Three views about the universe

Aquinas' first cause argument

Two objections to Aquinas

the kalām argument

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

4. There are no infinite causal chains.

"... 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."

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"?

8. If there is a

first cause,

then God exists.

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finite

infinite

infinite

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4. ● There

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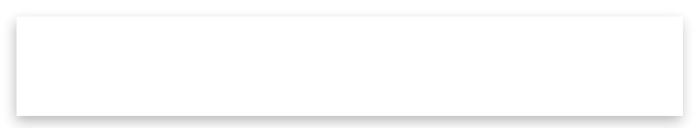cause from a causal chain, you thereby take

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infinite series:

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of itself, it would be prior

(i) circular, (ii) infinite,

itself. (1,2)

1. If something were the cause

2. Nothing is prior to itself.

or (iii) have a first cause.

causal chains

7. There is a first cause.

3. Nothing is the cause of

8. If there is a first cause,

4. There are no infinite

6. Every causal chain must be

to itself.

C. God exists. (7,8)

then God exists.

5. At least one thing has a

$(3,4,5,6)$

particles described?

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

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

8. If there is a

first cause, then

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

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

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

God has, but the Big Bang does not.

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

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

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

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?

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.

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.

Two objections to Aquinas

the kalām argument

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

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

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

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.

must have come to exist at a certain time.

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

time.

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

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

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

universe is God?

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

Our first topic is the question of whether God exists.

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how seriously you take quasi-theism. This is something to which

we will return.

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

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

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