1. Preliminaries: Before offering his famous five proofs for God, Aquinas first asks:

*Is the existence of God self-evident?*

That is, if we just sat around thinking about it—without observing anything about the world—could we know with certainty that God exists?

Some things are self-evident. For instance, <All triangles have 3 sides>. If you knew the meanings of all of the terms, you’d just automatically see that this statement is certainly true—even if you had never observed anything in the world. That is because ‘3-sided’ is included in the very DEFINITION of ‘triangle’.

[Note: Strictly speaking, Aquinas DOES think that ‘existence’ is included in the very definition of ‘God’. As we’ll see, he defends Avicenna’s view that God’s essence IS existence. In that case, God’s existence IS self-evident. However, he thinks that this won’t be very obvious to anyone unless we’ve already proven God’s existence in some other way first.]

Aquinas doesn’t think knowledge of God is like this. He thinks that proofs for God’s existence require a starting point in creation. We OBSERVE something in the world, and then reason from there to God. Namely, we reason from the EFFECTS (creatures) to their CAUSE (God). We can’t gain a PERFECT knowledge of God by this method (since in this case the cause is infinitely superior to its effects). But we can at the very least come to know THAT a cause exists, even if we can’t know fully WHAT that cause is like.

Anselm & Augustine: Aquinas dismisses Anselm’s ontological argument, saying only that one cannot prove that something exists in reality based merely on the fact that it exists in one’s mind. He dismisses Augustine’s truth-based argument even more quickly. He agrees that the existence of truth is self-evident. [To deny the existence of truth is self-defeating, since what you’d really be saying is that ‘It is true that there is no truth’.] However, he doesn’t think it’s self-evident that there is some ultimate Truth, such that this Truth = God.

2. The 1st and 2nd Way: These are taken from Aristotle. The starting point of Aquinas’s first way is that we observe motion, or change. Things change all the time. They take on new properties, like shapes, colors, motions, and so on. But, nothing changes itself. Every change is caused by something external. For instance, consider a billiard ball sitting motionless. It cannot just impart motion to itself. Rather, it starts moving only when motion is imparted to it by something ELSE.
Aquinas then reasons that there must be a FIRST mover. Here’s why. Consider this toy (called a ‘Newton’s cradle’):

The first ball imparts motion to the next, and it translates on down the chain to the last ball. But, now imagine that we remove the first ball—or rather, the first motion. What happens? Nothing, right?

So, it seems to follow that, **if there is no first mover in a chain of motions, or changes, then there will be no motions or changes at all.**

You might say, ‘What if the series just goes back and back forever, without beginning?’ Well, just ask: Does a beginningless series of movers have a FIRST mover? Obviously not. So, then, our claim above is not met. The chain never gets started, and there will still be no motions or changes at all. So, there MUST be a beginning.

*[This does NOT mean that Aquinas thinks that an infinite series of motions is impossible. Rather, there would still need to be something to put that WHOLE series INTO motion.]*

Think of it another way: Imagine a bunch of interconnected gears. If one moves, the rest will move. But, unless someone inserts a crank into one of them and starts turning it, none of them will move. In short, without an external MOVER, the gears will remain motionless. Adding an INFINITE number of gears does not change this fact. For, an infinite number of interconnected gears still requires an EXTERNAL source of motion (e.g., someone to turn the crank).
The conclusion is that there must be a first mover, which was not itself moved by anything prior. And we call that God. Here it is in argument form:

1. Things move, or change.
2. But, nothing can move or change itself. It requires an external cause.
3. If there were no first mover in the chain of motions (i.e., changes), then there would be no motions at all.
4. Therefore, there must be a First Mover, which itself is unmoved by an external cause. And this is God. *(Aristotle called it the 'Prime Mover, Unmoved')*

**The 2nd Way:** The second way is exactly like the first, except that it begins with the observation that **things come into existence.** But, again, **nothing can be the cause of its own existence.** For then a thing would have to exist prior to its own existence, which is absurd. And if there is no first cause in the chain of causes, then nothing would ever come into existence at all. Therefore, there must be a First Cause. And this is God.

In short, just replace ‘move’ with ‘begins to exist’ in the argument above.

*[Which is stronger? Compare premise 2 of each argument. What do you think?]*

**3. The 3rd Way:** This one is reminiscent of Avicenna’s argument, which went like this:

1. Everything that exists is either contingent (i.e., requiring an external cause for its existence) or necessary (i.e., not requiring an external cause for its existence, since its essence by itself entails its existence).
2. Something contingent exists (e.g. tables, trees, you).
3. The set of all contingent beings is itself contingent (since, if all of a thing’s parts are contingent, then the whole is contingent); i.e., it must have an external cause.
4. Therefore, a necessary being exists (since a cause that is NOT a member of the set of all contingent beings can only be a necessary being). And this is God.

Again, the basic idea is that, if there is no NECESSARY being to (so to speak) “anchor” the existence of all of the contingent beings, then the existence of contingent beings remains unexplained. So, not ALL beings can be contingent.

**Misinterpretation?** However, Aquinas is often interpreted differently here. Many think that his reason for thinking that not every being can be contingent is this:

*If there were all and only contingent beings, there could be no beginning. But, if the universe were beginningless, then an infinite amount of time would have
passed already. But, over the course of an infinite amount of time, EVERY possibility is realized. But, if everything is contingent (i.e., possibly fails to exist), then one possibility is that ALL of the contingent beings fail to exist at the same time—in which case there would be nothing. In short, if everything is contingent, then every single possibility would have been realized by now—in which case, everything would have winked out of existence by now, and then there would presently be nothing. This is obviously false, so not ALL beings are contingent beings. [Is this REALLY the correct interpretation of Aquinas? What do you think?]

Motivation: Here, Aquinas seems to assume (but not explicitly state) the following principle: Given an infinite amount of time, all possibilities will be realized. Why would anyone think this? Well, consider The Infinite Monkey Theorem: A chimpanzee sitting at a typewriter for eternity randomly banging out letters would eventually type Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in its entirety.

Problem: But, another possibility is that the collection of all possible beings DON'T go out of existence (e.g., if each replaces itself before going out of existence). But, that possibility is incompatible with the possibility that all possible beings DO go out of existence. So, the principle stated above is clearly false. (In short, clearly not EVERY possibility will be realized, given an infinite amount of time, since two of the possibilities are logically incompatible.)

[Avicenna sort of pitches his cosmological argument as if it is self-evident. Technically, we DO have to observe something about the world—namely, something exists. However, as we'll see later, Avicenna thinks that your own existence is self-evident. One cannot coherently deny it. And from there, it should be self-evident that anything that exists must either be necessary or contingent. Etc. For this reason, some have claimed that Avicenna's argument is closer to being an ontological argument than a cosmological argument.]

4. The 4th Way: This one is inspired by both Aristotle and Plato. Here, Aquinas begins with the observation that various attributes come in degrees. Things can be more or less true, more or less good, and so on. But, if things are "more" or "less" like X, then there must be a STANDARD against which "being-like-X" is measured.

For instance, if we all made drawings of Thomas Jefferson, some would look "more" like him and others "less" like him. But, we can say this only because there is a STANDARD against which we are measuring our drawings. Namely, the actual Thomas Jefferson. Similarly, if we say that things are "more" good or "less" good, then there must be a STANDARD of goodness that we are measuring things against; a MOST good thing that is absolutely perfect. And a MOST true thing, and so on. And this is God.
[**Problems:** First, why does the entity at the top of each scale need to be the SAME entity? For instance, perhaps there is a ‘most wise’ thing and a ‘most good’ thing and a ‘most beautiful’ thing and so on—but why must all of these all be included in ONE being?

Second, there seem to be all sorts of scales. Is there a ‘hottest thing’? A ‘greenest thing’? A ‘most disgusting’ thing? Etc. Is God at the top of these scales too?

Reply: At the very least, Aquinas DOES seem to think there is a hottest thing—and it’s not God, but FIRE. So, is the idea that the standards against which concrete, material properties (e.g., hotness, greenness) are measured are found in Earthly things, but the standards against which abstract perfections are measured (e.g., goodness, wisdom) could only be something God-like?]

[**Problem of Evil:** Interestingly, Aquinas gives a brief refutation of the Problem of Evil (i.e., that the existence of evil disproves the existence of a good God). His reply is simply that a good God could coherently allow some evil if doing so brings about an even greater good.]

5. The 5**th** Way: This is a teleological argument (e.g., Averroes).

[Note: The first 3 ways are, roughly, about **efficient** causes. Meanwhile, the 4**th** way is, roughly, about **formal** causes. Here, the 5**th** way is about **final** causes.]

Here, Aquinas reasons from the observation that everything seems to have a telos; that is, a purpose, or end. But, things act—or are arranged, or are ordered—toward some end if there is an Arranger or an Orderer which gives things purposes, or ends. Therefore, there exists some intelligent grand Designer of everything in the universe.

Notice that Aquinas’s teleological argument does not focus on the fact that the universe seems suited to human life, as Averroes’s does, but rather on the fact that things THEMSELVES are orderly. Each thing in the universe seems to have an “end”. In contemporary language, we might say that everything in the universe obeys physical laws, such that all things act in regular, orderly ways. Matter ALWAYS attracts other matter. Light ALWAYS travels in straight lines*, and at the same speed (*caveat: space itself is usually curved). Put 79 protons, 79 electrons, and 118 neutrons together into atoms and you will ALWAYS get gold. Etc. **The world is ridiculously orderly!**

[For a crash course on Aquinas’s first four ways, go here. But, that video seriously mis-represents and mis-interprets Aquinas in a number of ways. So, for an excellent reply to the first video, go here. (And for a lengthy discussion of ONLY the 3**rd** way—which is basically Avicenna’s argument for the Necessary of Existence—go here.)]