



THE FIRST
CAUSE
ARGUMENT

Our first topic is the question of whether God exists.

But what does it mean to say that God exists? Don't people have different ideas of what God could be?

In this class, we'll be working with the conception of God common to what are often thought of as the major monotheistic religions — Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Here is the view of God common to these religions:

The classical conception of God

God is not part of the universe, but is the creator of the universe. God is also all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good. God has always existed, and always will exist. God is the greatest being that could exist.

Three views
about
the universe

Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two
objections
to Aquinas

the kalām
argument

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With this conception of God in mind, we can state two views about the nature of reality.

Simple theism

God exists, and
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Simple atheism

The universe (or perhaps several
universes) are all that exists.
Nothing created it (or them).

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These two views are exclusive: if one is true, the other is false. Are they the only possible views?

No. One might think that the universe was created by something outside of the universe, but that that being is not God. Let's call this view 'quasi-theism':

Quasi-theism

The universe was created
by something outside of it,
but not by God.

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Many arguments for God's existence are best thought of as arguments against simple atheism. Whether they also amount to good arguments for the existence of God then depends in part on how seriously you take quasi-theism. This is something to which we will return.

Let's turn then to our first argument for the existence of God: the first cause argument we find in the reading from Thomas Aquinas.

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St. 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 philosophical exposition of the Catholic faith.



Here is the central argument of Aquinas' second way - the second of five proofs that Aquinas gave for the existence of God.

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, indeed, is it 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 ...

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 cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.



What we want to know is: Is this a good argument for God's existence? Is it valid? Is it sound?

But to answer these questions, we first need to figure out what the premises of Aquinas' argument **are**.



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But right away we have a problem: the text uses a phrase, 'efficient cause,' with which you are likely unfamiliar. A reasonable first strategy is to try out a familiar candidate. So let's suppose that 'efficient cause' just means 'cause,' and see how far that gets us.

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Let's start with the second sentence. Our goal is to come up with a simple, straightforward way to state the main point of this sentence. We always want to use language which is as simple and clear as possible.

There are
some
causes.

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There are
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Let's have a look at the next sentence. How would you state this claim in simple language?

Nothing is
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There are two kinds of premises in arguments: independent premises, which are supposed to stand on their own, and derived premises, which are supposed to follow from other premises. Which do you think this is?

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We get a hint when we look at the rest of the sentence, which seems to provide a mini-argument for the claim that nothing is the cause of itself.

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There are some causes.

If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.

Nothing is prior to itself.

Nothing is the cause of itself.





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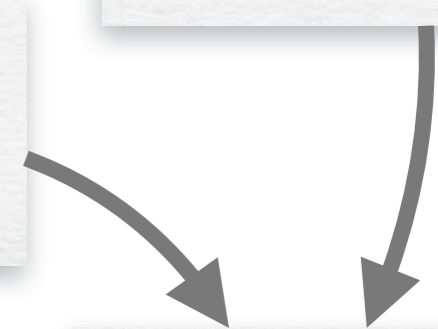
If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.

We get one more premise in the next sentence.

There are no infinite causal chains.

Nothing is prior to itself.

Nothing is the cause of itself.





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There are some causes.

If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.

Nothing is prior to itself.

There are no infinite causal chains.

Nothing is the cause of itself.

It is pretty clear that this is a derived premise, since we get a long argument for it in the passage immediately following.

Let's set this difficult passage to the side for now, and see if we can figure out the shape of Aquinas' argument.





There are some causes.

There are no infinite causal chains.

Nothing is prior to itself.

If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.

Nothing is the cause of itself.

There is a first cause.

We've now got some premises on the table. But to figure out whether they make for a valid argument, we need to first figure out what conclusion they are supposed to be an argument for.

Fortunately, it is pretty clear that at least one thing Aquinas is arguing for is the following:

By this Aquinas means "there is something which causes other things to exist but was not itself caused to exist by anything."



There are no infinite causal chains.

There are some causes.

If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.

Nothing is prior to itself.

Nothing is the cause of itself.

Does this follow from the premises that we already have on the table?

Aquinas never says that he is assuming this; but it is hard to see how the argument can work if he is not.

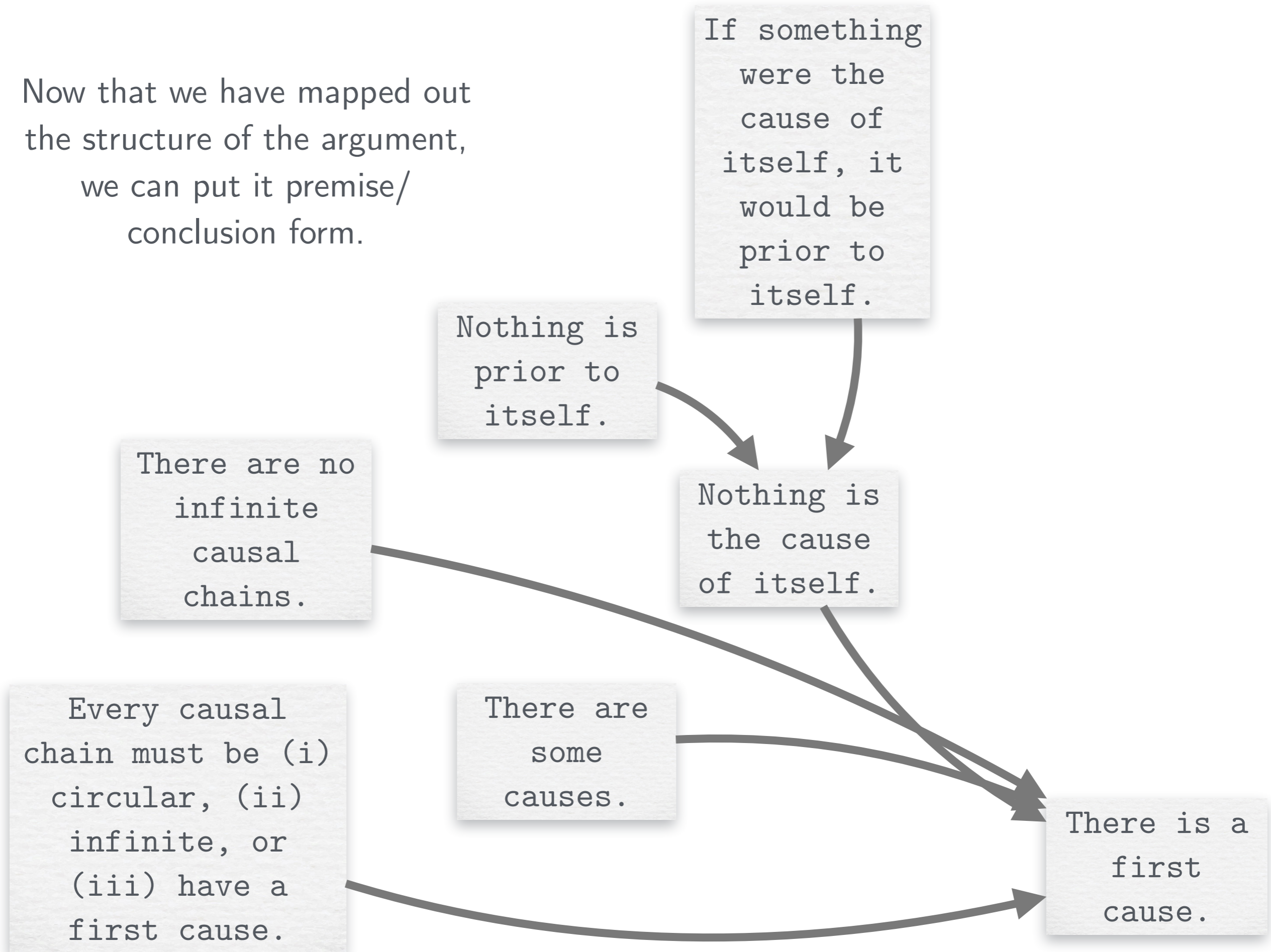
It looks like it does, if the following assumption is true:

Every causal chain must be (i) circular, (ii) infinite, or (iii) have a first cause.

There is a first cause.



Now that we have mapped out the structure of the argument, we can put it premise/conclusion form.



1. If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.
 2. Nothing is prior to itself.
 3. Nothing is the cause of itself.
(1,2)
 4. A chain of causes cannot be infinite.
 5. At least one thing has a cause.
 6. Every causal chain must be (i) circular, (ii) infinite, or (iii) have a first cause.
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- C. There is a first cause. (3,4,5,6)

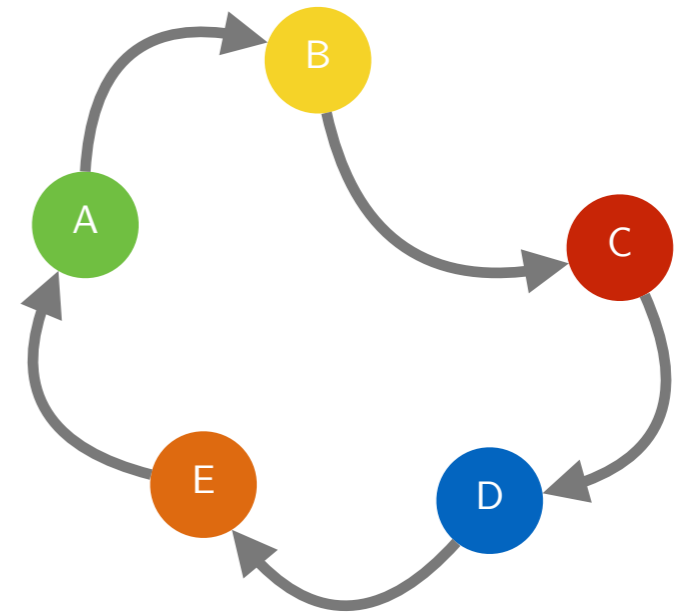
Does this argument show that there is at least one first cause, or exactly one first cause?

Is the argument valid?

1. If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.
2. Nothing is prior to itself.
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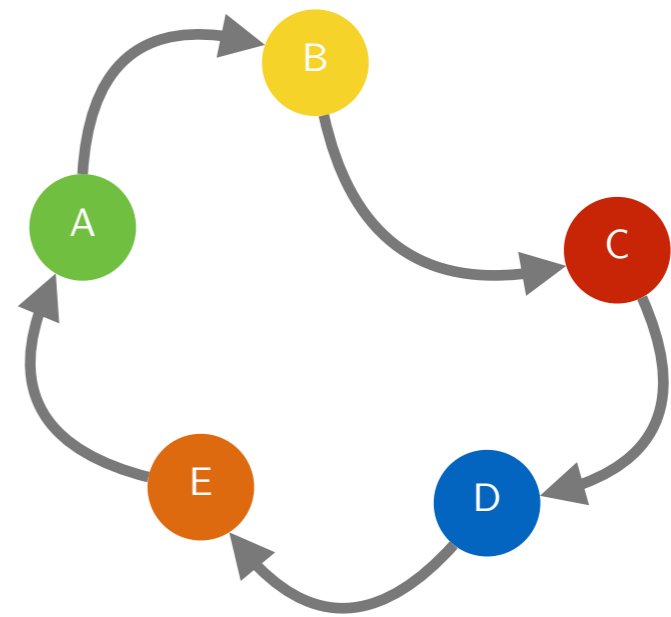
Here's an example of a causal chain which seems to show that our argument is invalid.



Nothing is the cause of itself, so (3) is true; the chain is not infinite, so (4) is true; there is at least one cause, so (5) is true; the chain is circular, so (6) is true; and yet there is no uncaused cause, so the conclusion is false.

1. If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.
2. Nothing is prior to itself.
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4. A chain of causes cannot be infinite.
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C. There is a first cause. (3,4,5,6)



This is a little tricky. There is a sense in which in this example nothing is the cause of itself, because nothing is directly the cause of itself. But it still seems like things are indirectly the cause of themselves. After all, if A causes B and B causes C, isn't there also a sense in which A causes C?

Let's agree to understand "causes" in our argument as meaning "directly or indirectly causes." Then the kind of causal chain pictured above is ruled out by premise (3).

So far, so good. But there is an obvious sense in which our argument so far is incomplete.

Aquinas' ultimate aim is not to argue for the existence of a first cause; his ultimate aim is to argue for the existence of God. So the thing we have labeled as a conclusion must actually just be a (derived) premise in the overall argument.

How can we get from our argument to the conclusion that God exists?

1. If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.
2. Nothing is prior to itself.
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4. A chain of causes cannot be infinite.
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6. Every causal chain must be (i) circular, (ii) infinite, or (iii) have a first cause.

C. There is a first cause. (3,4,5,6)

How can we get from our argument to the conclusion that God exists?

The simplest way is to add a premise which Aquinas seems to assume:

If there is a first cause, then God exists.

1. If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.
2. Nothing is prior to itself.
3. Nothing is the cause of itself. (1,2)
4. A chain of causes cannot be infinite.
5. At least one thing has a cause.
6. Every causal chain must be (i) circular, (ii) infinite, or (iii) have a first cause.

C. There is a first cause. (3,4,5,6)

This argument is valid, and seems to be a plausible interpretation of the piece of text we've been looking at.

But who cares whether this is a **valid** argument for the conclusion that God exists?

What we care about is whether the conclusion is true - and to be sure of that, we need to know that the argument is sound. Validity is only half the puzzle; the premises also have to be true.

AQUINAS' FIRST CAUSE ARGUMENT

1. If something were the cause of itself, it would be prior to itself.
2. Nothing is prior to itself.
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5. At least one thing has a cause.
6. Every causal chain must be (i) circular, (ii) infinite, or (iii) have a first cause.
7. There is a first cause. (3,4,5,6)
8. If there is a first cause, then God exists.

C. God exists.

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7. There is a first cause. (3,4,5,6)
8. If there is a first cause, then God exists.

C. God exists.

Suppose that someone objected to the argument by saying that, while it is valid, it has a single false premise — premise (7). Why would this be confused?

So to defend Aquinas' argument, we just need to defend its **independent** premises — (1), (2), (4), (5), (6), and (8).

Which of these look the most questionable?

Three views
about
the universe

Aquinas'
first cause
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I suggest that we focus in on
premises (4) and (8).

4. A chain
of causes
cannot be
infinite.

8. If there is a
first cause,
then God exists.

4. A chain
of causes
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infinite.

You might remember that, earlier, we mentioned that Aquinas gives us an argument for (4), which we set aside for simplicity at the time. Here's the relevant passage:

“... 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 ... 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.”

4. A chain
of causes
cannot be
infinite.

Aquinas says that if you take away the first cause from a causal chain, you thereby take away every subsequent cause; hence if the first cause of every actual causal chain had been taken away, there would be no caused things in existence. But, as he says, this is “plainly false” - there are caused things in existence, so the first cause of every causal chain must not have been taken away.

The problem with this argument is not that anything Aquinas says is incorrect; the problem is that the argument is simply misdirected. Infinite causal chains are not finite causal chains whose first link has been erased; they are causal chains in which every link is preceded by another. Consider the following infinite series:

.... -5, -4, -3, -2, -1, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5,

Is this a finite series whose first member has been “taken away”?

Three views
about
the universe

Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two
objections
to Aquinas

the kalām
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4. A chain
of causes
cannot be
infinite.

But even if Aquinas' defense of (4) is unsuccessful, (4) might still be true. Can you think of any way to argue for it?

One way to do this is to use a thought experiment called 'Thomson's lamp.'



Suppose that I told you that I have a lamp in my office which turned on and off infinitely many times between 8:00 and 9:00 this morning. Would this make sense?

Three views
about
the universe

Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two
objections
to Aquinas

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Suppose that I told you that I have a lamp in my office which turned on and off infinitely many times between 8:00 and 9:00 this morning. Would this make sense?

Here is an argument that it would not:

If the lamp turned on and off infinitely many times during this period, then there is no last event of it turning on or off. So at 9:01 the lamp cannot be on, since every on-turning is followed by an off-turning. But it also cannot be off, since every off-turning is followed by an on-turning. So, at 9:01 the lamp is neither on nor off. But that is impossible. So an infinite series of on- and off-turnings is impossible.

If the lamp turned on and off infinitely many times during this period, then there is no last event of it turning on or off. So at 9:01 the lamp cannot be on, since every on-turning is followed by an off-turning. But it also cannot be off, since every off-turning is followed by an on-turning. So, at 9:01 the lamp is neither on nor off. But that is impossible. So an infinite series of on- and off-turnings is impossible.

Now, you might reply that this only shows that a certain sort of infinite chain is impossible. For we can contrast two different sorts of infinite chains — those with no last member, and those with no first member. This is like the contrast between these two different infinite series of numbers:

.... -5, -4, -3, -2, -1

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, ...

It looks like our argument only shows the impossibility of the second kind of infinite causal chain. But which sort would make trouble for Aquinas' argument?

However, we can adapt our argument to show that the first sort of infinite series is also impossible.

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Suppose that the lamp turned on and off infinitely many times between 8:00 and 9:00, and that there was no first event of it being turned on or off. So at 7:59 the lamp could not have been off, since then the first event would have been an on-turning. But at 7:59 it also could not have been on, since then the first event would have been an off-turning. So, at 7:59 the lamp is neither on nor off. But that is impossible. So there had to be a first on-turning or off-turning between 8:00 and 9:00.

Is this argument convincing?

Does this argument rely on the assumption that the infinite series took place in a finite interval of time? Could a similar argument show that there can be no infinite series of on- and off-turnings in an infinite period of time?

If not, then it looks like this argument, even if it works, can only rule out the possibility of an infinite causal chain if we assume that the age of the universe is finite. Is that a reasonable assumption?

8. If there is a
first cause,
then God exists.

Let's turn to premise (8). Here is one hypothesis which would seem to falsify (8):

The Big Bang

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

This would appear to be a description of a world in which there is a first cause, but God does not exist. And it appears to be entirely consistent with simple atheism. So it looks as though, if we are to believe (8), we must have some reason for rejecting the above hypothesis.

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Might one defend (8) by saying that this hypothesis is impossible, on the grounds that there **can't be** an uncaused cause?

Instead, it seems like a defender of the first cause argument has to argue that nothing like the Big Bang could genuinely be a first cause. Things like the Big Bang have to have a cause; but things like God don't. But why?

Aquinas did have things to say about this. But rather than pursue Aquinas' thought on this further, let's consider one way of developing the argument which was prominent in a school of Islamic thought which predates Aquinas. This version of the argument makes use of the following premise:

Everything which begins to exist at some time must have a cause.

Because the universe — including the Big Bang — has a beginning in time, the universe as a whole — again, including the Big Bang — must have a cause. So the Big Bang can't be the first cause — and indeed nothing in the universe can be.

If one accepts this extra premise, and one accepts the assumption that the universe came to exist at some time, then it follows that the universe was caused to exist by something outside the universe.

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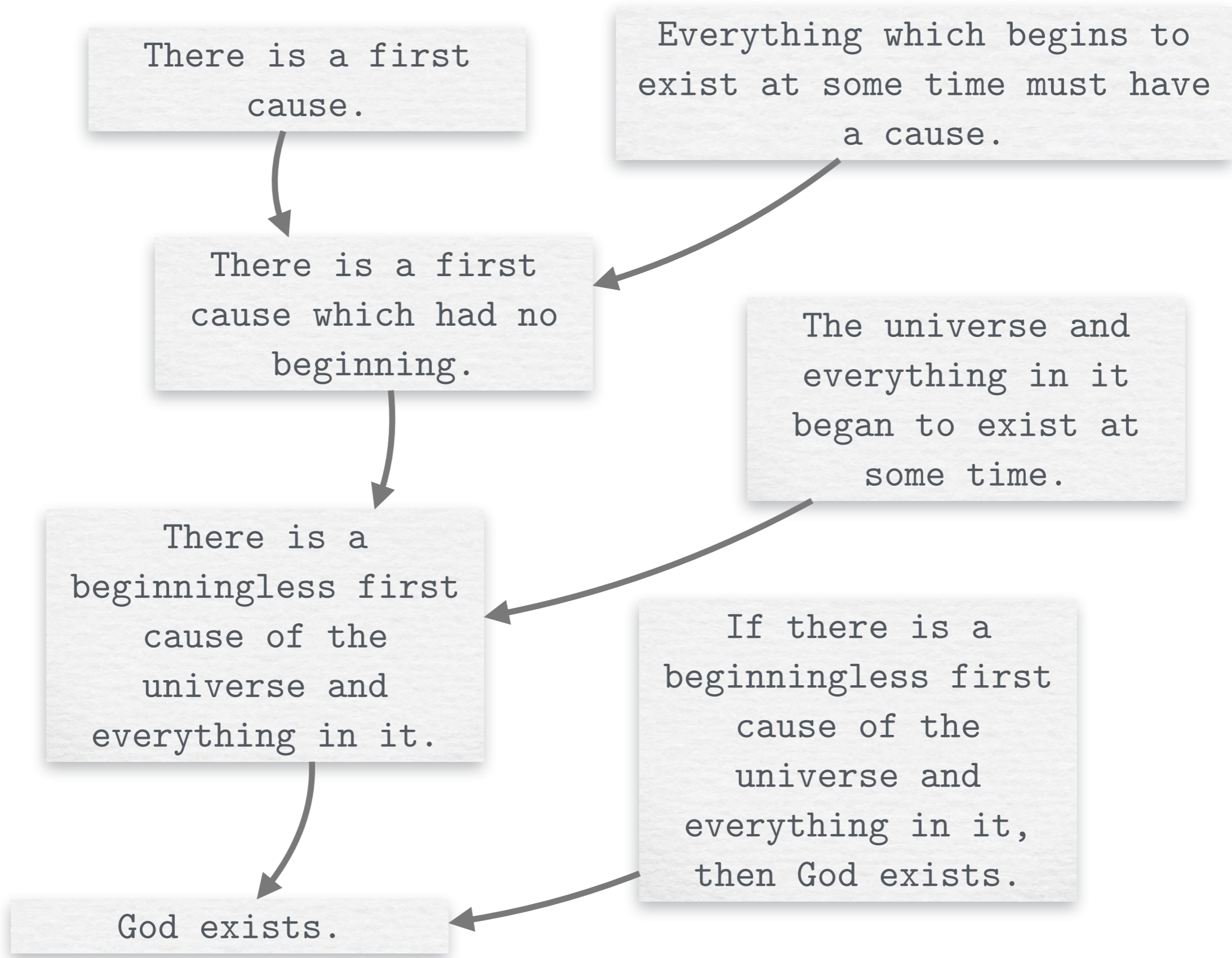
And then there are just two options — that thing must have had no beginning, or it must have come to exist at a certain time.

If we go with the second option, then it must have had a cause. And then **that** thing would have to be beginningless, or have come to exist a certain time.

If we agree with Aquinas that there can't be infinite causal chains, then this must come to an end somewhere. And that end must be some thing which had no beginning and which is (whether directly or indirectly) the cause of the universe.

How might we lay out this argument?

- Three views about the universe
- Aquinas' first cause argument
- Two objections to Aquinas
- the kalām argument



We can put this together with the argument from Aquinas to give us the following **kalām argument** (named after the school of Islamic thinkers who developed several versions of it).

THE KALĀM FIRST CAUSE ARGUMENT

[premises 1-6 are the same as in Aquinas' first cause argument]

...

7. There is a first cause. (3,4,5,6)
8. Everything which begins to exist at some time must have a cause.
9. There is a first cause which had no beginning. (7,8)
10. The universe and everything in it began to exist at some time.
11. There is a beginningless first cause of the universe and everything in it. (9,10)
12. If there is a beginningless first cause of the universe and everything in it, then God exists.

C. God exists. (11,12)

Three views
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objections
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the kalām
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There are a number of questions one could raise about this argument.
But let's focus in on one premise:

12. If there is an eternally existing first cause
of the universe and everything in it, then God
exists.

Could one object to this premise in much the way that we objected to Aquinas' assumption that if there is a first cause, then that thing must be God? How do we know that this beginningless thing which is outside of the universe and caused the universe to exist is God?

This is a reasonable question. Here is one way which a defender of the kalām argument might respond.

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Many theists are less certain that God exists than they are that $2+2=4$; many atheists are less certain that God does not exist than they are that $2+2=4$. So many people think that there is some chance that God exists and some chance that God does not exist.

Keeping this in mind, recall the three hypotheses about reality with which we began.

Simple theism

God exists, and
created
the universe.

Simple atheism

The universe (or perhaps several
universes) are all that exists.
Nothing created it (or them).

Quasi-theism

The universe was created
by something outside of it,
but not by God.

If you agree that the kalām argument shows that there is a beginningless being outside of the universe which caused the universe to exist, that rules out simple atheism. So the simple atheist cannot respond to the argument just by denying (12).

Three views
about
the universe

Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two
objections
to Aquinas

the kalām
argument

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Does the existence of such a being rule out quasi-theism? No. So it looks like the kalām argument should not convince at least some kinds of quasi-theists that God exists.

But that does not mean that the argument should not convince many people that it is much more likely that God exists than they thought it was before encountering the argument.

Three views
about
the universe

Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two
objections
to Aquinas

the kalām
argument

But that does not mean that the argument should not convince many people that it is much more likely that God exists than they thought it was before encountering the argument.

Just to have an example, let's imagine that you are an agnostic, and that you think that simple theism has a 45% chance of being true, simple atheism has a 50% chance of being true, and quasi-theism has a 5% chance of being true.

Three views
about
the universe

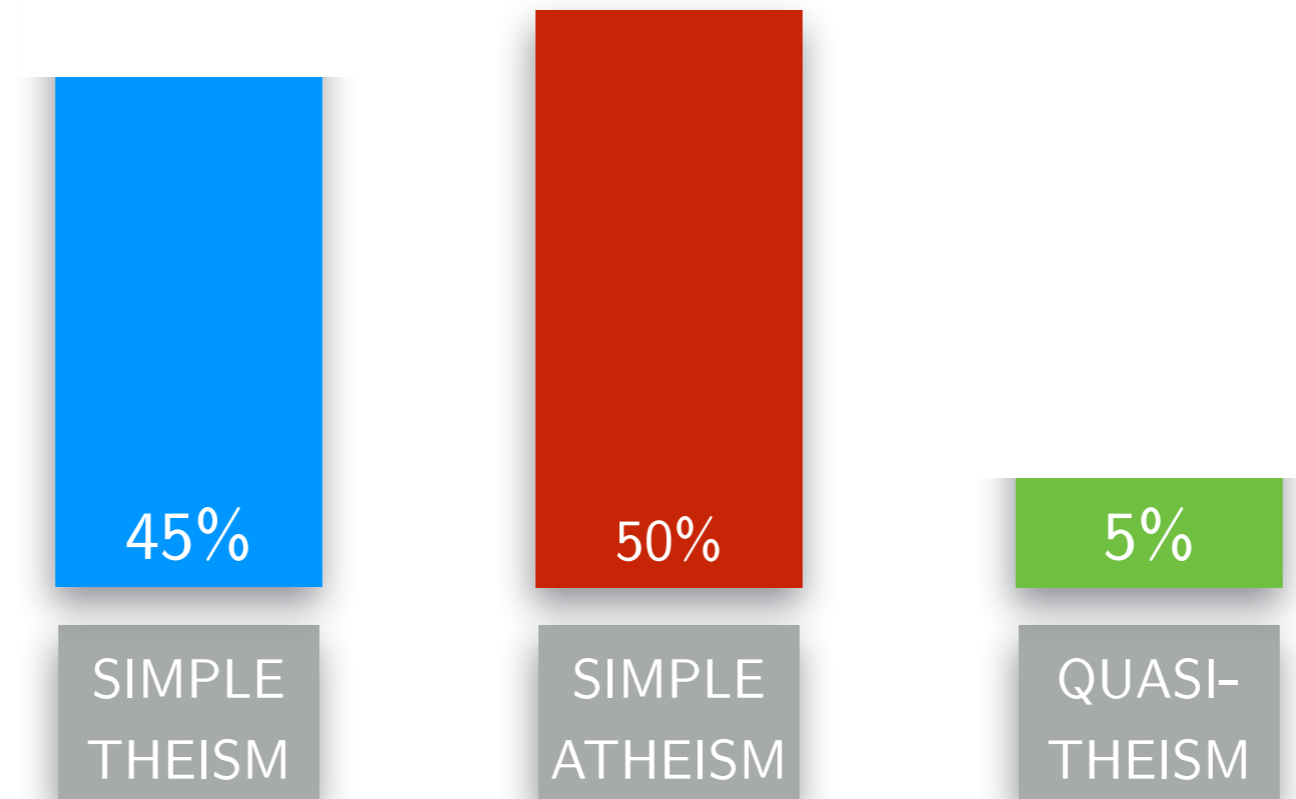
Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two
objections
to Aquinas

the kalām
argument

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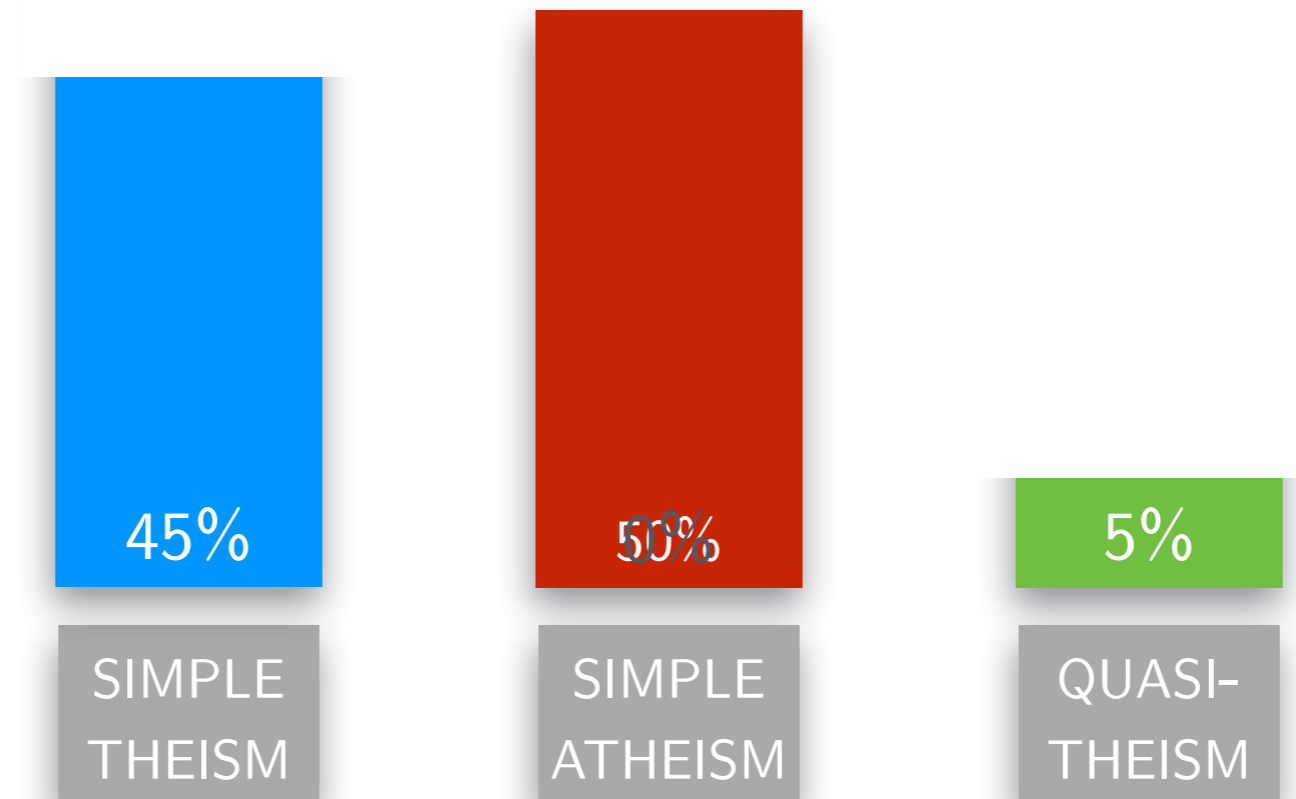
Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two
objections
to Aquinas

the kalām
argument

Suppose now that you are convinced that every premise of the kalām argument besides (12) is true. So you are convinced that there is a beginningless first cause of the universe -- and just not sure whether that thing is God.

This rules out simple atheism. So (in this simplified example) the probability you assign to simple atheism goes down to 0%.



Three views
about
the universe

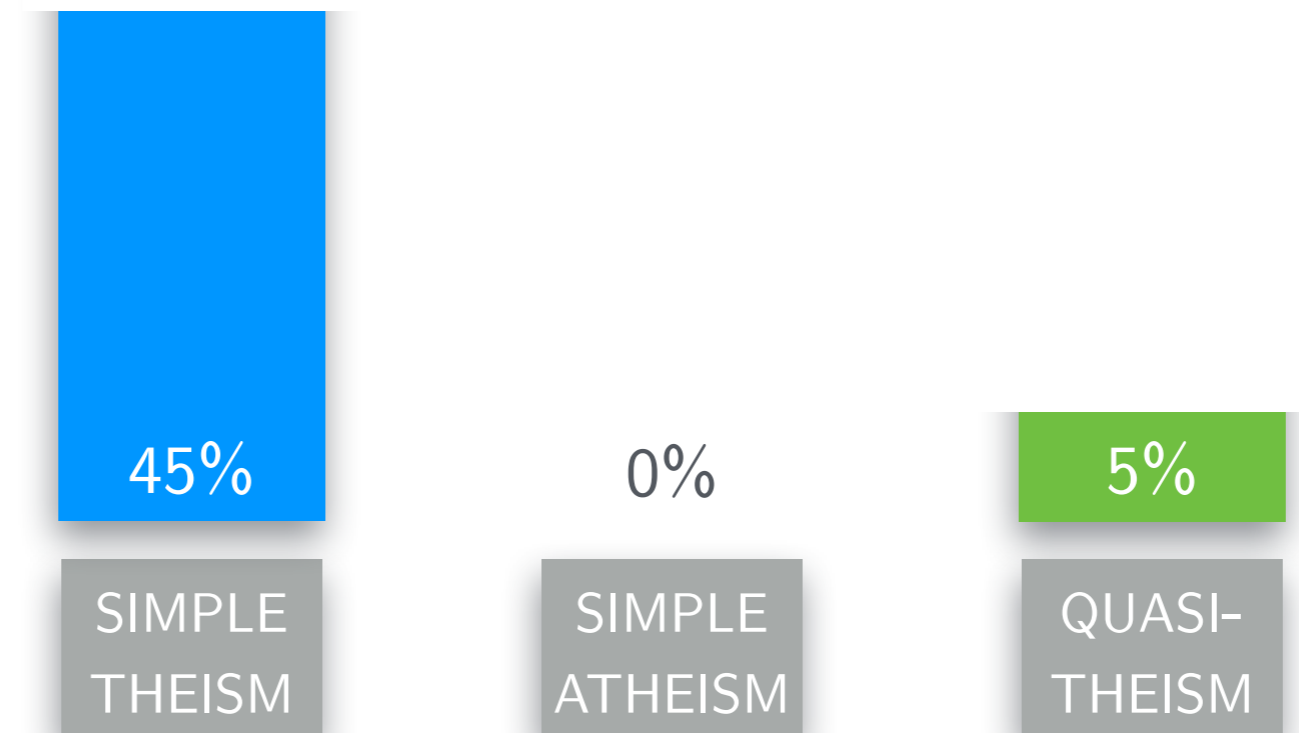
Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two
objections
to Aquinas

the kalām
argument

But if you eliminate simple atheism from the picture, you have to adjust the probabilities you assign to simple theism and quasi-theism. After all, you know that one of these two theories is true -- so the probabilities you assign to them should add up to 100%.

Before encountering the kalām argument, you thought (in this example) that simple theism was 9 times more likely to be true than quasi-theism. Nothing in that argument seems to affect this view; so it looks like you should keep it.



Three views
about
the universe

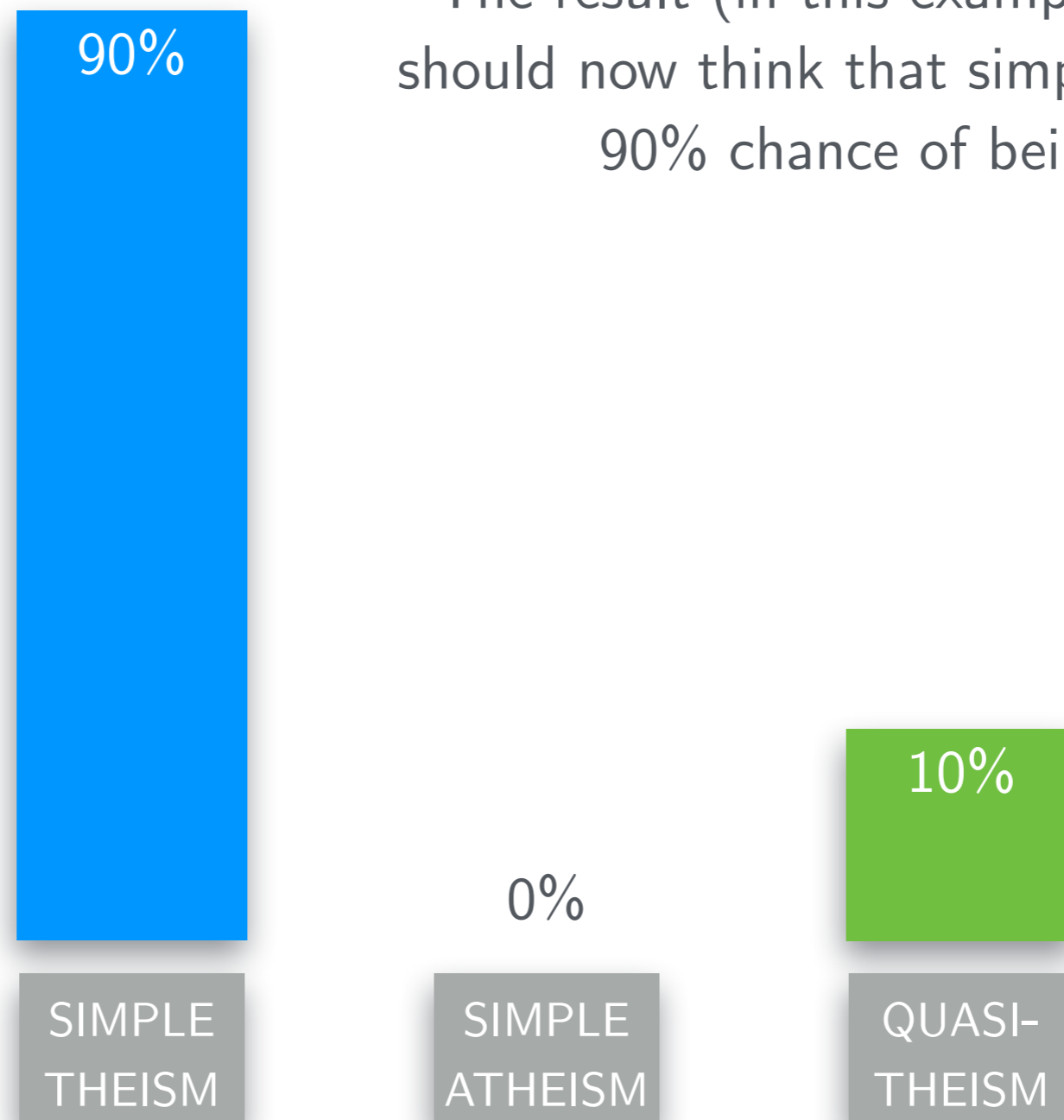
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Two
objections
to Aquinas

the kalām
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Before encountering the kalām argument, you thought (in this example) that simple theism was 9 times more likely to be true than quasi-theism. Nothing in that argument seems to affect this view; so it looks like you should keep it.

The result (in this example) is that you should now think that simple theism has a 90% chance of being true.



Three views
about
the universe

Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two
objections
to Aquinas

the kalām
argument

The result (in this example) is that you should now think that simple theism has a 90% chance of being true.

This is just one example. But it illustrates how an argument might (very) substantially increase the probability you assign to its conclusion even if it does not definitively rule out every other possibility.