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.

Three views about the universe

Two objections to Aquinas

the hidden argument

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.

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

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

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

of which is plainly false. Therefore it is necessary to admit a first cause, to which

things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known

neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all

causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate, cause. But if in efficient

causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes

everyone gives the name of God.

causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause,

of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now in efficient

following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause, and the

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

proofs that Aquinas gave for the existence of God.

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

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

we will return.

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

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

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.

There are

causes   ●

of itself.

the cause

Nothing is

were the

would be

If something

itself, it

itself.

prior to

cause of

itself.

Nothing is

prior to

infinite

There are no

chains.

immediately

following.

this is a derived

It is pretty clear that

a long argument for

it in the passage

premise, since we get

of Aquinas'

the side for now,

difficult passage to

and see if we can

Let's set this

argument.

figure out the shape

Three views
about
the universe

Aquinas' first cause argument

Two objections to Aquinas

the kalām argument

6. Every causal chain must be

C. God exists. (7,8)

or (iii) have a first cause.

7. There is a first cause.

2. Nothing is prior to itself.

itself. (1,2)

4. There are no infinite

3. Nothing is the cause of

5. At least one thing has a

(i) circular, (ii) infinite,

to itself.

1. If something were the cause

$(3, 4, 5, 6)$

then God exists.

cause.

8. If there is a first cause,

of itself, it would be prior

causal chains

Aquinas'
first cause
argument

Two objections to Aquinas

and indeed nothing in the universe can be.

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

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

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

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

was caused to exist by something outside the universe.

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

must have come to exist at a certain time.

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

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

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

But let's focus in on one premise:

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.

**Three views
about
the universe**

Aquinas' first cause argument

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

particles described?

first cause, then

8. If there is a

God exists.

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

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

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

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

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

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

nothing like the Big Bang could genuinely be a first cause. Things like the Big

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

Bang have to have a cause; but things like God don't. But why?

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.

the kalām argument

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.

There are some causes.

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

Nothing is prior to itself.

There are no infinite causal chains.

passage to the side for

Let's set this difficult

Aquinas' argument.

figure out the shape of

now, and see if we can

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.

There are
some
causes.

of itself.

the cause

Nothing is

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

Nothing is prior to itself.

There are no infinite causal chains.

following.

premise, since we get

this is a derived

a long argument for

It is pretty clear that

it in the passage

immediately