
Three views
about
the universe


Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two objections to Aquinas


the kalām
argument

But even if Aquinas' defense of (4) is unsuccessful, (4) might still be true. When you encounter an argument in which one of the premises is insufficiently well defended by the author, you should always ask: can we do better?

4. There are no infinite causal chains.

One attempt to do better begins with the thought that just because certain mathematical notions make sense, it does not automatically follow that every real world scenario involving those notions makes sense.

For example, the idea of negative numbers makes sense. But would it make sense for me to say that I have -16 apples in my refrigerator?

One might then try to make a parallel argument about infinity. Perhaps the idea of an infinite series of numbers makes sense, but the idea of an infinite causal chain does not.

One way to argue for this is to argue that, more generally, the idea of an infinite collection of things existing in space and time does not make sense.

Let's consider some curious features of infinite collections. Consider the collection of natural numbers

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, ...

And compare this to the collection of even natural numbers

2, 4, 6, 8, ...

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Might one defend (8) by saying that this hypothesis is impossible, on the

particles described?

grounds that there can't be an uncaused cause, like the explosion of

God exists.

first cause, then

8. If there is a

Bang could genuinely be a first cause. Things like the Big Bang have to

have a cause; but things like God don't.

Instead, it seems like Aquinas has to argue that nothing like the Big

which was an uncaused cause would have to have other properties, which

he did not have the Big Bang in mind). He tried to argue that something

And that is, in a way, exactly what Aquinas tried to do (though of course

God has, but the Big Bang does not.

grounds that there **can't** be an uncaused cause?

Might one defend (8) by saying that this hypothesis is impossible, on the

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?

This would appear to be a description of a world in which there is a first

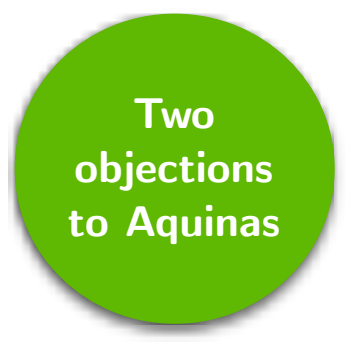
cause, but God does not exist. And it appears to be entirely consistent with

some reason for rejecting the above hypothesis.

simple atheism. So it looks as though, if we are to believe (8), we must have

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.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and indeed nothing in the universe can be.

On this view, everything which begins to exist at some time must have a

cause. Because the universe — including the Big Bang — has a

Bang — must have a cause. So the Big Bang can't be the first cause —

beginning in time, the universe as a whole — again, including the Big

If one accepts this extra premise, and one accepts the assumption that

was caused to exist by something outside the universe.

the universe came to exist at some time, then it follows that the universe

And then there are just two options — that thing must be eternal, or it

must have come to exist at a certain time.

then *that* thing would have to be eternal, or have come to exist a certain

If we go with the second option, then it must have had a cause. And

time.

There are a number of questions one could raise about this argument.

But let's focus in on one premise:

Could one object to this premise in much the way that we objected to

be God? How do we know that this eternally existing first cause of the

Aquinas' assumption that if there is a first cause, then that thing must

universe is God?

Our first topic is the question of whether God exists.


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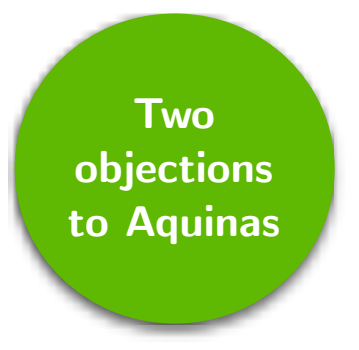
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good arguments for the existence of God then depends in part on

arguments **against** simple atheism. Whether they also amount to

Many arguments for God's existence are best thought of as

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.

Aquinas' first cause argument

2. Nothing is prior to itself.

itself. (1,2)

1. If something were the cause

3. Nothing is the cause of

of itself, it would be prior

(i) circular, (ii) infinite,

to itself.

causal chains.

5. At least one thing has a

6. Every causal chain must be

or (iii) have a first cause.

7. There is a first cause.

4. There are no infinite

8. If there is a first cause,

cause.

then God exists.

C. God exists. (7,8)

(3,4,5,6)

4. There are no infinite causal chains.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, ...