

The cosmological argument (continued)

Remember that last time we arrived at the following interpretation of Aquinas' second way:

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)

I suggested that this argument is valid, and that the two premises most open to question are premises 3 and 5.

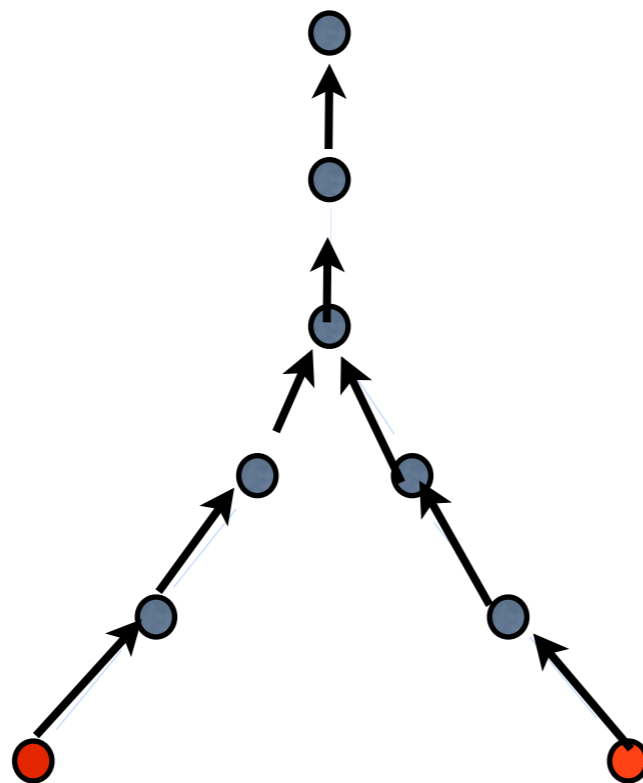
Last time we closed with a discussion of premise 3, the “no infinite chains” premise. We considered two possible defenses of that premise: the one contained in Aquinas' argument, and the argument from the example of Thomson's lamp.

Today I'd like to begin by talking about the 5th premise of this argument.

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.

This would not make the argument insignificant; if it succeeded in ruling out atheism in favor of theism of some variety or other, that would be a significant achievement.

A more worrying weakness is that the argument seems to show only, at best, that there *at one time* was at least one God.

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.

This brings out an important aspect of all arguments for the existence of God. All such arguments are really arguments for the conclusion that a being with such-and-such characteristics exists -- Aquinas' second way, for example, is an argument that a being with the characteristic of being an uncaused cause exists. So, all such arguments raise the question: do we really know that any being with that characteristic would be God? The discussion above is a way of raising a doubt about the idea that we can be sure that any uncaused cause would be God.

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, and see how these notions might play a role in an argument for God's existence. Aquinas tries to provide just such an argument in his 3rd way.

The crucial notion for understanding Aquinas' second way was the notion of an efficient cause of a thing -- the cause of a thing's existence. The crucial notions for understanding his third way are the notions of *necessity* and *possibility*.

Let's begin by discussing what it means for something to be **possible**. It is important to see that Aquinas is using the word in a very broad sense: something is possible just in case it could have happened --- no matter how absurd, or bizarre, it is. So, for example, it is possible that a pink elephant is presently running through south quad, or that a talking donkey will one day be a professor of philosophy at Notre Dame.

It is not possible, in this sense, that there could be a three-sided plane closed Euclidean figure with four angles -- it isn't just that this scenario would be silly or surprising; on reflection, we can see, on the contrary, that the scenario really does not make sense. In the same way, we can see that it simply could not be the case that I have an object in my office which is bright red and bright green all over. This is what we mean when we say that the scenario is **impossible**: it could not have been the case.

Once you understand what it means for a scenario to be impossible, you can understand what it means for a scenario to be **necessary**: a scenario is necessary just in case its opposite is impossible; or, equivalent, just in case it is impossible for that scenario not to be actual.

Can you think of any examples of necessary truths -- claims about the world which are not just true, but necessarily true?

There's one more term which will be important to master, not just for understanding Aquinas' argument, but also for understanding several other arguments which we will be discussing later: **contingent**. A contingent truth is a truth that is not necessary; and, in general, a contingent claim is one which is possibly true and possible false. So every claim about the world falls into exactly one of the following three categories: necessary, impossible, or contingent.

With these terms in hand, let's look at Aquinas' argument:

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to be corrupted, and consequently, it is possible for them to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which can not-be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything can not-be, then at one time there was nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist begins to exist only through something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but admit the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

This is a complex argument. The easiest way to think about it is by breaking it into two parts.

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In the **first part**, Aquinas argues from the fact that some things exist only contingently to the conclusion that there is some being which exists necessarily.

In the **second part**, he argues that if there is some being which exists necessarily, then God exists.

We'll focus our attention on the first half of the argument.

Aquinas' argument for the existence of a necessary being.

We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to be corrupted, and consequently, it is possible for them to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which can not-be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything can not-be, then at one time there was nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist begins to exist only through something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary.

We know what Aquinas is arguing for:

C. There is something which exists necessarily.

But what are the premises?

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A first premise is clear enough:

There are something things which possibly exist, and possibly do not exist.

i.e.,

1. There are some things which exist contingently.

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1. There are some things which exist contingently.

In a second premise, Aquinas draws a connection between possible nonexistence and nonexistence at some time:

2. If something exists only contingently, then there is some time at which it did not exist.

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But what are the premises?

1. There are some things which exist contingently.
2. If something exists only contingently, then there is some time at which it did not exist.

Aquinas' next sentence begins with the word "therefore"; this is a good indication that he takes what he is saying with this sentence to be something which follows from one or more of the preceding premises, rather than an independent premise. What he says is that if everything can not be -- i.e., if everything exists only contingently -- then at one time there would have been nothing in existence. Let's suppose for now that this is a third premise, which is supposed to follow from (1) and (2):

3. If everything exists contingently, then at one time nothing existed. (1,2)

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We know what Aquinas is arguing for:

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But what are the premises?

1. There are some things which exist contingently.
2. If something exists only contingently, then there is some time at which it did not exist.
3. If everything exists contingently, then at one time nothing existed. (1,2)

The next sentence considers this possibility -- the possibility that at one time nothing existed -- and draws the conclusion that if *at one time* nothing existed, then it would be true *even now* that nothing exists.

4. If at one time nothing existed, then now nothing exists.

Aquinas' argument for the existence of a necessary being.

We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to be corrupted, and consequently, it is possible for them to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which can not-be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything can not-be, then at one time there was nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist begins to exist only through something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary.

We know what Aquinas is arguing for:

C. There is something which exists necessarily.

But what are the premises?

1. There are some things which exist contingently.
2. If something exists only contingently, then there is some time at which it did not exist.
3. If everything exists contingently, then at one time nothing existed. (1,2)
4. If at one time nothing existed, then now nothing exists.

But, of course, this is crazy -- as Aquinas recognizes. Some things do definitely exist now, like you and me. This obvious claim is the 5th and final premise that, I think, can be found in the text.

5. Some things now exist.

Aquinas' argument for the existence of a necessary being.

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So now we have isolated a bunch of premises:

1. There are some things which exist contingently.
2. If something exists only contingently, then there is some time at which it did not exist.
3. If everything exists contingently, then at one time nothing existed. (1,2)
4. If at one time nothing existed, then now nothing exists.
5. Some things now exist.

and a conclusion.

C. There is something which exists necessarily.

Our first question is: do these premises give us a valid argument for the conclusion? This is certainly not obvious at a first glance. A good strategy is to begin by looking at the premises, and seeing whether any two of the premises can be put together to prove a further claim.

1. There are some things which exist contingently.
2. If something exists only contingently, then there is some time at which it did not exist.
3. If everything exists contingently, then at one time nothing existed. (1,2)
4. If at one time nothing existed, then now nothing exists.
5. Some things now exist.

One obvious place to start is with the last two premises. These seem to be of the form:

if p, then q

and

not-q

So, from these it should follow that not-p -- i.e., that

6. It is not the case that at one time nothing existed.
(4,5)

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3. If everything exists contingently, then at one time nothing existed. (1,2)

4. If at one time nothing existed, then now nothing exists.

5. Some things now exist.

6. It is not the case that at one time nothing existed. (4,5)

But now look at (3) and (6): these seem to be related in just the way that (4) and (5) were. That is, (3) seems to be a claim of the form

if p, then q

while (6) says that

not q.

So it should follow from these that

7. It is not the case that everything exists only contingently. (3,6)

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3. If everything exists contingently, then at one time nothing existed. (1,2)

4. If at one time nothing existed, then now nothing exists.

5. Some things now exist.

6. It is not the case that at one time nothing existed. (4,5)

7. It is not the case that everything exists only contingently. (3,6)

But now think for a second about what (7) says: it says that it is not the case that everything is a contingent being. But that means that it must be true that *something* is *not* a contingent being.

8. There is something which does not exist contingently. (7)

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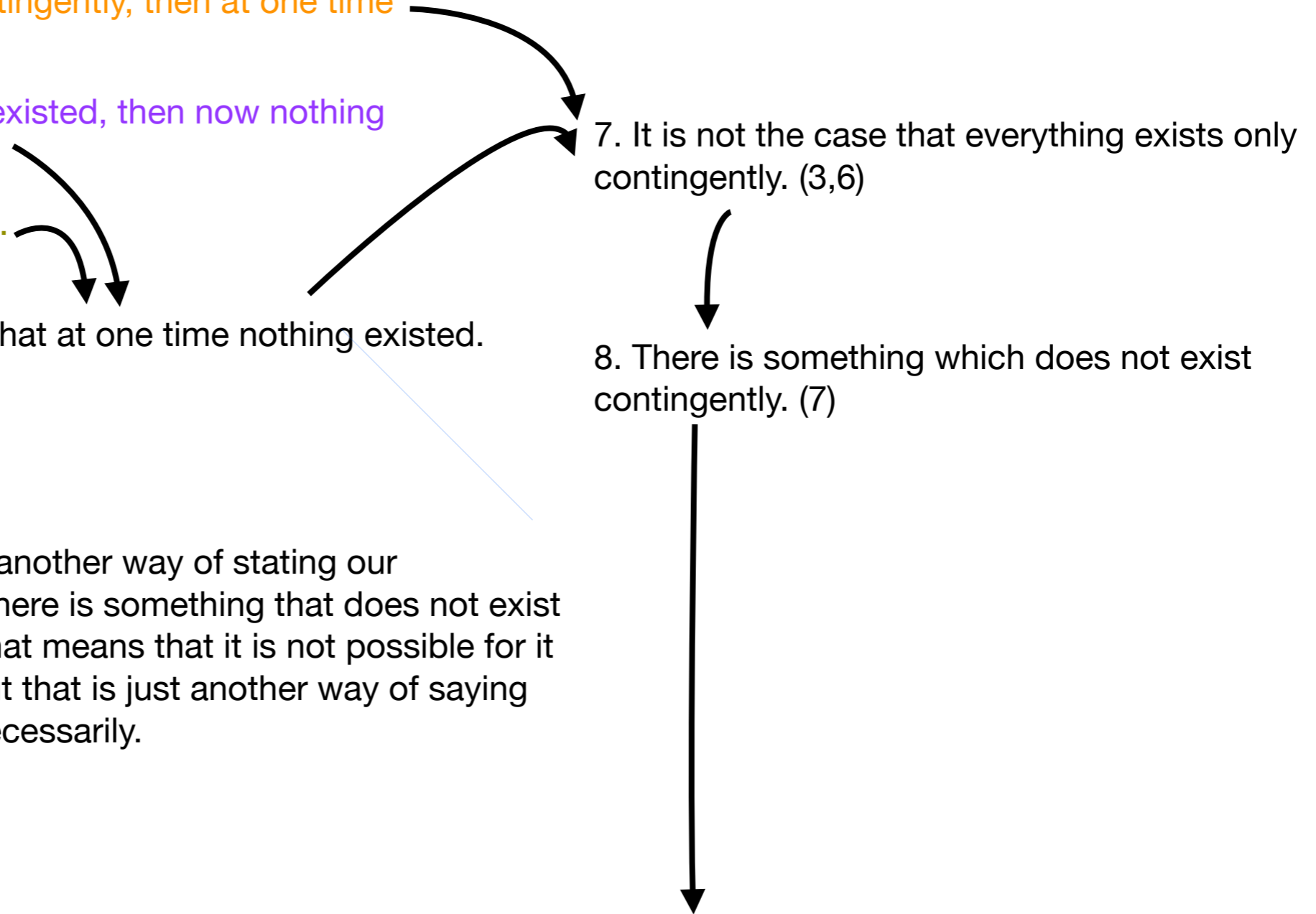
6. It is not the case that at one time nothing existed. (4,5)

7. It is not the case that everything exists only contingently. (3,6)

8. There is something which does not exist contingently. (7)

But this is just another way of stating our conclusion; if there is something that does not exist contingently, that means that it is not possible for it not to exist. But that is just another way of saying that it exists necessarily.

C. There is something which exists necessarily. (8)



So it looks like we have our reconstruction of Aquinas' argument:

1. There are some things which exist contingently.
2. If something exists only contingently, then there is some time at which it did not exist.
3. If everything exists contingently, then at one time nothing existed. (1,2)
4. If at one time nothing existed, then now nothing exists.
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C. There is something which exists necessarily. (8)

Is this argument valid?

The argument as a whole is valid if and only if each of the 5 sub-arguments that make it up are valid. These are:

from 1 & 2 to 3

from 4 & 5 to 6

from 3 & 6 to 7

from 7 to 8

from 8 to C

We have discussed the last four of these. But how about the first one: the inference from premises 1 & 2 to 3? Is this valid?

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C. There is something which exists necessarily. (8)

We have discussed the last four of these. But how about the first one: the inference from premises 1 & 2 to 3? Is this valid?

First, let's ask whether 3 follows from 2 by itself. This seems to be analogous to the following inference:

2*. If a person sings sometimes, then there is some time at which that person sings.

3*. If everyone sings sometimes, then there is some time at which everyone sings.

Is this inference valid?

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C. There is something which exists necessarily. (8)

Now, let's ask whether 3 follows from 1 & 2. This seems to be analogous to the following inference:

1*. There are some people that sing sometimes.

2*. If a person sings sometimes, then there is some time at which that person sings.

3*. If everyone sings sometimes, then there is some time at which everyone sings.

Is *this* inference valid?

Even if this inference were valid, a separate problem would be that premise (2) does not look clearly true. Can you see why?

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2. If something exists only contingently, then there is some time at which it did not exist.
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8. There is something which does not exist contingently. (7)

C. There is something which exists necessarily. (8)

If (3) were true, then it would seem very plausible that we would have a sound argument for the existence of God. Premises (4) and (5) each appear to be true, and all of the logical inferences from (3) to the conclusion seem fine.

Unfortunately, it does not seem that Aquinas has given us any good reason to believe that (3) is true.

Aquinas' general strategy in this argument, however -- arguing for the existence of God on the basis of reflection on necessity and possibility -- has proven to be quite a popular one. Next week we will begin by discussing the efforts of Gottfried Leibniz, a 17th century German philosopher, to improve on Aquinas.