

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.

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.

Let's turn to Aquinas's arguments for the existence of God. His "first way" runs as follows:

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is moved is moved by another, for nothing can be moved except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is moved; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, *i.e.*, that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is moved must be moved by another. If that by which it is moved be itself moved, then this also must needs be moved by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover, seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are moved by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is moved by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, moved by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

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By “in motion” Aquinas means something like “changing.” Given this, we can think of his first way as follows:

1. Whenever something undergoes change, it is caused to do so by something.
2. Nothing can be the cause of its own change, since something cannot have a quality both potentially and actually at the same time.
3. Whenever something changes, this change must have been brought about by something other than that thing. (1,2)
4. The chain connecting things which change and things which initiate the changes cannot be infinite.

C. There is a first mover, which initiates change but is not itself changed. (3,4)

A worry about this argument: is premise (2) true? How does Aquinas defend this premise?

This doubt about premise (2) is less of a worry with Aquinas' second way, which is structurally similar to the first way:

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.

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We can think of the second way as having the following form:

1. Whenever something comes to exist, it is caused to exist by something.
2. Nothing can be the cause of its own existence, since then it would be prior to itself.
3. Whenever something comes into existence, this must have been brought about by something other than that thing. (1,2)
4. The chain connecting things which come into existence and things which bring them into existence cannot be infinite.

C. There is a first cause, which brings things into existence but was not itself brought into existence. (3,4)

Is premise (2) of this argument more plausible than the corresponding premise of the first way?

Aquinas's second way

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Even if premise (2) of this argument looks strong, though, there are other questions which can be raised about it.

First, it seems to show that at least one first cause exists, not that exactly one does.

Second, premise (4) might seem less than obvious. How can we be sure that there is not an infinite series of causes of the sort that premise (4) denies? After all, there's nothing incoherent about infinite series generally; the series of natural numbers is infinite, but arithmetic still makes sense.

A defense of premise (4): the example of "Thomson's lamp."

A third worry: is Aquinas right that everyone would give the name of God to a first cause? Suppose that there are several, or that the first cause no longer exists. Or suppose that the first cause is the big bang.

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Here is a possible reply on Aquinas's behalf.

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

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."

If this is right, then one way to repair the defects in our interpretations of Aquinas' arguments is to formulate an argument employing the notions of necessity and possibility. That will be our topic next time.