

Classic Text 03 – God’s Existence

In the previous Classic Text we found Descartes in need of a benevolent God to dispel the doubts of the Evil Demon of his own imagination. And while Descartes claimed to be a devout Catholic, he was also a philosopher and therefore sought to establish the existence of God by reason alone, in the third Meditation. That undertaking was unsuccessful therefore we shall examine the more frequently touted “five ways” of St Thomas Aquinas as well as the ontological argument of St Anselm of Canterbury.

Please note that your personal faith or lack thereof has no bearing on the arguments themselves and whether they in turn are convincing or not cannot alter the fact that either one (or more) God(s) exist(s) or they do not, in spite what we may sincerely believe. And again we can’t try to be politically correct and have it both ways such that God does not exist for atheists and simultaneously does exist for theists and for all shades of belief in between.



St Thomas Aquinas (1225- 1274 AD) Dominican Friar, author of the Summa Theologica and Doctor of the Catholic Church

In Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* he cites Aristotle as simply “The Philosopher.” Indeed much of Aquinas can be regarded as Christianised Aristotle including his “five ways” of proving the existence of God, all of which are variants on the same cosmological argument that derives first from Aristotle’s *Physics* and later his *Metaphysics*. The arguments themselves are collectively known as cosmological because the appeal to the nature of the cosmos (or universe) to establish their conclusion. The following extract concerning the “five ways” is from part 1 of the *Summa Theologica* as translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

The existence of God can be proved in five ways.

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 in motion is put in motion by another, for nothing can be in motion except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is in motion; 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 in motion must be put in motion by another. If that by which it is put in motion be itself put in motion, then this also

must needs be put in motion 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 put in motion by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is put in motion by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, put in motion by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The second way is from the nature of the efficient cause. In the world of sense 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 only one. 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.

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 corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by 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 postulate 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.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble and the like. But *more* and *less* are predicated of different things, according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest and, consequently, something which is uttermost being; for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in *Metaphysics*. ii. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus; as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.

Each of Aquinas' "five ways" boils down to or derives from the following Aristotelian version of the cosmological argument:

1. Every finite and contingent being has a cause.
2. A causal chain cannot be of infinite length.
3. A causal loop cannot exist.
4. ∴ There must exist an uncaused First Cause, (to which Aquinas appends,)
5. And this everyone understands to be God.

The argument as it stands appears to be valid in form because if the premises are true then the conclusion must follow, so whether we accept the conclusion will depend on whether we accept the premises. Let us examine this argument line by line.

The first premise is about a **finite** and **contingent** being. A finite entity is one that is bounded or limited in magnitude or spatial or temporal extent. To the best of our knowledge everything or event in the known universe, including the universe itself is finite. It has a finite age of 13.75 (± 0.11) billion years and is believed to be about 93 billion light years in diameter. However vast it may be, it has not been in existence forever, nor is it or anything contained within it of infinite extent. A contingent being on the other hand is one that does not exist in and of itself but depends for its existence upon some other being that might or might not exist. Every entity including every atom and sub-atomic particle in the known universe is a contingent entity because it depends or depended for its existence on the existence on something prior to it. Even elementary particles are thought to have come into existence from a tremendously high energy field soon after the big bang. So in other words, no thing or event in the known universe is a **necessary** entity, *i.e.* such that it is impossible for it not to exist. All the entities that make up the furniture of the universe including the universe itself are contingent entities. Even though neither Aquinas nor Aristotle would have any of the facts of modern cosmology at hand they would have both agreed upon what was meant by a finite and contingent being and that such a being has or must have had a cause.

The second premise is ostensibly true because if A were caused by B and B were caused by C... *ad infinitum*, A would never get round to being caused because there would be an infinite number intermediary steps that would have to be caused first. One can liken a causal chain to a train with a variable number of wagons. Each wagon is caused to be in motion by the wagon before it, which in turn is caused to be in motion by the wagon before it *etc...* which in turn is caused to be in motion by the locomotive. Trains may be very long (up to 4km,) consisting of hundreds of wagons, but they cannot be infinitely long because then they would require an infinite amount of force or an infinite amount of time just to accelerate from rest. Just so with causal chains, they may be very long but they may not be infinite. They must terminate in one or more causes (like the locomotive in the analogy,) on which the rest of the chain depends. As parents discover to their great exasperation when their first child learns the question, "why?" an explanation may be very long, in answer to a "why?" at every step, but it cannot be infinitely long. It must terminate sooner or later in a reason that is not in need of further explanation; otherwise we shall never ultimately be able to explain anything of the sort.

The third premise is also ostensibly true. A causal loop is no way to escape an infinite regress. A causal loop occurs when a series of cause and effects becomes circular such as A causing B and B causing C which in turn causes A. An entity can have no part in causing its own existence because then it would have to exist prior to itself. *E.g.* A mother cannot give birth to a daughter, who gives birth to a granddaughter who goes on to give birth to the original mother because then the original

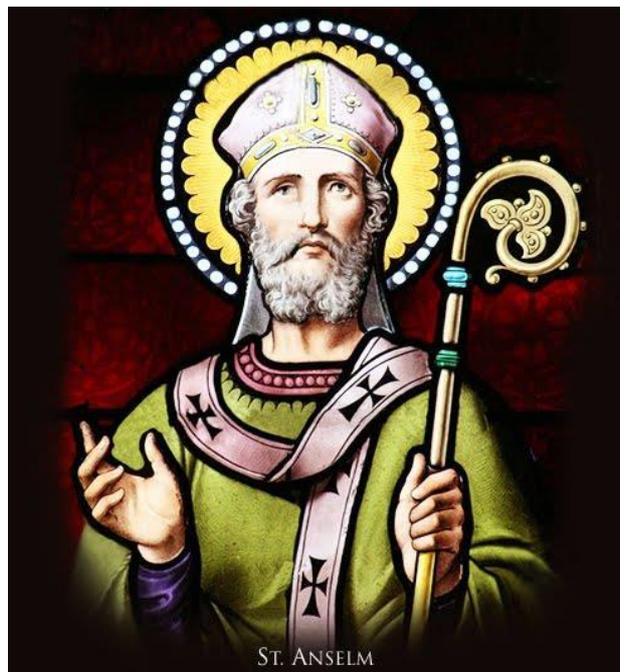
mother would have to be born and bare a child before she could be born, which is absurd. Similarly just coupling a number of wagons together in a loop will not solve the problem of trains of infinite length not getting started, because, while each wagon will be caused to be in motion by the wagon before it, which will in turn be caused to be in motion by the wagon before it ... If the foremost waggon is then coupled to the hind most wagon, all you get is a circle of stationary wagons because to come to be in motion, they would already have to be in motion, whose movement cannot be prior to itself. What you would need is something radically different from yet another wagon in the loop. You would need a locomotive.

The conclusion that there must exist an uncaused First Cause does seem to follow from the premises if the premises are true, however it is possible that this universe is just one of many seeded by other universes and that time may have had no beginning. Perhaps we might be living among one such endless cycle of Big Bangs and Big Crunches. But with no means of verifying what we are wondering because we can't step out of the universe in which we presently abide, not even experimentally, let us therefore conditionally accept the conclusion of the Cosmological Argument unless or until we can demonstrate otherwise.

Just what we are accepting however, is a fundamental question. If "There must exist an uncaused First Cause," means something as banal as "The Universe had to start with some existing entity that didn't have to be caused to exist," then I think most cosmologists and philosophers would be inclined to agree, whether or not they happen to be atheists or theists. So if this is what follows, then Aquinas was wrong to have appended: "...and this everyone understands to be God," because it doesn't follow that just because some entity is a First Cause that it is necessary God. The uncaused First Cause of our universe might have been a singularity of infinite density, one of scientific but not theological interest, one that had none of the attributes of a theistic God such as being good, loving, personal, immanent as well as transcendental *etc.* the kind of God Descartes needed on his side.

If Aquinas could not prove the existence of a personal God by looking outward towards the cosmos, St Anselm of Canterbury appeals instead to the very notion of being in his ontological argument, hence the name. It runs as follows:

Suppose that we define God as a being so perfect that none more perfect than he or she or it might be imagined. That much seems uncontroversial - you don't get more perfect a being than God and you don't get more perfect than perfect. Now suppose you imagine two scenarios in which the most perfect being imaginable, such that none more perfect is imaginable, exists in the one scenario and does not exist in the other. Clearly the most perfect being imaginable who does not exist is not one of whom none more perfect can be imagined, because the one who actually exists would be more perfect than the one who didn't. Therefore of



the two, the existent most perfect being of whom none more perfect could be imagined and whom we call God actually exists. *Q.E.D.*

At first blush, many people react to this argument as if it is too good to be true, and with good reason. What is wrong with the ontological argument, even if we accept its logical structure, is that it can be employed in proving the existence of any entity of imaginable perfection and if any can then none is, in the way that for example, if anything can be proved to be potentially unique then nothing is unique.

Suppose that someone tells you of a perfect island paradise. Naturally being a bit sceptical in nature you invite her to prove her assertion. In reply she asks you to imagine the most perfect island imaginable such that no more perfect island could be imagined. You both agree that such an island would surely be paradise. Now she asks you to imagine two scenarios, one in which the perfect island, such that none more perfect could be imagined, actually existed and another, in which it does not exist. Next she goes on to point out that the non-existent perfect island, such that none more perfect could be imagined is actually not the most perfect island because one that, in addition existed too, would be an even more perfect island, such that none more perfect could be imagined. Hence the perfect island paradise does exist. *Q.E.D.*

Now if everything, the perfect island, the perfect toaster, the perfect supermodel... *etc.* such that no greater island, toaster, supermodel... *etc.* could be imagined, could be proved to exist via its own version of the ontological argument, then the ontological argument in its original form is revealed to be so very weak as to prove nothing, in reality. Similarly if you had an argument that proved the uniqueness of everything, the concept of uniqueness itself would become so diluted as to not pick out anything unique at all. So if every species of being can be elevated in the imagination to the level of existent perfection, via its own ontological argument, then in reality nothing can and so the argument fails.

Finally Alvin Plantinga has come up with a twentieth century version of the ontological argument using modal logic, however it remains contentious and appears to suffer from some of the same shortcomings of St Anselm's argument, including that the existence of anything follows, provided it is defined as the most excellent or special in every possible world. Nevertheless we shall have to wait until we have explored the logic of possible worlds before we can evaluate Plantinga's argument for ourselves.

Understanding

1. Aquinas would have been aware of Anselm's ontological argument almost two centuries earlier. Why do think he did not include it in his *Summa Theologica*?
2. Is it logically possible for the Universe to have no First Cause?
3. Does it follow that a First Cause must necessarily be both personal and benevolent, rather than impersonal and indifferent to human affairs?
4. Are there any other arguments for the existence of God that you have heard about?

Feedback

1. Thomas Aquinas was profoundly devoted to the philosophy of classical antiquity, as were most medieval scholars, who had lately been acquainted with their works in Latin via Arabic translations. The classical era was regarded as a Golden Age of Philosophy as well as the arts, to be admired, studied and emulated. In the absence of any empirical, scientific evidence to the contrary, entire arguments, techniques and rhetorical devices were lifted and copied wholesale. An argument such as Anselm's, irrespective of quality, with no classical ancestry, was therefore unlikely to have been accorded as much significance.
2. It is *logically* possible for the Universe to have no First Cause because, although we may have trouble getting our head around the idea, it is not self-contradictory, as logically impossible entities are, such as square circles. Whether it is *physically* possible for a universe to have no origin is another matter. What we do know is that it is possible for pairs of particles to pop into and out of existence on the quantum scale, but whether an entire universe could emerge *de novo* from out of the void, we just don't know as a matter of fact rather than conjecture.
3. No, the First Cause could be an entirely physical event or entity like the Big Bang or whatever caused it. Although we might all acknowledge that we owe our existence and, by extension, our own personhood to the First Cause, it is doubtful that anyone would be persuaded to regard it as personal, loving or worthy of worship if it were a mere physical event rather than a Divine Person.

There are several other arguments for the existence of God, none of which comes as close to the cosmological argument in terms of persuasiveness. Firstly, there is the argument from Scripture, which says that God must exist because Scripture tells us so. However when we ask what distinguishes Scripture from prose, such as the works of Charles Dickens, we are told that Scripture is divinely inspired and that Dickens is not. Therefore the argument from Scripture is circular: we have to assume that Scripture is divinely inspired from the outset to prove that God exists. Secondly, there is the argument from revelation which goes, "I have had an epiphany, so you must believe me when I say that God exists." This is an inductive argument of the weakest kind, *i.e.* from a single instance. It takes the form: I have experienced something extraordinary; therefore you must believe something extraordinary. We know from common sense that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence to back them up. What would you think if someone told you that he had an epiphany concerning the stock market and wanted to invest all your savings on your behalf? Clearly there are some people who do not uphold the same standards of scepticism about arguments concerning their hard earned savings as they do for those concerning God. Thirdly, there is the argument from design which recognises that our world is replete with design, from snowflakes to flowers and humans and so must have been designed by a Great Designer or Artificer, which can only be God. As every High School Biology student should be able to tell you, Nature is very good at design by means of purely physical processes including natural selection, without foresight or Divine intervention. So much the worse for the argument from design.

The next classic text deals with the causal links between events that drive, not only the cosmological argument, but also common sense and a good deal of scientific thinking too.