Chapter 24

A First Cosmological Argument that God Exists

1. Taking offence at the question

The main question posed within the chapters on philosophy of religion in this book is whether one should believe that God exists. Put another way, taking you yourself to be what "I" refers to, our question is: "Should I believe that God exists?" Given the result of the previous chapter, that question becomes: "Should I believe that there exists a being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and all good?" Our discussion through this and the subsequent chapters of this Part of the book might in some places be dry or impersonal, but our concern at root is with each of us as an individual and with what, as an individual unlike anyone else, one oneself should believe.

Some students in introductory philosophy courses find it inappropriate, even offensive, to ask this question. One is not to ask whether God exists, they say; to ask such a question is impious or disrespectful or unloving. To ask it is to be unfaithful—and to be unfaithful is, perhaps, to hurt God. It is not for us, God's creatures that we are, to ask whether God exists; it is for us, rather, to celebrate God, to be awed by the glory of God, to love God, to worship God.

Now, oftentimes in a philosophy classroom passions run high, and not only when the discussion concerns abortion, what the rich owe the poor, or some other issue in practical ethics. The question whether we possess free will usually provokes heated debated, as even does the question whether all mental events are physical events (though students heated up by the latter question, it must be admitted, are found only among those who go on to major in philosophy). But it is only when discussing religion philosophically, teachers find, that students are hurt not by hearing some thesis on the topic that they don't like but merely by the fact that that is the topic under discussion. No topic is off limits to philosophical investigation, it seems, except, perhaps, the topic of God's existence or of one's belief in God. Why is this the case? In discussing anything philosophically, one risks hearing ideas that one would rather not hear; one even risks changing one's mind about something important. Certainly, then, a student might fear that her religious beliefs are put at risk by engaging with them philosophically—or that her atheism is. But a student might fear that her ethical beliefs are put at risk by philosophy, or that her self-image as a free and responsible person is, and yet that fact does not incline anyone to think it inappropriate to investigate ethics or free will philosophically. So that one puts one's religious beliefs at risk by discussing whether God exists does not explain the strong bad feelings some students have about the topic itself. What does explain these feelings, it would seem, is, again, some people's sense that to ask the question is to be irreligious or impious, or to be disrespectful and unloving toward God.

Whether it is inappropriate because impious to discuss whether God exists, and to discuss it dispassionately and disinterestedly, as philosophers do, following the argument wherever it leads, is itself another question worthy of philosophical investigation. We, though, will not pursue it here. We will simply acknowledge that some students find asking the question whether God exists distasteful or offensive, and that their reaction poses a real and important philosophical question, namely, whether indeed they should be offended by the thought of asking

whether God exists or whether instead it is entirely fine that they, faithful though they are, pursue the question of God's existence in the spirit of philosophical inquiry.

2. Types of argument that God exists

In this and the next four chapters, we will consider four sorts of argument that God exists. These arguments, or, at least, the first three, are widely referred to as "proofs" of the existence of God. We will avoid the term "proof", though. To call an argument a *proof* is to suggest that it is deductively sound or, at least, to suggest that it is intended by those who offer it to be deductively sound. But many good arguments, arguments that rightly incline us to accept their conclusions, are not deductively sound. Very often, deductive soundness is too much to ask of an argument; the contention in question or the area of inquiry is such that serious inquirers can find no interesting sound arguments by which to move forward. We do not want to assume that in the philosophy of religion only sound arguments that God exists can give a person good reason to believe that God exists. And so we will not require that a good reason for believing that God exists take the form of a sound argument.

What we are after are considerations that would properly incline a person to believe that God exists and considerations that would properly incline her to believe that God does not exist. We want to understand whatever strengths the arguments we look at have and whatever weaknesses. What good reasons could a person have (read: "what good reasons could I have") to believe that God exists and what good reasons could a person (could I) have to believe that no god exists? Of course, we must always remain alive to the fact that sometimes arguments that indeed are weak seem strong to us and that arguments that are strong seem weak. Even though we will not fault an argument for failing to be deductively sound, still we will fault when faults we find.

The first sort of argument that God exists that we will examine is called *cosmological*. An argument that God exists is a cosmological argument when that argument begins with some observation about the universe and proposes that the existence of God best explains that observation. The second sort of argument that God exists is called *ontological*. An argument that God exists is an ontological argument when that argument proposes that something within the concept of God itself shows God to exist. The third sort of argument that we will examine is called *teleological* or the *argument from design*. An argument that God exists is a teleological or design argument when it argues, first, that the universe or some part of it evinces design and then proposes that that bit of design indicates the craftsmanship and purposes of God. The fourth, and final, sort of argument is the argument from miracles. According to arguments of this sort, that such-and-such event occurred in violation of natural laws informs us of God's intentions or nature.

Not every consideration that thinkers have offered in favour of the claim that God exists fits one or another of these categories. We will have occasion in subsequent chapters to discuss a couple arguments that don't come under these heads. But listed above are the four sorts of argument we will examine most closely.

3. Aquinas's second way

Thomas Aquinas lived from 1225 to 1274 and was canonized in 1323. He composed the book *Summa Theologiae* between 1267 and 1273. Modern Catholicism is heavily indebted to Thomism, the name given to doctrines associated with St. Thomas. Though Thomas was a Christian and, specifically, a Roman Catholic, his work is of interest not only to Catholics or Christians. Religious believers of many stripes find much in his thought insightful and useful to them.

A short part of *Summa Theologiae* goes under the title "Five Ways to Prove that God Exists." (To avoid irrelevant problems sometimes raised by the word "proof," we should think of the section not as five ways to *prove* that God exists but rather as five sets of considerations each one of which would strongly incline a dispassionate, reasonable inquirer to believe that God exists.) At least three of these ways fit our description of cosmological arguments. We will concentrate on the second of the five ways, the one often called "The First Cause Argument." The second way, the first cause argument, in a translation from *Summa Theologiae*, is this:

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 God.

Reread the above passage, slowly and carefully.

Now, having reread it, ask yourself what is its conclusion. Ask yourself how it seeks to get to that conclusion.

With paper before you and pencil in hand, return to the passage. Write down in your own words what you take Aquinas's premises to be—that is, write down the statements that don't themselves follow from other statements in the passage. Write down the conclusions in the passage, those statements that Aquinas offers us as true given the other statements, the statements you've identified as premises. Now organize the premises and conclusions in such a way as to display the chain of thought in the passage.

You now have in front of you your analysis of the argument contained in the above passage. What do you think of this argument? What flaws, if any, do you find in it?

Here is my own analysis (this is what, in my words, I think Aquinas is saying):

The chain of thought leading to the main conclusion (statement 7):

1. The universe itself is a chain of events.
2. Each event in this chain is caused by a prior event.
3. No chain of cause and effect could reach infinitely into the past.

Thus: 4. There was a unique first event in the universe, the event that initiated the chain of cause and effect that is the universe.
5. This first event itself had a cause.
6. The cause of the first event of a series must be outside that series.
Thus: 7. The cause of the first event in the universe occurred outside the universe.
Therefore: 8. There exists a being outside the universe intelligent and powerful enough to have caused the first event in the universe (which is tantamount to having caused the universe).

The chain of thought leading to statement 2:
9. A self-caused event would be an event prior to itself
10. No event could be prior to itself
Therefore: 11. No event is self caused.
12. Every event has a cause.
13. The event that is an event's cause is either prior to that event or the same as that event.
Therefore: 14. Each event is caused by a prior event.
1. The universe is a chain of events.
Therefore: 2. Each event in the chain of events that is the universe is caused by a prior event.

The chain of thought leading to statement 3:
15. If a chain of cause and effect of which a member is presently occurring stretches back into the past infinitely, then there is no first event in that chain.
16. If there were no first event in a chain of cause and effect to cause the second event, then there would be no second or third or subsequent events in that chain.
17. If there were no subsequent events leading to the presently occurring event, then there would be no presently occurring event.
Thus: 18. If a chain of cause and effect of which a member is presently occurring stretches back into the past infinitely, then there would be no member of that chain presently occurring..
Therefore: 19. Any chain of cause and effect must have a first member.
Therefore: 3. No chain of cause and effect could reach infinitely into the past.

My analysis is detailed and long. I've tried to make explicit every thought meant to get us to the conclusion. Making explicit all the thoughts in an argument often involves reading into the words on the page ideas not stated in those words. I've also tried in my analysis to correct a few simple problems with the argument as Aquinas states it. These corrections or emendations are friendly, I hope. As part of an analysis of an passage, they would have to stay within the spirit of the original argument. Otherwise, the analysis would be of a different argument than the one given in the passage (though it's probably rarely possible or necessary to say at what point emending an argument amounts to forsaking the spirit of that argument).

Compare your analysis to mine and compare both with the original passage from Aquinas. Revise your analysis in light of the comparisons you've made. In revising your analysis, take from my analysis what you want and discard anything in it you think irrelevant or beyond the spirit of the original.

Drawing a diagram is often useful when analysing and evaluating an argument. A diagram can show plainly how the various statements in the argument are related. Below is a diagram of Aquinas's argument, at least as I interpret it. From this diagram one should be able to see the movement of thought that takes us from the first premises to the final conclusion. After studying the diagram of my analysis of Aquinas's argument, draw a diagram of the argument as you have analysed it.

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A Diagram of Mercer's Interpretation of Aquinas's First Cause Argument

The statements in the argument:

1. The universe itself is a chain of events.
2. Each event in this chain is caused by a prior event.
3. No chain of cause and effect could reach infinitely into the past.
4. There was a unique first event in the universe, the event that initiated the chain of cause and effect that is the universe.
5. This first event itself had a cause.
6. The cause of the first event of a series must be outside that series.
7. The cause of the first event in the universe occurred outside the universe.
8. There exists a being outside the universe intelligent and powerful enough to have caused the first event in the universe (which is tantamount to having caused the universe).
9. A self-caused event would be an event prior to itself
10. No event could be prior to itself
11. No event is self caused.
12. Every event has a cause.
13. The event that is an event's cause is either prior to that event or the same as that event.
14. Each event is caused by a prior event.
15. If a chain of cause and effect of which a member is presently occurring stretches back into the past infinitely, then there is no first event in that chain.
16. If there were no first event in a chain of cause and effect to cause the second event, then there would be no second or third or subsequent events in that chain.
17. If there were no subsequent events leading to the presently occurring event, then there would be no presently occurring event.
18. If a chain of cause and effect of which a member is presently occurring stretches back into the past infinitely, then there would be no member of that chain presently occurring..
19. Any chain of cause and effect must have a first member.

How to use this diagram:

Diagrams of arguments are meant to be used both in coming to understand an argument and in evaluating that argument.

To use the diagram to understand the argument, begin at the bottom, with statement 8, the final conclusion of the argument. Read statement 8 aloud. Then ask why one should think statement 8 true. In answer to your question, read statement 7 aloud. The arrow from statement 7 to 8 indicates that, in the argument, statement 8 follows from statement 7. Statement 7 is offered as a good reason for believing statement 8.

Read statement 7 aloud again. Ask why one should think statement 7 is true. In answer to your question, read statements 4, 5, and 6. The line under 4, 5, and 6 indicates that these three statements are to be taken together and the arrow from that line to statement 7 indicates 7 follows from 4, 5, and 6 taken together. Statements 4, 5, and 6 together are offered as a good reason for believing 7.

Statements 5 and 6 are undefended in the argument. Statement 4, though, is the conclusion of a prior chain of reasoning. Read statement 4 aloud again. Ask why one should think that statement 4 is true. In answer to your question, read statements 1, 2, and 3. The bar that runs underneath statement 1, 2, and 3 and the arrow from that bar to 4 indicate that 1, 2, and 3 taken together provide a good reason for thinking that statement 4 is true.

Statement 1 is undefended in the argument. Both statement 2 and statement 3, though, are conclusions from prior chains of reasoning. Read 2 aloud and, asking why one should believe it, work back along the chain of reasoning that leads to 2. Read 3 aloud and work back along the chain that leads to it.

Having worked back to statements 9 and 10 on the one side and statements 15, 16, and 17 on the other, you should have a pretty good idea of how this argument is supposed to work. To firm up your understanding, now read the argument the other way, from top to bottom. Read statements 9 and 10 aloud, say "therefore," and read statement 11. The arrow heads in the diagram indicate inferences and, so, can be read as "thus," "hence," or "therefore." Read statements 11, 12, and 13, say "therefore," and read statement 14. Continue one more step.

When you have said "therefore" and read statement 2 aloud, return to the top of the diagram and read statements 15, 16, and 17, say "therefore," and read statement 18. Continue down until you say "therefore" and read statement 3. Now read statements 1, 2, and 3, say "therefore," and read statement 4. Continue until you say "therefore" and read statement 8.

To use this diagram to evaluate the argument, note that some statements are not defended by prior chains of reasoning while others are. The undefended statements in the argument are 1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, and 17. For each of these statements ask yourself whether you think it is true. For any you don't think true, whether you have good reason to think it false. Each statement to which an arrow points is a statement defended by an argument. For each of these statements, ask yourself whether, supposing the statement or statements at the beginning of the arrow is or are true, those statements give one good reason for thinking that the target statement is true.

You should judge the argument weak to the extent that you think you have good reason for thinking an undefended premise false and to the extent that you think a defended statement is poorly defended by the chain of thought to it.

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Perhaps my analysis departs most significantly from Aquinas's original in the conclusion I find. Aquinas's argument clearly concludes that God exists. That God exists is not the conclusion of the argument as I have analysed it. In my analysis, the argument concludes with statement 8, which is that there exists a being outside the universe intelligent and powerful enough to have caused the first event in the universe. God, we have said, is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly just and perfectly good. Nothing in the original passage implies anything about the creator's goodness, though. To bring the conclusion into line with what the argument as a whole might plausibly show, I have weakened that conclusion. Rather than criticise the argument as obviously poor because its conclusion is too strong to be sustained by its premises, I have modified the conclusion to bring it more in line with those premises.

Still, if the argument does go some distance toward establishing that there exists a being outside the universe intelligent and powerful enough to create the universe, then that argument is tremendously significant, even though it itself is not an argument that God exists.

Another significant departure from the original has to do with distinguishing between the first event in the universe and the event that caused that first event. Aquinas's passage says that God is the first event, which is doubly confusing. God is neither an event nor a being existing within space or time. In my analysis, then, the argument is meant to show that there exists a being outside the universe who was causally responsible for the first event in the universe. As causally responsible for the first event in the universe, this being could be said to be causally responsible for the universe as a whole.

Now turn to the supplement to this chapter, the supplement on analysing and diagramming arguments. Work through the exercises in the supplement before returning to this chapter.

4. Criticisms of Aquinas's second way

Does the argument Aquinas offers as his second way go any distance toward establishing that there exists a being knowing and powerful enough to have created the universe? There are at least eight serious difficulties with this argument, each of which is enough to render the argument no reason at all to believe that there exists a being knowing and powerful enough to have created the universe.

1) Caused and uncaused. A key premise in the argument is that every event has a cause. But if that premise is true, then the event that caused the first event in the series of events that is the universe itself had a cause, and that event had a cause, and on and on. The argument gives us no principled reason to settle on the event that caused the first event. If we follow Aquinas in identifying the cause of the first event with God, this criticism can be put as the question "What caused God?" Given that the argument proposes that every event has a cause outside itself, this question cannot be answered by saying "Nothing did" or "God caused Himself."

2) Events, not entities. The argument concerns events. It seeks to show that there must have been a first event in the universe and that this event must have had a cause in an event apart from it itself. But then it concludes that this event, an event distinct from the first event in the universe, was the action of an entity, a being knowledgeable and powerful enough to perform an action that brought about the universe. All that the premises of the argument could entitle us to

conclude, though, is that something occurred that caused the first event. We are not entitled to say anything about the entities involved in that occurrence.

3) Knowledge and power. Suppose that the event that caused the first event in the universe was, indeed, an action, the intentional doing of some person. (The criticism above, of course, is that we have no reason at all to suppose that it was.) It follows directly from this supposition that that person was powerful enough to have caused the first event in the universe. But we can draw no conclusion about his intelligence. He might have caused the first event accidentally. Even if he caused it purposively, he need not have had any idea what would happen after that.

4) The universe a single chain of cause and effect. The argument assumes that the universe is a single chain of cause and effect or, at least, that all chains of cause and effect stem from a single first cause. But the universe might be a collection of chains of cause and effect. The argument gives us no reason to think that there are many first events, one for each of the many chains of cause and effect in the universe. (Each of these first events would be the result of a particular event that occurred outside the universe. Perhaps the universe, then, is the product of the independent contributions of many gods.)

5) God and stuff are co-eternal. The argument allows that a static universe full of objects could have existed eternally along with God. The first event in the universe would have been an event involving things already in existence. The cause of the first event merely acted to put into motion objects already on the scene. That the argument doesn't rule out the idea that stuff existed along with the agent responsible for the first event means that the argument doesn't show that that agent was even close to all powerful.

6) God and time are co-eternal. If there was a first event, then there was a moment before the first event and, so, time was not created by the agent who caused the first event.

7) All events are caused. The argument assumes that all events are caused. It does not *show* that no event occurred without a cause. The first cause in the universe, then, so far as Aquinas's argument goes, might itself have been uncaused.

8) No chain of cause and effect stretching infinitely into the past. The argument contains a defence of the idea that no chain of cause and effect could stretch infinitely into the past, but that defence is poor if even intelligible. Indeed, the contention that there is an absolutely first event is contradicted by the claim that every event has a cause. If every event has a cause, then a first event in a series has a cause as well, and so is merely the first event in that series and not an absolutely first event.

Those, then, are our eight criticisms of the cosmological argument presented in Aquinas's second way.

But remember: That a statement does not follow from a set of statements does not mean that that statement is false. That the conclusion of Aquinas's argument from the second way, that there exists a being outside the universe who at least resembles God, is not supported by that argument does not mean that no such being exists. That Aquinas's argument fails does mean, though, that we cannot in good conscience hold on the basis of that argument that there does exist such a being. We must either find a good argument to that conclusion or hold that God exists on no grounds at all.

Can Aquinas's argument be repaired? I doubt it. But perhaps another argument in the same style, the style, that is, of a cosmological argument, will legitimately show (even if not

prove) that a being resembling God exists. We will try again in the next chapter, hoping to learn from the mistakes we have identified, in this chapter, in Aquinas's second way.