With his “Five Ways” Aquinas is attempting to prove by means of reason alone that the God of traditional theism exists. Before taking a closer look at his Second Way, let’s define some terms.

Traditional theism—A being exists that has the following attributes:
   i) a person,
   ii) creator of the universe,
   iii) all-knowing or omniscient,
   iv) all powerful or omnipotent, and
   v) perfectly good and just.
   vi) omnipresent.
This being is God.

Atheism—neither the God of traditional theism nor a deity of any other sort exists.

An agnostic—someone who suspends judgment on the question of whether or not the God of traditional theism exists. An agnostic is neither a theist nor an atheist.

Religious skepticism—Nobody knows or has sufficiently good evidence to justify a belief in God or the truth of any other religious claim. Usually, the religious skeptic is an agnostic and claims that everyone else should be one too. However, as we’ll see later, Pascal and William James hold that one can have good reason to be religious, even if the religious skeptic is right and nobody has any way of knowing whether any religion is true.

“Natural theology”—the attempt to prove by means of purely rational arguments and evidence that traditional theism is true and that atheism and agnosticism are unreasonable views. This is what Thomas Aquinas is doing with his “Five Ways.”

The 3 main arguments of natural theology are:

i) cosmological the bare fact that there is a universe, → God
(“first cause”) that things exist.
(Aquinas’s 2nd and 3rd “Ways” are both versions of this sort of argument).

ii) teleological the fact that many things in the universe → God
(“design”) have purpose or order
(Aquinas’s 5th Way, William Paley, and Cleanthes from Hume’s Dialogues all defend versions of this argument).

iii) ontological the idea/definition of “God” → God is real
(St. Anselm defends this argument).
If natural theology is successful, then it follows that reasonable people who are acquainted with its arguments will be theists. Does it follow that they will be Christians? No. Why not? Does it follow that they will believe in the immortality of the soul and an afterlife? No. Why not?

Now for Aquinas’s Second Way (the “first cause” argument for God’s existence)

The following is a slight revision of Sober’s restatement (on pp. 38-39) of Aquinas’s argument:

1. In the natural world (i.e the world of physical objects in space and time), events occur. (an event = thing(s) undergoing change).
2. Every natural event has a cause.
3. Since a cause must exist before its effect, nothing can be its own cause, because nothing can exist before it exists.
4. A chain of causes and effects extending into the past to infinity is an impossibility.
5. There is a first uncaused cause of the first natural event(s) (the Big Bang?), which is not itself a natural event or natural thing.
6. This “supernatural” thing is God.

Sober has 4 objections to this argument, and I want to add my own:

1. 6 doesn’t follow from 5. Even if a single supernatural first cause of the universe exists, it doesn’t follow that it’s a person (an intelligent being with goals, intentions, etc.) and thus, it doesn’t follow that it’s the God of traditional theism.

2. 4 is not obviously true, and A.’s argument for it is flawed. It doesn’t follow from “take away the cause, and you take away the effect,” that there would be nothing in existence now if there were no first cause.

3. 2 is not obviously true. Why must everything that occurs in nature have a cause?

3b. (This is my objection, not Sober’s). If one thinks that a principle of universal causation is true, why think that it is true only of “natural events” and not everything? If everything has to have a cause, then God does, too. If God doesn’t need a cause, then why does the universe? Aquinas’s answer, “because God is a supernatural being and the universe is a collection of natural thing/events, and the principle of universal causation applies only to natural things/events” seems to me ad hoc. (ad hoc = contrived solely for this purpose).

4. The inference from 1-4 to 5 commits the “birthday fallacy.”
What is the “birthday fallacy”? It’s the type of fallacy committed by the following inference:
   i. Everybody has a birthday.
      ---------
   ii. There is one day, the same day, on which everyone was born.

The following inference also commits this fallacy:
   i. Everybody has a father.
      ---------
   ii. There is one man, the same man, who is everyone’s father.

Instead of calling it the “birthday fallacy,” Sober could just as easily have used this example to illustrate it and then have called it the “father fallacy.” In both examples the premise is true and the conclusion false, so either serves to prove that the inference is a fallacy.

How exactly does Aquinas’s argument commit this fallacy?

There are lots of causal chains that extend into the past. Here are just 3:

   i)  .... → my great grandparents → my grandparents → my parents → me.
   ii) .... → my great grandparents → my grandparents → my parents → my sister.
   iii) .... → your great grandparents → your grandparents → your parents → you.

Now suppose that Aquinas is correct in claiming that the chain in i) must have an uncaused supernatural cause at its beginning, that he is correct in claiming that the chain in ii) must have an uncaused supernatural cause at its beginning, etc. Does it follow that the supernatural cause that begins i) has to be the same one as the one that begins ii), etc.? No. It’s possible that each causal chain has its own supernatural first cause that’s different from the supernatural first cause of any other causal chain.

The inference:
   Every causal chain must have an uncaused supernatural cause at its beginning.
      ---------
   There is one uncaused supernatural cause, the same one, that begins each and every causal chain.

has the same logical form as the above arguments about fathers and birthdays. It commits the “birthday fallacy.”

In saying that Aquinas’s 2nd way is a “bad” argument, we (Sober and I) are not saying that it’s conclusion (God exists) is false. All we’re saying is that argument does not provide anyone with good reason to believe that it’s true. You could agree with that and think that there are other good arguments for traditional theism.