

# PROOF OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN AVERROËS AND ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

Ismail Mohamad

*National University of Malaysia, Bangi*

Ibn Rušd, who among Western scholars is called Averroës, and St. Thomas Aquinas were well-known theologians and philosophers in the Middle Ages. Averroës as a Muslim and Aquinas as a Christian gave a huge contribution in the field of theology and philosophy. It is also undeniable that their philosophical thoughts are influenced by Aristotelianism. It is a historical fact as stated by many scholars — Muslims and non-Muslims — that some philosophical thoughts of Aquinas have been influenced by Averroës's philosophy.

In theology, Averroës and Aquinas discussed many issues relating to God. One of them is the proof of the existence of God. Both, Averroës and Aquinas, agree that the existence of God is demonstrable. According to Averroës the existence of God can be demonstrated through physics, not metaphysics as held by Avicenna. Averroës said that physics establishes the existence of the subject matter of metaphysics. Furthermore, Averroës said that physics studies the principles of all mobile substances, and metaphysics, on the other hand, must accept the results of physics (Daig 1972: 205–206). This means that metaphysics must begin with the fact of matter and form, and these two things are included in the scope of discussion of physics. Although in this case Aquinas preferred Avicenna to Averroës, he did not accept totally what has been argued by Avicenna.

In fact, Aquinas, like Averroës, used both concepts of physics and metaphysics. This is because physics studies mobile being as mobile, while metaphysics studies all substances from the point of view of substantial being (Doig 1972: 207). This can be seen when we refer to his *Five Ways* where he plainly mentioned in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* that he based the argument of the existence of God on the physics and metaphysics of Aristotle (Aquinas *Summa* I, 3).

According to Aquinas's view one is able to demonstrate the existence of God from the things that He has made, His effects, though they are not proportionate to Him. Aquinas pointed out that because every effect must have a cause, the existence of an effect is sufficient to demonstrate the existence of its cause. Therefore he argued that the existence of God can be demonstrated from His effects.

## Averroës's proof

Averroës in his commentary on the physics of Aristotle laid down a theory of motion as one of the proofs of the existence of God. He described it in detail in his *Tahāfut at-tahāfut* (The Incoherence of the Incoherence; e.g. 59; 66; 75; 79) and *Mā*

*ba'd at-tabī'a* (Metaphysics; e.g. I, 20; III, 1565; 1588; 1599). As a peripatetic philosopher, he recognized that this theory is valid as a proof of the existence of God. This proof, however, is too complicated and too difficult for the masses to grasp it adequately. Thus he did not suggest this proof as a proof of the existence of God in his *Kašf*. *Kašf* introduces us to his approach about the Islamic creed according to the Quranic teaching. In *Kašf*, Averroës presented two proofs of the existence of God, based on many verses of the Quran, because he believed that Quranic teaching is acceptable for all levels of human understanding, whether they belong to the demonstrative, dialectical or rhetorical groups. This means that when he referred to the Quran, he did not base his argument of the existence of God on logical and philosophical premises which sometimes are not certain and cannot be understood by the laity. Based on this reason, he criticized proofs given by Muslim theologians, such as those given by the Aš'arites. So, to the benefit of both intellectuals and the masses, he gave two proofs of the existence of God. These two proofs are called providence and creation.

### 1. Proof of Providence

Averroës said that this proof is based on two principles: first, that all existences are adaptively created to man's existence. Secondly, that any adaptation in the universe must necessarily be brought about by an agent, it cannot be merely the result of chance. The first principle, Averroës said, is self-evident. Furthermore, he said, when a man has examined some sensible objects such as the sun, the moon, the earth and all the stars fitted for the habitation of man and animals, then he knows positively that it is impossible that this harmony for man, animals and plants in all parts of the universe should arise by chance, but it must proceed from someone who arranged it and made it by his attention, and that is God (Averroës, *Kašf* 150). Averroës gave an example: if a man sees a stone on the ground, in its shape fit for sitting on, then he will come to know that it was made by a maker who put it there (*ibid.* 194).

According to Averroës, this proof is positive and simple, acceptable by all (*ibid.* 195). The ground of this proof is found in the Quran which can be understood from many verses (e.g. Q 78:6-16; 80:23-32). Through the verses, as Averroës said, we recognize that the adaptation of all parts of the universe is suitable for man's existence (Averroës, *Kašf* 195). Again, Averroës said that evidence for this concept of providence does not only manifest itself in the universe, but also in human and animal organs where each organ has its certain function to maintain their life and existence (*ibid.* 150). This proof of Averroës, in relation to intellectuals, can be systematized as follows:

- a) The universe in all parts is fit for the existence of man and other beings here.
- b) All existing beings in all parts, which are adapted to the existence of man and all other beings, are necessarily created.

- c) The universe is created and has a maker.

## 2. Proof of Creation

Averroës mentioned that this proof is also based on two principles. The first is that all existences are created, and secondly, that every created thing has a creator. Again, Averroës said that the first principle is quite clear in the case of animals as God mentions in the Quran. For example, "Surely those upon whom you call, apart from God, shall never create a fly, though they banded together to do it" (Q 22:72). From this verse, Averroës said, if we see organic substances and then we find life in them, we know certainly that there is a creator and bestower of life, that is God (Averroës, *Kašf* 151).

When we analyze the first and the second principle of Averroës's proof, we can reach a conclusion that every existence must have a creator. Averroës himself clearly said that these two principles are valid to prove that every existence has a maker. To support the validity of this principle, he referred to the verse of the Quran: "Have they not considered the dominion of the heaven and the earth and things God has created?" (Q 22:75). In fact there are many other verses in the Quran which show the proof of creation. For example 86:6-7, 88:17-20 and the like.

The proof of creation, actually, does not show many differences compared to the proof of providence. The second proof (proof of creation) mostly depends on the first one (proof of providence) (al-'Irāqī 1968: 230) and there is some overlapping. For example, the proposition "every created thing has a creator" in the second proof, is partly discussed in the first proof.

Furthermore, in Averroës's second proof, though he said that it is drawn from the Quranic verses, we find that there is a logical element, such as the statement: "every created thing has a creator". This logical premise is not so easy to be understood by the masses. However, we find that Averroës plainly recognized that these two proofs are religious proofs (*šar'*) (Averroës, *Kašf* 151) which, according to him, are suitable for both the intellectuals and the masses. As for the masses, they can understand and grasp by their senses, while intellectuals can go further and learn by reasoning as well as by sense (*ibid.* 153).

Averroës said that these two methods are the correct way by which God invites men to a knowledge of existence. Therefore he insisted that the Quranic verses leading to the knowledge of the existence of God are dependent only on the two foregoing arguments. Some point to the argument of providence (e.g. Q 78:6-16; 2:22), some point to the argument of creation (e.g. Q 78:6-16; 2:22), and some comprise both arguments (e.g. Q 3:191; 36:23).

The conclusion of the two proofs relates to the universe, where the first proof concerns the harmoniousness of the movement of all parts of the universe, and the utility of its harmoniousness to humankind and other beings; the second proof shows

that the universe is not created by itself, but by someone else — God (Averroës, *Kašf* 195).

Of these two proofs Averroës explained the proof of providence in more detail than that of creation, so the proof of providence, according to him, is the best proof for the existence of God.

### Aquinas's proof

Aquinas presented his famous *Five Ways* of proving God's existence in his two *Summas*. He claimed that his proofs are the same as those used by both philosophers and Catholic teachers (Aquinas, *Summa* I, 13).

The first three of the *Five Ways* are best included under the well-known *Cosmological Argument* (Craig 1980: 160), and the background of these arguments is Aristotle's philosophy. The Fourth argument points back to Plato's idea of the eternal form and also points forward to the moral argument. The Fifth argument points to the *Teleological Argument*.

This paper is not intended to criticize Aquinas's argument of the existence of God by comparing his thought with that of other Christian philosophers. But the main purpose is to lay down his argument and then try to point out if there are any similarities between Averroës's and Aquinas's proofs. Aquinas's proofs are as follows:

### The First Way: Argument from motion or change

In brief this argument is based on motion or change. Aquinas said that everything that is moved is moved by another, and that in movers and things moved one cannot proceed to infinity. So we must posit some unmoved-mover. This we call God (Aquinas, *Summa* I, 13).

This argument is the longest of the *Five Ways* presented by Aquinas in his *Summa*. In the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas gave no indication of the sources of this proof, but in *Summa Contra Gentiles* he mentioned that this proof stems from Aristotle's physics.

Aquinas introduced many logical propositions in this argument which sometimes are very difficult to be understood by the masses.

There are two important propositions in the argument of motion or change. First, "that everything moved or changed is moved by another", and second, that "it is impossible to go back to infinity in a series of things moving and moved". The Second proposition is an extremely important point (Patterson 1993: 60), because many have criticized this proposition (*ibid.* 60ff). In establishing this second proposition, Aquinas referred to Aristotle's physics, which Aquinas explained in detail in his *Summa*.

During the Middle Ages the first way was regarded as the strongest of the Five (Mascall 1943: 40); however, in this way a weakness still exists, especially when it

faces new theories, for example, Newton's first law<sup>1</sup>. This is perhaps why the first way, which has weaknesses, fails to solve some problems (Mascall 1966: 75). Aquinas's first way, in fact, is an intellectual argument which is not easily understood by the masses, because it passes many logical premises. This is perhaps Averroës's reason why he does not accept the theory of motion as one of the proofs of God's existence. This, however, does not mean that he rejected totally the concept of motion. He, as a dedicated follower of Aristotle, gave much to a discussion of motion and accepted that some of the premises in the theory of motion are valid. For example, like Aquinas, he agreed that the infinite regress of causes according to philosophical doctrine is impossible (Averroës, *Tabāfut* 267).

Averroës did not reject the theory of motion as a proof of the existence of God because it is invalid, but because it is very difficult for the majority of people to conceive it and there is a certain confusion in the theory itself.

### The Second Way: Argument from efficient cause

This argument is based on the notion of efficient causation. Aquinas said that in the observable world we discover an order of efficient causes, but no case is found of something efficiently causing itself. Now it is impossible to go on forever in a series of efficient causes. For in every ordered series of efficient cause, the first member of the series causes the intermediate member which in turn causes the final member. If you eliminate a cause you eliminate its effect, so there will not be final or intermediate members in the series unless there is a first member. Therefore it is necessary to posit some first efficient cause, to which everyone give the name God (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q2, a3). In brief, this argument concludes that a thing cannot be its own efficient cause, that is to bring itself into existence.

It is worth noticing the close resemblance of this argument to the first way. Both seek to establish a first cause or mover on the basis of the impossibility of going back to infinity in an ordered series of causes and effects (Gilson 1957: 67; Rowe 1975: 21). The first way starts from the fact of motion to a prime mover; the second way starts from causation to a first cause.

Both these arguments are to be seen as complementary to each other. Thus we find that there is an overlapping between the first and the second proofs (Kenny 1969: 35–36), where in the first case Aquinas considered things as being changed, and in the second case he considered them as active agents. He then proceeded, after excluding the hypothesis of an infinite regress, to draw the conclusion that there must be a first cause which we can call God.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Aquinas's theory of motion and some modern theories, see Evan 1932: 307; Blair 1976: 301.

In *Summa* (I, 13) Aquinas mentioned that the second way is also adopted from Aristotle's metaphysics, but in addition, it is said to be drawn from the Avicennian notion of efficient cause (Gilson 1957: 66).

### The Third Way: Argument from necessary being

This proof starts from the fact that some beings come into existence, then perish, which shows that they can be and cannot be, that they are contingent and not necessary. Since if they were necessary they would always have existed and would neither come into being nor pass away. Furthermore, Aquinas said that there must exist a necessary being which is the reason why contingent beings come into existence. That necessary being we call God (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q.2, a.3).

The source of this proof is derived from Aristotle, but it is also said that Aquinas's concept of necessary being is closer to Avicenna's. However, I think that the concept of necessary being explained by Avicenna is not exactly the same as explained by Aquinas. Even Craig says that Aquinas's concept of necessary beings and possible beings is identical with Averroës's revision of Avicenna's proof (Craig 1980: 201).

Aquinas's third way starts from the notion of the concept of contingent and necessary. The contingent being for Aquinas is a being subject to the natural process of generation and corruption, a being that is susceptible to substantial change, while a necessary being is in no way subject to generation and corruption.

What is clear for us in Aquinas's first, second and third ways is their similarity (Mascall 1943: 94; Kenny 1969: 44; Patterson 1933: 72) and parallel structure. The first way argues from the fact of motion or change to a Prime Mover; the second from the causation to a First Cause; the third from the contingent beings to a Necessary Being. Each of these three arguments established its case by denying the possibility of an infinite regress, but they are not identical, because their points of departure are different elements.

### The Fourth Way: Argument of degree of being

This argument is based on the gradation form in things. Aquinas said that some things are found to be more or less good, or true, or noble than other things, and so on. There is therefore something which is best and truest and noblest of things. Therefore there is something which causes being and goodness and any perfection in all things, and this we call God (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q.2, a.3).

In establishing this proof Aquinas cited Aristotle's metaphysics in *Book II* and *Book IV* which states that things possessing the supreme degree of truth possess also the supreme degree of being. This proof is also said to come closest to Platonism (Kenny 1969: 71; Gilson 1957: 74) which was developed by St. Augustine and St. Anselm. From Aquinas's text we find that this proof is related to the theory of

causality, where the example given shows that the noblest being, the being which is absolutely perfect, is the cause of all other beings which are imperfect.

Some questions regarding this proof arise. For example, does this argument prove the existence of God, of an absolute good or only a relative one (Mascall 1943: 53). Perhaps for this reason, Copleston says that this proof is admittedly difficult to grasp (Copleston 1975: 125). There are many controversies (Gilson 1957: 71) and many difficulties (*ibid.* 72) in this proof (Patterson 1933: 81ff). So there are varieties of the critique of this proof.

### The Fifth Way: Argument of final cause

This argument is based on guidance of nature. Aquinas said that we observe that some things which lack awareness, namely natural bodies, act for the sake of an end. This is clear because they always or commonly act in the same manner to achieve what is best, which shows that they reach their goal not by chance but because they tend toward it. Now things which lack awareness do not tend towards a goal unless directed by something with awareness and intelligence, like an arrow by an archer. Therefore, there is some intelligent being by whom everything in nature is directed to a goal, and this we call God (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q.2, a.3).

In *Summa* (I, 13), Aquinas clearly mentioned that this proof is referred to Damascene and Averroës. Aquinas argued that we see inorganic objects operating for an end, and this cannot proceed from chance, but must be the result of intention. This proof is derived from the idea of providence which governs the universe, by which he means God. In fact, the idea of giving orders to the universe is the common property of Christian theology (Gilson 1957: 75). So this proof is more familiar to theologians than philosophers, because the Bible is the authoritative source for theologians, and they, of course, know that the creation of the universe is mentioned in the Bible. As we have seen in *Summa*, Aquinas did not discuss this proof at length.

Each of Aquinas's proofs of existence of God starts from an obvious and indisputable fact of human experience. The examination and understanding of the fact lead by different path to the conclusion that a certain kind of being exists, whom men call God. Arguments employed by Aquinas are a posteriori, because they attempt to demonstrate the existence of God by reasoning from the effect of which God is the cause, and, of course, it is evident that every effect exists later than its cause.

Aquinas's proofs, actually, are not new (Copleston 1975: 127). They are taken from his predecessors (Owens 1980: 137), Aristotle and Muslim philosophers. However, the *Five Ways* are still regarded as Aquinas's proof, because he did not merely take them from others, but also analyzed them in a new and more systematic way than his predecessors. He described the *Five Ways* so that they should not contradict Christian teaching. When we refer to Averroës's two arguments there is a probability that his arguments are original. This means that he did not borrow from any Muslim theologians, because, as we have seen in *Kašf*, he criticized any type of proof given

by *Mutakallimūn* sects such as the Muʿtazilites, the Ḥaṣawites, the Aṣʿarites and the Sūfīs.

When we examine closely Aquinas's *Five Ways*, we shall find that they are not five separate arguments for theism, but five different aids to the apprehension of God and the creature in the cosmological relation (Mascall 1966: 79). There are various critiques among modern writers who claim, for example, that Aquinas's proofs of the existence of God fail to convince contemporary thinkers (Evans 1932: 299), Aquinas's proofs are puzzling (Owens 1980: 132), and so on.

It would not be fair to blame Aquinas for some weaknesses in his arguments of the existence of God even if it is probably safe to say that nobody at his time had such profound understanding. His high intellectual capacity to analyze and modify the proofs of the existence of God taken from various sources is indisputable. We should also realize that his analysis to solve the problem of the existence of God was based on intellectual development in the Middle Ages, not in the twentieth century.

In analyzing Aquinas's five proofs of the existence of God, we find that only one of them has some similarity with Averroës's proof, and that is Aquinas's fifth proof and Averroës's argument of providence. Both proofs are called argument from design. Averroës's scope of discussion is wider than Aquinas's. Averroës explained his proof of providence in detail, while Aquinas described it briefly. In fact, the proof of Aquinas's fifth way is found in Averroës's second principle of the proof of providence, where Averroës and Aquinas are in agreement that the existence of all things is under the control of an intelligent being, and they do not happen by chance. However, their focuses are different. Averroës is concerned with the harmony that exists in the activity of natural bodies, and the harmoniousness of their activities that is beneficial for human life. On the contrary, Aquinas simply concentrated on the goal or end of the activities of natural bodies which are guided and directed by someone intelligent.

In comparing the argument of the existence of God given by Averroës and Aquinas, it is clear for us that Aquinas's arguments, though they depend on the fact of experience and the observable world, rely upon philosophical analysis such as appear in the *Summa*. Consequently, deep intellectual capacity is needed to comprehend them, so his proofs, perhaps, are not so easy to be understood. The difficulty in Aquinas's proofs can be seen, especially, in his first three, which are well-known as cosmological argument. Aquinas elaborated his proofs at length in the *Summa* by employing many philosophical assumptions, but in the *Summa Theologiae* he explained them briefly. The difference in approach is because the *Summa* is intended to be primarily a philosophical work and is written to refute the teaching of Muslim philosophers, Avicenna and Averroës, and hence, he naturally met them on their own Aristotelian ground, while the *Summa Theologiae* is primarily theological doctrine, and is aimed to the ordinary believers.

Averroës's proof of providence and creation are also based on observable facts which exist in the world. Averroës tried to avoid using any philosophical concepts in his proof. He referred directly to the Quran. This is because he firmly believes that Quranic proof is more suitable for all levels of human intellect, whether one is learned or belongs to the laity.

For Aquinas the proof of the existence of God is not limited to his five proofs, but he also recognized that any other proofs given by other thinkers are valid if they can be understood in the framework that starts with accidentally possessed existence and reasons to subsistent existence. Arguments that cannot be read in that way are not looked upon as valid (Owens 1980: 139-140).

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