



The Logic of the Identity of Being and Goodness and a Moral Argument for Theism

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Abstract

In section 1 of this paper, I consider the logical validity of four versions of Aquinas' arguments to this conclusion that being and good are identical, as presented by Stump and Kretzmann. Subsequently, I formalize the arguments in order to make their validity logically explicit. In section 2, I show how the formal reality of the identity of being grounds moral arguments for theism. In section 3, I then consider the application of this formal reality, to a simplified contemporary "moral argument" for theism. I argue that Aquinas' arguments for the identity of being and goodness should play a vital role in moral arguments for theism to militate against atheistic objections to them.

EJSTA 42 (2023)

DOI:

10.2478/ejsta-2024-0003

Article history:

Received: 17.4.2024

Accepted: 6.8.2024

Available online:
01.12.2024

Keywords

being • goodness • the moral argument • theism

Aquinas' metaphysics and his metaethics (account of goodness) are intimately connected. It is true that the act of the discovery that being is *esse*, the exemplification of an essential nature, is according to George Klubertanz, "the moment of the discovery of metaphysics."¹ We can also say that the discovery that being and good are identical is the discovery of metaethics. In several places in both the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas argues to the conclusion that being and goodness are identical in things (*idem secundum rem*), but differ in idea (*differunt secundum rationem*). This claim is not merely an interesting appendage to Aquinas' metaphysics. Rather, it is an important fact not only for metaethics, theoretical ethics, and applied ethics, but also to any are of philosophy that deals with ethics and morality, including moral arguments for theism.

In this article, there will be four sections which are built on one another. In section 1, I consider the logical validity of four versions of Aquinas' arguments to this conclusion that being and good are identical, as presented by Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann. Using Aquinas' own words, I formalize the arguments in order to make their validity logically explicit. In section 2, I illustrate how the conclusion from Aquinas' arguments that being and good are identical entails the formal reality

¹ G. Klubertanz, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Being* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 50.

of the identity of being and goodness. I show how this formal reality grounds moral arguments for theism. In section 3, I then consider the application of this formal reality, to a simplified contemporary “moral argument” for theism. I argue that Aquinas’ arguments for the identity of being and goodness should play a vital role in moral arguments for theism to militate against atheistic objections to them.

1. Aquinas’ Four Ways to Good

Aquinas has at least four distinct arguments for his view that being and good are identical in things and distinguishable in our minds.² Let us call these arguments Aquinas’ “Four Ways to Good” (following his famous “Five Ways to God”). In this section, we will examine Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann’s summaries of these arguments, along with the text from Aquinas’ writings.³ Specifically, we will examine these arguments for logical validity since each of the arguments are formal deductions. I will show that these arguments are deductively valid syllogisms.

Before we look at the details of each argument, here are some general descriptions of Aquinas’ “Four Ways to Good.” The first way is an argument from desire (*appetunt* in Latin and *ἐφίεται* in Greek), and its conclusion is that being and goodness are really the same. The second way is an argument from corruption resistance, and its conclusion is: goodness and being (qua complete actuality) are identical. The third way is an argument from essential teleology to the conclusion that all final goods are fully actualized being. The fourth way is an argument from aiming at being and concludes that all being is good. Let us view the validity and soundness of these four arguments in turn.

1.1 First Way: An Argument from Desire/Appetunt/ἐφίεται

The clearest argument for the real identity of being and goodness occur in the *Summa Theologiae*. Aquinas writes (*STh* I, q. 5, a. 1):

² An earlier version of this section of the paper appeared in my article, ‘From Being to Goodness to “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”’ in *Lex Naturalis* Vol. 6 (2021). It is reprinted here in a revised form with permission from the publisher. While the text and general structure of the arguments from Aquinas along with some ideas from Stump and Kretzmann are similar between these two versions, there are significant differences between them. In this version of this section, in the “first way to good,” I clarify how identity claims are related to the logical operation of conversion in Aristotelian logic. In the “second way to good” in the version presented here, I focus on the relationships between “being an act,” “goodness,” and the notion of “that which all desire,” in order to make the logical relations clearer in the syllogism implied in Aquinas’ text. In the “third way to good” presented here, I elaborate on the content of the argument, clarifying and elaborating the premises more than in the previous version. The “fourth way too good” in this version here presented, is left unchanged from the previous version.

³ E. Stump, N. Kretzmann, ‘Being and Goodness’, In *Being and Goodness*, ed. Scott Macdonald (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 98-128.

The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. Hence the Philosopher says (*Ethic. i*): "Goodness is what all desire." Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is actual. Therefore it is clear that a thing is perfect so far as it exists; for it is existence that makes all things actual, as is clear from the foregoing (3, 4; 4, 1). Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really. But goodness presents the aspect of desirableness, which being does not present.

The conclusion of Aquinas' argument here is a strong identity claim: "goodness and being are the same really." Identity claims pose unique challenges in logical relations, especially when using Aristotelian categorical logic. Identity relations and the statements expressing those relations have to be clearly distinguished from other non-identity statements which may appear similar to them. For example, if I claim that:

1. "All dogs are mammals,"
- and
2. "All beings are good."

Statements 1 and 2 as linguistic expressions look remarkably similar when they use the English word "is." Further, in categorical logic, each expression would be translated into formal Aristotelian logical statements as universal affirmative logical expressions of this type: All A are B (where A and B stand for the subject and predicate terms in statements 1 and 2 respectively).

This is where the logical precision of Aquinas' argument must be made clear. When Aquinas says that "in things," "All Beings are Good," he does not mean a statement like statement 1 above. Here is why. There is a logical operation in Aristotelian categorical logic called "Conversion." Conversion is the operation of switching the subject and predicate terms, and then examining the new statement for the same logical meaning. Unfortunately, in Aristotelian categorical logic, universal affirmative logical expressions (logicians call these "A" type expressions), of the type "All A are B" when the operation of conversion applies to them, they are not logically equivalent. To see this, let us just convert statement 1 above to:

- 1.' All mammals are dogs (the converse of "All dogs are mammals.").

Notice that 1. "All dogs are mammals" is obviously true, but its converse 1' "All mammals are dogs" is clearly false." Thus, any operation of conversion on A-type categorical statements (e.g. All A are B) will necessarily be invalid, not truth preserving, and therefore illogical. Logicians call this the "fallacy of illicit conversion." Any argument relying on such a move will therefore also be invalid.

Now we have a puzzle. Doesn't Aquinas maintain an invalid conversion of an A-type categorical statement in his argument for the identity of being and good in things? If Aquinas maintains 2:

2. All being are good,

then he cannot infer from this to the conclusion that "All good are being" without committing the fallacy of illicit conversion.

This truly would be unfortunate if Aquinas' argument rested on such a logical mistake. However, Aquinas' claim 2 (All being are good) is not merely a categorical claim like claim 1 (All dogs are mammals). It is an identity claim. The "are" used in the expression "All being are good" is an "are" of *identity*, between being and good. This means that since the two terms are identical in what they refer to, they can be swapped via the operation of conversion without losing any logical equivalence. This of course cannot be done with non-identity claims like "All dogs are mammals," as we have seen above. So, it appears that in a statement "All A are B" if A and B are identical, then the conversion of "All A are B" to "All B are A" would be logically equivalent, and there would be no fallacious inference.

The drawback from such a logical move is that it looks to be question-begging. After all, if we are trying to prove that "All being are good" and "All good are being" are identical claims, then to merely assert that "All being are good" is an identity claim and then assert that it can be validly converted would avoid the fallacy of illicit conversion at the expense of making our argument question-begging.

What is particularly interesting, in this passage from Aquinas, is that Aquinas does not make this move in the text from the *Summa* above. Aquinas does not stipulate that "All being are good" as an identity claim, and then show that the converse claim is logically equivalent in a question-begging way. Instead, Aquinas' argument is much more robust. However, in its robustness, much of the argument appears enthymemic. There are assumed premises which the reader is expected to see without them being made explicit in the text of the argument.

So, let us look at the explicit and implicit logic in this passage in order to see how Aquinas reasons to the strong identity claim that being and good are identical in things. In order to get this strong identity claim, it seems that two distinct but combined arguments are needed for the conclusion that "goodness is being" and "being is goodness." In what follows I will make explicit what these two distinct arguments are, each of which is a combination of three syllogisms. In order to make the arguments clearer, I use the following key to stand for the categories referred to in Aquinas' argument: G= Good, D= Desirable, P= Perfect, A= Actual, B= Being.

Argument 1.1 P1: All D are P / P2: All G are D / C1 $\therefore$ All G are P.

Argument 1.2 P3: All P are A. / C1: All G are P / C2: $\therefore$ All G are A

Argument 1.3 P4: All A are B / C2: All G are A / C3: $\therefore$ All G are B.

So far, Aquinas has demonstrated that Good is Being. He could assert that this is an “are” of identity and then immediately assert the converse of the claim. However, Aquinas does not do this in the text. Since he does not do this, then a separate argument is needed to demonstrate the converse of “All G are B” (i.e. “All B are G.”) Now we need a separate argument for the conclusion that “being is good.” Here are what I take to be the three implicit arguments for the next conclusion that “goodness is existence.”

Argument 2.1 P2*: All D are G / P1*: All P are D / C1* $\therefore$ All P are G

Argument 2.2 C1*: All P are G / P3*: All A are P / C2* $\therefore$ All A are G.

Argument 2.3 C2*: All A are G / P4*: All E are A / C3* $\therefore$ All G are E.

“All G are E” is the conclusion when Aquinas’ claims are interpreted as strong identity claims. Thus, If C3 and C3* can both be established on this interpretation of the text, then the validity of Aquinas’ demonstration that being and good are really the same has been made explicit without any fallacy of illicit conversion. Therefore, we can conclude that Aquinas’ “first way to good” deductively, validly proves the strong identity claim that being and goodness are really the same in things, even though we can distinguish them in our minds. Let us turn to the “second way to good.”

1.2 Second Way: An Argument from Corruption Resistance

Aquinas’ “second way to good” is an argument from corruption resistance. This argument, Aquinas writes (*ScG I*, c. 37 (4)) is as follows:

Furthermore, “the good is that which all things desire.” The Philosopher introduces this remark as a “felicitous saying” in *Ethics I*. But all things, each according to its mode, desire to be in act; this is clear from the fact that each thing according to its nature resists corruption. To be in act, therefore, constitutes the nature of the good.

This short argument is logically dense. If we are to make it explicit using categorical logic, it might be best to start with the conclusion: “To be in act, therefore, constitutes

the nature of the good.” If this simply means that The nature of the good is constituted by “to be in act”. This can be formalized as C:

C: “All G are B.”

Where G is “good” and “B” stands for “to be in act” or just “being” (assuming that all being is “being in act”). Since we now have two of the main terms for our syllogism (the minor term G=good, and the major term B=being), we can put this conclusion into the standard form for a categorical syllogism with “X” standing for the middle term which will connect B=being and G=good together. If we follow the English translation quoting Aristotle, the subject of the minor premise is clearly “good” and the middle term is “what all desire” which we can call “D.” The major premise is “All things ... desire to be in act.” Here the locution “all things” will need to be interpreted as “all things that have being, or more simply “being.” Thus, our syllogism will now look like this:

D= what all desire; B=being; G=Good
All D are B, All G are D, therefore, All G are B.

It is important to note that the “second way to good” is different from the “first way to good” above. We must point out that the conclusion “All G are B” is not a strong identity claim. If this argument were to be a strong identity claim, then, of course we would need a new additional conclusion “All B are G.” Aquinas does not offer an argument for this conclusion in this passage, but such an argument may easily be at hand, given what he says about “corruption resistance.” If it is true that all “corruption resistance” is good, then we have the following syllogism:

C=corruption resistance, G=Good, B=Being
All C are G; All B are C; Therefore, All B are G.

If this works, under the assumption that corruption resistance itself is good, then we have both conclusions we need: All G are B and All B are G. When combined, a strong identity claim is established from the notion of corruption resistance being intimately connected to both being and good. Thus, the “second way to good” from corruption resistance establishes an identity between goodness and being in things, while allowing that good and being are distinguishable in our minds.

1.3 Third Way: An Argument from Essential Teleology/Fulfillment

Aquinas’ “third way to good” can be found in the *Summa Theologiae*, where Aquinas writes (*STh* I-II, q. 1 a. 5):

First, because, since everything desires its own perfection, a man desires for his ultimate end, that which he desires as his perfect and crowning good. Hence Augustine (*De Civ. Dei* xix, 1): "In speaking of the end of good we mean now, not that it passes away so as to be no more, but that it is perfected so as to be complete." It is therefore necessary for the last end so to fill man's appetite, that nothing is left besides it for man to desire.

In order to interpret this argument to imply that being and good are the same in reality, some interpretive work needs to be done from this passage.⁴ Here is a possible way to proceed. The first premise of the argument seems to be "everything desires its own perfection." This premise is consistent with Aquinas' arguments from the first two ways above. The subject of the premises is "everything" which is every existing thing, which implies "all being." The second premise in the text seems to be narrower than the first two ways above. Aquinas is clearly talking about the desires (*appetatus*) of a man in relation to man's last/final end. In order to prove that there is just one final end of man which is good. However, the argument presented here can be generalized to be consistent with the notion of the identity of being and good in the previous two arguments above.

Here is the formalization of the argument that I believe can be drawn from this passage.

1. All beings desiring their own perfection are good.
2. All being are beings desiring their own perfection.
3. Therefore, all being are good.

If we are looking for another strong identity claim, then we are only half way through this argument. We also need "All good are being." This will easily be done by arguing that all goods are completed perfections of the culmination of desire are, especially as they relate to the completion of the nature of the being of a thing. In addition, the culmination of all desire is also being/real. Thus, the notion of perfection in the culmination of desire will give us the middle term to connect being and good. Thus, we have here another strong identity claim between being and good. This argument contributes to the conclusions of the first two ways by emphasizing both the very teleological nature of being and goodness as well as the completion and perfection of goodness and being as co-extensive reality.

⁴ If the interpretation of this argument given here is not faithful to Aquinas' text, then a modified version of the argument should be given.

1.4 Fourth Way: An Argument from Aiming at Being

Let us turn to the “fourth way to good” in Aquinas’ writings. In the *Summa contra Gentiles*, Aquinas writes: (ScG III, c. 3)

Besides, every action and movement are seen to be ordered in some way toward being, either that it may be preserved in the species or in the individual, or that it may be newly acquired. Now, the very fact of being is a good, and so all things desire to be. Therefore, every action and movement are for the sake of a good. ... This is the reason why the philosophers, in defining the good, have said: “the good is what all desire. And Dionysius states that “all crave the good and the best [*De div. nom.* IV, 4].

Stump and Kretzmann’s interpretation of this argument is as follows: “[E]very action is ordered toward being, toward preserving or enhancing being in some respect either in the individual or in its species: in acting all things aim at being. Therefore, again, being is what all desire; and so being is goodness.”⁵

The way in which Stump and Kretzmann formulate this argument is puzzling because the predicate term of the conclusion, “Being is goodness” doesn’t show up in the premises of the text. Perhaps it is enthymemic in the following way: P1 All desires aimed at are good. P2 All being are desires aimed at. C ∴ All being are good. If this is right, then it seems like this fourth way, like the first way only gets us to “All being are good” but not to “All good are being.” If this stronger conclusion is what Aquinas (and Stump and Kretzmann) are after, then a second argument will be needed, perhaps something like: P1* All desires aimed at are being. P2* All good are desires aimed at. C* ∴ All good are being. Again, like “the first way” the conclusion here is being and goodness are identical in things, but distinguishable in our minds.

Now that we have examined the formal validity of Aquinas’ “Four Ways to Good,” let us see how we can put these arguments to use in arguments for theism, especially moral arguments.

2. How the Identity of Being and Goodness in Aquinas’ “Four Ways to Good” Grounds Moral Arguments for Theism

In section 1, we outlined how Aquinas’ “Four Ways to Good” are logically valid, and have some initial plausibility as to their soundness. The main conclusion of these “four ways” is this: “being and good are identical in things.” Now this is a profound statement, and in my view, is the only basis for a robust study of what philosophers today call “metaethics” which is (in part) a study of the nature of goodness. However, there is also another application which I would like to explore here. It is an application

⁵ Stump, Kretzmann, ‘Being and Goodness’, 101.

in the broad area of “metaethics” conceived as a study of the nature of goodness but applied to what philosophers call “the moral argument” for theism. In this section, I will show how Aquinas’ conclusion that being and good are identical connects to, and establishes a robust metaphysical grounding for moral arguments for theism.

I will do three things in this section. First, I will examine the claim that Aquinas’ arguments indicate the possibility of a formal reality “the identity of being and goodness in things.” Second, I will show how this formal reality connects Aquinas’ “Fifth Way to God” (the last of Aquinas’ famous “Five Ways” arguments to the existence of God). Third, I will show that the formal reality implied by Aquinas’ “Four Ways to Good” when combined with his “Fifth Way to God” improves contemporary moral arguments for theism.

2.1. *The Identity of Being and Goodness Implies a Formal Reality: “existence-identical-to-goodness”*

One of the ways in which Aquinas follows Aristotelian metaphysics is in our knowledge of universals. Since Aristotle and Aquinas maintain that universals are really in the things that have them (their instances), then when we experience reality, we experience a universal. In addition, through our experiences of multiple instances of the same universal, we can have knowledge of universals as abstract entities. This general metaphysics applies to logical realities as well. In Aquinas’ “Four Ways to Good” we are presented with four particular arguments each implying the same general conclusion: there is a real identity of being and goodness in things (*idem secundum rem*). Being and goodness differ only in idea (*differunt secundum rationem tantum*) within our minds.

A few things seem to follow from this. First, it follows that for any existing thing, there exists in that thing an instance of the reality “*existence-identical-to-goodness*.” Thus, for multiple existing things, there will be many instances of the reality “*existence-identical-to-goodness*.” This would be a reality that is present in everything that exists.

Second, if there is a reality “*existence-identical-to-goodness*” that is present in everything that is real, then it is at least possible (on a certain understanding of universals) that there is a formal reality “*existence-identical-to-goodness*” existing apart from the particulars that instantiate it. This would be no different than say experiencing multiple instances of a red iron sphere and concluding from this experience that there is a formal reality or universal or quality of “ironness,” “redness,” and “sphericity.”

This would mean that in any multiple objects *O*₁...*O*_n, each object has the quality of having an identity relation between its being and its goodness. So, “being is identical to goodness” is something that all existing things have. This entails that “being is identical to goodness” is a universal that exists apart from its instances (at least as an object of thought), just as redness can be thought of as existing apart from

its instances. If it exists apart from its instances, then it might explain what unifies all of the things which have it.

Third, if there is such a formal reality "*existence-identical-to-goodness*" then this implies that whatever existence itself is, it is identical to good, and whatever goodness itself is, it is identical to existence. We can consider this in a formalized argument.

Consider the following argument which appears to flow from Aquinas' identity claims.

1. P = Being and Good are really the same (*idem secundum rem*) identical in things.
2. P is true.
3. If P is true, P corresponds to reality.
4. If P corresponds to reality, then there must be a reality in any existing thing which consists of the identity relation: IR = "*the identity of being and goodness.*"
5. If IR really is in any existing thing, then IR will be in all existents $E1...En$.
6. If $E1...En$ exemplify IR , then one can abstract IR from $E1...En$ and think of IR formally.
7. If IR can be thought of formally, and given that IR exists in $E1...En$, then possibly IR is a formal reality that can exist apart from $E1...En$.
8. There are good reasons (e.g., any argument for formal realities existing separately from their instances could work here), to believe that IR exists apart from its instances.
9. Therefore, there is good reason to believe that IR exists as a formal reality independently from $E1...En$.

This argument would certainly be acceptable for a Platonist about universals. For an Aristotelian view, universals are real *possibilia* at least, such that one could say that if anything exists, then IR exists in things and as an object of thought. One might then seek to explain the reality of the existence of IR . In any such explanation, one is explaining both the existence of being *and* goodness. In addition, and most importantly for our purposes here, any such explanation of this type will be intimately connected with Aquinas' fifth way to God. Let us turn to his argument.

3. The Identity of Being and Good Considered with Aquinas' "Fifth Way" to God

Now that we have shown the validity of Aquinas' arguments to the conclusion that being and good are identical in things, and shown how the validity of such arguments implies the existence of a formal reality "*existence-identical-to-goodness*" we can consider how these truths are related to Aquinas' "Fifth Way" argument for the existence of God. Then, in Section 4 we will show how the results of our inquiry can undergird a contemporary moral argument for theism.

Here in Section 3, we will first offer a brief exposition of Aquinas' "Fifth Way," elaborating on the notion of "acting for an end." Second, we will show how this notion is intimately connected with Aquinas' claim that being and good are identical in

things. Third, we will transition into a discussion of how “acting for an end” and the identity of being and good connect to a moral argument for theism.

3.1 Aquinas’ “Fifth Way” to God and “acting for an end”

Here is Aquinas’ “Fifth Way” (*STh* I, q. 2, a. 3) followed by a brief exposition of the notion of acting for an end:

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 not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. 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.

The salient part of this passage for our purposes is the notion of “acting for an end” and “achieving their end.” This is relevant to Aquinas’ understanding of the nature of existence as “essential actualization” and of goodness as the completion of the “appetunt” of any existing thing. This is where the identity relation of being and goodness becomes relevant. It is important to note that acting for an end in one sense just is the exemplification of an essence. It is the “*epheintai*” or “aim-at-ness” translated into Latin as “*appetunt*” and in English as “desire.”

3.2 “Acting for and end” and the Identity of Being and Good

Let us now turn to see how the notion of “acting for an end” connects with the identity of being and good in things. When Aquinas quotes Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and says, ““Goodness is what all desire” (“*bonum est quod omnia appetunt*”) the Latin term “*appetunt*” is rendered as “desire.” But this seems absurd at first glance. Merely physical things (e.g., carbon atoms) do not have desires! They do not have mental or emotional states at all, and they share this with many other things that exist. However, the Latin term “*appetunt*” might help. This Latin word is where we derive our English term “appetite.” However, this does not seem much better than “desire.” Carbon atoms are not hungry. The Greek term, from which the Latin “*appetunt*” and the English “desire” derive, might be helpful. The Greek term is ἐφίεται. It means “aim at” (e.g., throwing a spear or dart). This seems to help. Any existing thing necessarily

in its existence aims at its own actualization since existence just is essential actualization.⁶

Every being has a “desire,” a “natural appetency,” a real “aim-at-ness” in its essence. Further, when that essence is actualized, the “aim-at-ness” of the essence is complete and perfected (in terms of its moving from potentiality to actuality) just in virtue of its existence (its *esse* or essential actualization). This is something that we can be aware of when we experience anything that exists. When we are aware of any existing thing, we are aware of an essence that “aims at” or “aims toward” (desires) its own existence. When we know an existing thing, we are aware of the completion and perfection of an essence as far as a thing exists. This awareness of the natural fulfillment of “aim-at-ness” (natural appetency or desire) is what Aquinas means by goodness presenting “the aspect of desirableness” which being/existence understood merely as essential actualization does not present. Thus, the distinction between being and good can be held in our minds, but is really an identity in things.

3.3 *Acting For Ends, the Identity of Being and Good, and Arguments for Theism*

Now we can see how acting for an end and the identity of being and good connects to arguments for theism, including a moral argument. It is the real identity of being and good that Aquinas emphasizes when he writes of things acting for an end. Further, and most relevant to arguments for theism, the aim-at-ness of existence in any object does not get there by itself. It needs an explanation.

It will certainly need an explanation when we consider human existence. For complex realities like human beings, the identity of being and good is present just as it is in less complex beings. There is an ontic order of our existence entailing the identity of our ontic goodness. But unlike simpler beings (e.g., a carbon atom), the completion of our being involves a moral order, as we are moral beings. The full completion of our essential human nature as *moral* beings will involve the full exemplification of the virtues directed toward our completion in a *summum bonum*, a final and complete actualization of our essential nature.

The account of full human well-being will need an explanation, with the explanation pointing to the existence of God. This is how the Identity Relation of being and good (IR above) can be used to point to the existence of God. Since being and good are identical, any argument that explains the being of any existent, also explains the goodness of that existent as well. In addition, any argument that explains the goodness of an existent is also explaining the being of that existent. And whether a philosopher focuses on being or on good, since the two are identical, and both need an explanation for their existence, they will both have the capacity to point us to God.

⁶ For a robust defense of the “aim-at-ness” of basic elements like carbon see D. Oderberg, *The Metaphysics of Good and Evil* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

4. The Identity of Being and Good and a Contemporary Moral Argument for Theism.

In this section, I will show how the approach using the identity of being and good (IR) to argue for theism relates to a contemporary moral argument for theism which relies solely on the moral order, but does not include IR in the structure of the argument. What I hope to argue is that IR can undergird a contemporary moral argument so as to avoid possible contemporary objections to it. Two such objections we will consider are 1) objections based on a-theological evidence (e.g., the problem of evil) and 2) objections based on the absence of moral knowledge.

4.1 A Contemporary Simplified Moral Argument (SMA) for Theism

Let us examine a simplified moral argument with objections and see how the identity of being and good can be used to overcome those objections. Some philosophers (e.g., William Lane Craig) have sought to use the existence of a moral order rationally to imply the existence of God. Take for example, a simplified moral argument (SMA):

- 1) If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist.
- 2) Moral values exist.
- 3) Therefore, God exists.

As Baggett and Walls state, “The conclusion obviously follows from the premises, so detractors need to try calling into question at least one of them.”⁷ How might that go? Let us take a look at the logic here for some clarity. Consider the following SMA in a formal manner:

P= God exists (has being) Q= Good (qua morals) exists (has being)

- 1'. If Q then P.
- 2'. Q
- 3'. Therefore, P

To defend the soundness of SMA the theist needs to argue for the truth of Q and P. But immediately a puzzle arises. If the conditional is only treated as a material/truth-functional conditional, then there is no necessary relationship between P and Q, only a truth functional one. In other words, if Q is granted to be true, then the argument for the soundness of SMA hinges on the truth of P. But if the conditional is only truth functional then the “moral argument” is not really about morality at all. It is simply an argument giving evidence for P, moral or otherwise.

⁷ D. Baggett, J. Walls, *The Moral Argument* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 204.

To see this, consider that to defend the unsoundness of SMA an atheist can argue for either a) the truth of Q and the falsity of P, to show that premise 1 is false, or the falsity of Q to show that premise 2 is false. Let us look at these possible options.

For option a) an atheist might argue that Q is true, by granting that it is a brute fact. This might require giving up naturalism/materialism, but does not necessitate theism. An atheist might argue for the falsity of P based on putative atheological evidence (e.g., the problem of evil) or the failure of theistic arguments. But once an atheist grants Q to be true, the soundness of SMA is simply reduced to the evidence for P.

For option b) the atheist could ignore premise 1 and simply deny premise 2. One could argue that there simply are not moral realities, but only moral practices, or maintain some sort of moral skepticism. Here, the evidence for or against theism is irrelevant to the soundness of the argument.

So, if the atheist attacks the soundness of SMA in premise 1, the issue boils down to evidence for theism (moral or otherwise). If the atheist attacks the soundness of SMA in premise 2, the issue boils down to evidence for the existence of morals (goodness), and theistic evidence or lack thereof is irrelevant. So, a demonstration of the unsoundness of SMA simply boils down to either good evidence for the existence of God, or good evidence for the existence of goodness.

There are several ways to strengthen SMA type arguments. One might be to modify them to abductive rather than deductive arguments. That is to say premise 1 is not simply a material conditional, but rather an explanatory one. If morals exist, then what best explains their existence is a personal God or something along those lines. This is what Craig seems to have in mind in his various debates, e.g. Craig v. Hitchens.⁸

A better way to strengthen SMA type arguments in order to keep them deductive is to include the identity of being and goodness established by Aquinas that we have explored above.⁹ If Aquinas is right, then if anything exists, including moral values, then there must exist a reality which is “existence-identical-to-goodness-itself.” Thus, any affirmation of the existence of moral values will give us natural (albeit minimal) theological knowledge. While such a “thin” natural theology might not give us the God of a particular religious tradition like Christianity, it may, as Dallas Willard says, “give us the ontological space” for the God of religion.¹⁰

⁸ See, “Does God Exist? The Craig-Hitchens Debate,” April 4, 2009, transcript. <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/debates/does-god-exist> (accessed 3/12/24).

⁹ Aquinas’ idea that being and good are identical can also be expressed using Leibniz’ law of the indiscernibility of identicals: $\forall x \forall y [(x = y) \rightarrow (\forall O)(Ox \leftrightarrow Oy)]$, where: x=being, y=good, O=any existent (exemplified essence). This would read: that for all being, and for all good if being is identical to good then, for any object O, O is good iff O has being. Expressing Aquinas’ notion in this way might be useful for formal analysis of arguments relying on the identity of being and good.

¹⁰ D. Willard, ‘Language, Being, God, and the Three Stages of Theistic Evidence’, In *Does God Exist?*, edited by J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, 197–220 (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1993), 212.

4.2 Two Possible Objections to SMA

Consider again the atheists' two routes to demonstrating the unsoundness of SMA: a) the truth of Q = Good (qua morals) and the falsity of P = God exists (has being), to show that premise 1 is false, or b) the falsity of Q to show that premise 2 is false. If Aquinas is right, then option a) defending Q entails the existence of a formal reality "existence-identical-to-goodness-itself" but this also implies that a "thin" view of P is true! So, if Aquinas is right then any defense of Q entails that premise 1 is true! Or is so in a "thin" sense: a being that everyone calls God.

Option b) showing the falsity of Q, if Aquinas is right, then showing the falsity of Q would entail that there is no being either! But this is absurd. So, if Aquinas is right, if being and good are identical then in either of these two objections to a contemporary SMA, then either theism is true or the atheist's denial of Q is absurd. This would be an unfortunate position for these atheistic objections to theism. The truth of Aquinas' arguments that being and good are identical logically forces an atheistic view into such a position. The identity of being and goodness found in Aquinas militates against atheistic objections to a moral argument, serving as an undercutting defeater to those objections.

5. Conclusion

Aquinas is a common-sensical philosopher. He makes it plain that what we can know about what is real through our ordinary sense perception. However, he does not simply stop at common sense. He leads us to metaphysical knowledge of the nature of being qua being; the nature of reality itself. In his metaphysical work, he clearly shows that for the things we experience with our senses, to be is to exemplify an essential nature. From this metaphysics grounded in common sense, he further argues that the things we experience in real life are also good. Most importantly, he demonstrates (in the "Four Ways to Good" discussed above) that being and goodness are identical in things, even though we can think about them distinctly in our minds.

Neither Aquinas' metaphysics (being is essential exemplification) nor his metaethics (being and good are identical in things) is inert in its philosophical implications. Aquinas' metaphysics and metaethics are meant to point us to the source of being and good. In this paper, I have argued that the validity of Aquinas' arguments for the identity of being and good can undergird a moral argument for theism. One purpose of such a philosophical move, allows a simple moral argument for theism to be presented more like a cosmological argument, more in line with Aquinas' Fifth Way discussed above.

For, if anything exists, then God exists, where there is a tight metaphysical relation between being and God. But, if there is an identity between being and good then any affirmation of being entails an affirmation of good, and vice versa. And the affirmation of either appears to entail a formal reality "the identity of being and good"

distinct from any particular being or good. This work in natural theology and natural agathology opens the ontological space for the possibility of leading our atheistic or agnostic interlocutors to know the truth of Jesus' claim, "No one is good – except God alone" (Mark 10:17).