

Aquinas' Five Ways

Today we begin our discussion of the existence of God.

The main philosophical problem about the existence of God can be put like this: is it possible to provide good arguments either for or against the existence of God? We will be considering a few traditional arguments for the existence of God, and the main argument against the existence of God, the 'argument from evil.'

The main positions on the question of the existence of God are three:

- Theism, the belief that God exists.
- Atheism, the belief that God does not exist.
- Agnosticism, not believing that God exists and not believing that God does not exist.

The connection of these three positions to arguments for the existence of God is not entirely straightforward.

For example, suppose that we do not find any good arguments for God's existence. Does that show that theism is false?

Or suppose that we do not find any good arguments against God's existence. Does that show that atheism is false?

There are harder questions in the vicinity as well. Suppose again that we do not find any good arguments for God's existence. Does that show that belief in God is *irrational*, or *baseless*?

Or suppose that we do not find any good arguments against God's existence. Does that show that atheism is irrational?

Questions like these are not easy to answer. We will return to these, and questions like them, later in the course.

But there is one related topic that is worth taking up at the outset. Some people are inclined to object to considering arguments for and against the existence of God on the following grounds:

“Belief in God is a matter of faith, not of reason. So it is not the sort of thing that we should be arguing about -- the whole point of belief in God is that you should believe it without needing any evidence or arguments!”

There are a few things to be said about this line of thought.

First, it is not obvious that faith and reason have to be opposed in the way that the objection assumes. In particular, it might be the case that one ought to believe in God whether or not one understands any good arguments for God’s existence, but that it is still worthwhile to look for good arguments. So, for example, many medieval philosophers took as the motto of their philosophical investigations “faith seeking understanding”: not as giving up faith in God, but as seeking a deeper understanding of the object of that faith.

Second, whether you are an atheist or a theist, you might think that you will stick to what you believe even if you cannot back it up with arguments. But even if this is so, you seem to have an obligation to be able to respond to arguments for the contrary view.

Third, you might have none of these views. You might think: I’d like to decide for myself whether or not God exists, and I want to know why I should believe one thing or the other. And if this is your attitude, then it seems that the only place for you to look for help are the arguments that have been offered for and against God’s existence.

The first three arguments for the existence of God which we'll be discussing are all among the proofs of God's existence offered by St. Thomas Aquinas. Thomas offered 5 proofs for God's existence; of the two which we will not be discussing, one is the topic of your first paper.

Thomas was born in 1225 and, while his works were extremely controversial in their time -- some were condemned as heretical by the bishop of Paris -- he has since come to be regarded as the greatest theologian and philosopher in the history of the Church. His *Summa Theologiae* -- from which the arguments we will be discussing were taken -- is regarded by many as the definitive exposition of the Catholic faith.



The second way is from the nature of efficient cause. In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or one only. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate, cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

We begin with Aquinas "second way" -- his second argument for the existence of God. In order to evaluate this argument, our first task is to identify Aquinas's premises.

The second way is from the nature of efficient cause. In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or one only. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate, cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

We begin with Aquinas “second way” -- his second argument for the existence of God. In order to evaluate this argument, our first task is to identify Aquinas’s premises.

One key premise seems to be his idea that nothing can be the efficient cause of itself -- i.e., that

Nothing can be the cause of its own existence.

The second way is from the nature of efficient cause. In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or one only. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate, cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

We begin with Aquinas “second way” -- his second argument for the existence of God. In order to evaluate this argument, our first task is to identify Aquinas’s premises.

One key premise seems to be his idea that nothing can be the efficient cause of itself -- i.e., that

Nothing can be the cause of its own existence.

A second idea, which Thomas expresses in the passage immediately following, is that there can be no infinite chain of causes:

The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.

The second way is from the nature of efficient cause. In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or one only. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate, cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

We begin with Aquinas “second way” -- his second argument for the existence of God. In order to evaluate this argument, our first task is to identify Aquinas’s premises.

One key premise seems to be his idea that nothing can be the efficient cause of itself -- i.e., that

Nothing can be the cause of its own existence.

A second idea, which Thomas expresses in the passage immediately following, is that there can be no infinite chain of causes:

The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.

Following his statement of this second premise, Aquinas gives a defense of this premise, to which we will return. But in order to understand his argument, we need in addition to his premises, an understanding of his conclusion. This comes right at the end, and is best thought of as a pair of claims:

There is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist.

This “first cause” is God.

So far, then we have two premises, and a pair of conclusions. The pair of conclusions was:

A. There is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist.

B. This “first cause” is God.

A first question: is how are these two conclusions related?

A plausible thought in this case seems to be that what Aquinas is really after is a proof of the existence of God. So conclusion A above is really just a kind of preliminary conclusion; the idea, Aquinas seems to think, is that if we can give an argument for A, we will then be in a position to get from there to the conclusion, B.

So let's focus first on how we could get to conclusion A.

A natural first thought is that perhaps this conclusion simply follows from the two premises which we have already identified, namely

Nothing can be the cause of its own existence.

The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.

If this is right, then the following argument should be valid:

Nothing can be the cause of its own existence.

The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.

There is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist.

Is this argument valid?

It seems that this argument is not valid. After all, we can imagine that nothing has ever been caused to come into existence. If that were true, then both premises would be true, and yet the conclusion would be false. How can we fix this problem with Thomas' argument?

Often, you can repair an invalid argument by adding an extra premise which makes explicit an assumption that the author had in mind. In this case, suppose we add the assumption that at least one thing has been caused to come into existence:

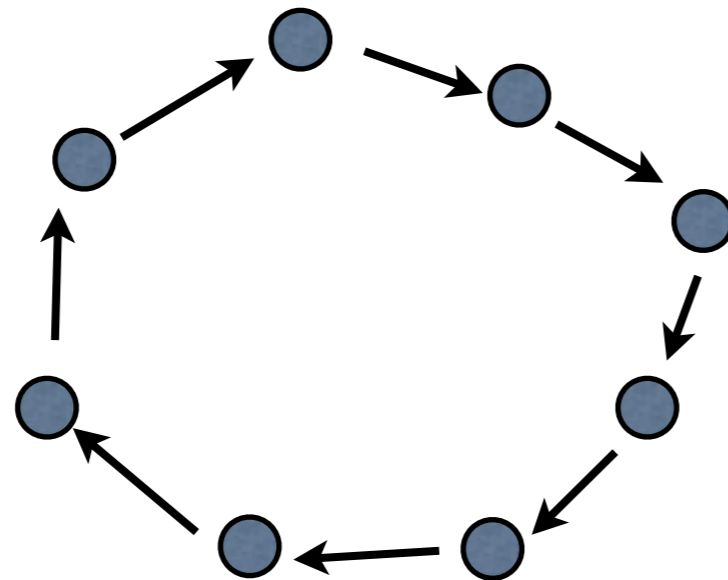
1. At least one thing has been caused to come into existence.
2. Nothing can be the cause of its own existence.
3. The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.

C. There is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist.

If this really is what Aquinas had in mind, why didn't he make this extra premise explicit?

Is this argument valid? Can you think of any way in which premises 1, 2, and 3 could be true, and yet the conclusion false?

Here's one way in which that could happen. Let $x \longrightarrow y$ mean that x brought y into existence. Then it seems that the chain of causation could, for all we have said, look like this:



In this diagram, some things are caused to exist (premise 1), nothing is the cause of its own existence (2), and there are no infinite chains of causation (3). However, if this were the way things were, then our conclusion would be false: there would be no cause of the existence of things which was not itself caused to exist. This suggests that, as it stands, our interpretation of Aquinas' argument is invalid.

How might Aquinas fix this problem with the argument?

A natural idea is to modify premise 2:

2. Nothing can be the cause of its own existence.

Plausibly, with this premise, Aquinas didn't just want to rule out things being the immediate cause of their own existence; he also wanted to rule out the possibility of something being one of a series of causes one of whose effects is its own existence. One way to express this idea is as follows: let's say that if A causes B and B causes C, then A, even though not the direct cause of C's existence, is still *causally responsible* for C's existence. And let's extend this notion of causal responsibility to cover causal chains of arbitrary length, so that if A1 causes A2, and A2 causes A3, and Ax causes Ay, A1 is causally responsible for Ay, no matter how long this series of causes is.

2*. Nothing can be the cause of its own existence, or be causally responsible for its own existence.

This seems like a plausible claim, and if we replace 2 with 2*, it looks like Thomas' argument is valid:

1. At least one thing has been caused to come into existence.
- 2*. Nothing can be the cause of its own existence, or be causally responsible for its own existence.
3. The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.

C. There is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist.

We haven't quite finished with the task of figuring out what Aquinas had in mind; after all, we know that he is trying to give an argument for the existence of God, and the above argument only gives us the conclusion that there is something which brings things into existence but was not itself brought into existence. But, fortunately, it is pretty clear what is going on here; from the way that Aquinas states his conclusion, it seems clear that he thinks that if there is such a first cause, then God exists -- because that first cause is God.

Adding this to our argument, we get the following:

1. At least one thing has been caused to come into existence.
2. Nothing can be the cause of its own existence.
3. The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.
4. There is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist. (1,2,3)
5. If there is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist, then God exists.

C. God exists. (4,5)

Is this argument valid? Note that answering this question is a bit more complicated than it was in the case of the arguments we discussed last time, since this argument contains a sub-argument: the argument which has premises 1, 2, and 3 as premises, and premise 4 as conclusion. So we have to ask both whether this sub-argument is valid, and whether the argument from 4 and 5 to C is valid.

Aquinas' 2nd way

1. At least one thing has been caused to come into existence.
- 2*. Nothing can be the cause of its own existence, or be causally responsible for its own existence.
3. The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.
4. There is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist. (1,2,3)
5. If there is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist, then God exists.

C. God exists. (4,5)

This shows how much work is often required just to come up with a valid version of an author's argument. And, of course, doing this is just half of our job: we want to know whether the argument is not just valid, but also sound.

To figure this out, we have to ask: are any of Aquinas' premises false? If not, then we will have a sound argument for the existence of God.

Aquinas' 2nd way

1. At least one thing has been caused to come into existence.
- 2*. Nothing can be the cause of its own existence, or be causally responsible for its own existence.
3. The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.
4. There is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist. (1,2,3)
5. If there is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist, then God exists.

C. God exists. (4,5)

This shows how much work is often required just to come up with a valid version of an author's argument. And, of course, doing this is just half of our job: we want to know whether the argument is not just valid, but also sound.

To figure this out, we have to ask: are any of Aquinas' premises false? If not, then we will have a sound argument for the existence of God.

We can immediately eliminate **premise (4)** from consideration. After all, premise (4) is supposed to follow from 1, 2, and 3, and we have already agreed that the argument is valid; so, it seems that if the first three premises are true, premise 4 must be as well.

Aquinas' 2nd way

1. At least one thing has been caused to come into existence.
- 2*. Nothing can be the cause of its own existence, or be causally responsible for its own existence.
3. The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.
4. There is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist. (1,2,3)
5. If there is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist, then God exists.

C. God exists. (4,5)

This shows how much work is often required just to come up with a valid version of an author's argument. And, of course, doing this is just half of our job: we want to know whether the argument is not just valid, but also sound.

To figure this out, we have to ask: are any of Aquinas' premises false? If not, then we will have a sound argument for the existence of God.

We can immediately eliminate **premise (4)** from consideration. After all, premise (4) is supposed to follow from 1, 2, and 3, and we have already agreed that the argument is valid; so, it seems that if the first three premises are true, premise 4 must be as well.

Further, **premises 1 and 2*** each look pretty plausible: some things -- like you and I, and this desk -- really do seem to have been caused to come into existence, and it really is hard to see how something could be causally responsible for its own existence.

So this just leaves us premises 3 and 5 to worry about.

Let's turn to premise 3 first:

3. The chain of causes of things coming into existence cannot be infinite.

One might wonder how Aquinas could know this. After all, the idea of an infinite series of things is perfectly coherent -- just think of the series of natural numbers (or, for a series which is infinite in both directions, the set of integers).

As noted above, Aquinas does provide an argument for this premise. His argument is contained in the highlighted portion of the argument:

The second way is from the nature of efficient cause. In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the intermediate is the cause of the ultimate cause, whether the intermediate cause be several, or one only. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate, cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

What is the argument here?

It is difficult (for me, at least) to see. Aquinas seems to be thinking of an infinite series as a series from which a first cause is "taken away." And he's right that if you take away a cause, you often take away all of its effects, whether direct or indirect.

But this seems to be the wrong conception of an infinite series; an infinite series is not one whose first member was taken away, but a series which is such that, for each member of the series, there is one which comes before it.

Can we give any other defense of the assumption that the chain of causes of things coming into existence must be finite in length?

One way to argue for this would be to show that there is some sort of absurdity in the idea of an infinite chain of causes of events. One attempt to show this is the example of “Thomson’s lamp”: a lamp which is turned on and off an infinite number of times between 3:00 and 4:00 one afternoon. The infinite series of events then can be represented as follows:

on, off, on, off, on, off

and so on, without end. Because there is no end to the series, every “on” is followed by an “off”, and every “off” is followed by an “on.”

So it seems that at 4:01 the lamp can be neither on nor off. But this is absurd; there is no other state for the lamp to be in.

If this shows anything, it shows that there cannot be an infinite series of events *in a finite time*. Can you see why?

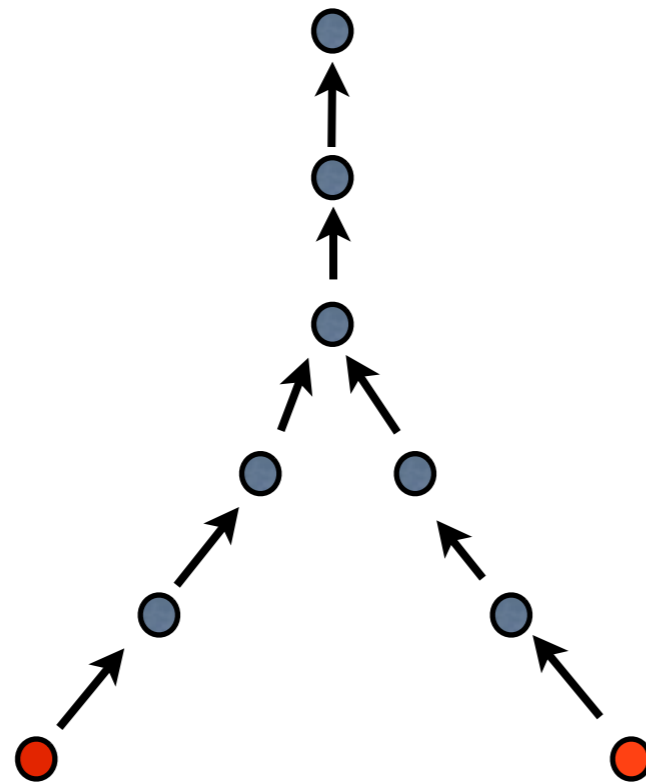
What does this tell us about premise 3?

A further problem with the argument concerns premise 5:

5. If there is a cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist, then God exists.

There are two different sorts of worries about this premise. The first is that, strictly speaking, the premise should say that if there is at least one cause of the existence of some things which was not itself caused to exist, then at least one God exists.

After all, nothing rules out the chain of causes looking like this:



This would be a non-infinite causal chain in which nothing is causally responsible for its own existence; but there are two uncaused causes in this chain, not one.

Since the idea that the chain of causes has this shape is consistent with everything in Aquinas' argument, it looks like that argument, strictly speaking, only can be taken to show that there is at least one God, not that there is exactly one. So it (perhaps) proves the truth of theism, but not the truth of monotheism.

But there's another, more serious worry about premise (5): it is just not obvious that it's true that if there is an uncaused cause of things, that that thing would be God. Consider, for example, the following (obviously, oversimplified) statement of Big Bang theory of the origins of the universe:

The first event in the history of the universe was an explosion of a an extremely dense collection of particles, with every particle moving apart from every other particle. This event had no cause -- in particular, no intelligent being set it into motion -- and, further, every subsequent event has been an effect of this event.

This is a description of the way that the universe could be, according to which there is a cause of the existence of things which was not itself caused to occur. But would it be reasonable to say that, if this picture of the universe is true, God exists?

It seems not. After all, if this view were correct, what would God be -- the event of the Big Bang? The condensed matter which exploded in the Big Bang? Either way, God would no longer exist. Moreover, these things lack too many of the attributes central to our conception of God -- such as, for example, personhood, intelligence, love, and moral goodness.

Here is a possible reply on Aquinas's behalf.

Perhaps Aquinas is not talking about a temporal series of causes of existence; some indication of this is given by the fact that Aquinas did not think that we could know on the basis of reason that the age of the universe was finite.

Perhaps when Aquinas talks about causes in this argument, he is talking about *sustaining causes*. The sustaining cause of something is not just what "starts off" its existence; it is also what keeps it in existence over time.

Consider DeBartolo Hall, from one moment to the next. It is surely *possible* that it go out of existence at any moment (even if, fortunately, quite unlikely). So why doesn't it? What is the explanation of the fact that DeBartolo Hall continues to exist?

It seems as though any explanation to which one appeals will be such that we can ask the same questions about it -- unless that something is such that it couldn't fail to exist. Perhaps such a thing would really deserve the name "God."

To give this sort of response to our worries about premise (5), we would have to make explicit some of the assumptions about possibility, necessity, and explanation we just made. That will be our task next time.