velevky needs to be much clearer in delineating his relativist fideism and in showing how it coheres with the personal fideism he also proposes. As it stands in this book, his general philosophy of religion is inchoate.

By contrast, Velevky's interpretation of Aquinas is simply wrong. True, Aquinas did not think that people usually come to believe in the existence of God through acceptance of an argument, nor would he consider an individual Christian who could not himself provide an argument for the existence of God thereby guilty of credulousness. True, too, Aquinas was sure that some of the knowledge about God essential to Christian belief (such as his trinity) cannot be gained by natural reasoning, but only through revelation. But Aquinas did not subscribe to any form of the fideism propounded by Velevky. He did think of the five ways as rational arguments for the existence of the being worshipped by Christians as God, although he did not claim that by themselves (without the questions which follow in the *Summa Theologiae*) they show much about him beyond his being an intelligent first cause of all things. Why, otherwise, would he begin his presentation of them by saying: 'that God exists can be proved in five ways' (*Deum esse quinque viis probari potest*)? Velevky dodges this question by offering the translation: "'God is" can be justified by five arguments.' This, however, is not an accurate rendering: although there were no inverted commas in medieval Latin, there were various devices which Aquinas could have used had he wished to show he was concerned, not with whether God exists, but just with the statement 'God exists'. Velevky's main argument for his interpretation is the following: Aquinas denies that we can know *what* God is and so he cannot have thought he was in a position to prove that God exists. But Aquinas, following a tradition of Christian thought going back to the Fathers, distinguished between knowing *what* God is and knowing *that* he is. There is nothing in the least mysterious about this distinction, and it can be applied easily to everyday matters (I might, for instance, come to know that there exists in a given place a certain lump of material, without being in a position to discover completely what sort of material it is).

Despite the many discussions already available, Aquinas' presentation of the five ways still raises many unresolved questions. Velevky's book does little towards finding the answers.

JOHN MARENBO