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.



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









There are some

causes.

Nothing is the cause of itself.

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

Nothing is prior to itself.





There are no infinite causal

chains.

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.

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

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

There is a first cause.

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

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



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(neither, indeed, is it possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause

The second way is from the nature of efficient cause. In the world of sensible

proofs that Aquinas gave for the existence of God.

Here is the central argument of Aquinas' second way - the second of five

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

we will return.

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

first cause argument we find in the reading from Thomas Aquinas.

Let's turn then to our first argument for the existence of God: the



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(ii) circular,

first cause.

(iii) have a

chain must be (i)

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Everv causal

Three views universe







particles described?

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

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



God exists.

first cause, then

8. If there is a

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

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

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

God has, but the Big Bang does not.

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

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

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

grounds that there can't be an uncaused cause?

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?

Instead, it seems like a defender of the first cause argument has to argue that

some reason for rejecting the above hypothesis.

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

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

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

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.









6. Every causal chain must be

of itself, it would be prior

5. At least one thing has a

(1,2)itself.

cause.

itself.

2. Nothing is prior to itself.

3. Nothing is the cause of

4. There are no infinite

chains. causal

1. If something were the cause

(3,4,5,6)

(i) circular, (ii) infinite,

8. If there is a first cause,

then God exists.

(7,8)C. God exists.

7. There is a first cause.

or (iii) have a first cause.







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 —

and indeed nothing in the universe can be.

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

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

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

was caused to exist by something outside 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

But let's focus in on one premise:

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

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

universe is God?

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

Our first topic is the question of whether God exists.











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