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

Approve
limit cause
augment

Two objections to Aquinas

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.

We've now got some premises on the table. But to figure out whether they make for a valid argument, we need to first figure out what conclusion they are supposed to be an argument for.

Fortunately, it is pretty clear that at least one thing Aquinas is arguing for is the following:

There is a
first
cause.

By this Aquinas means "there is something which causes other things to exist but was not itself caused to exist by anything."

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

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

to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient

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

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

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

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everyone gives the name of God.

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itself. (1,2)

1. If something were the cause

2. Nothing is prior to itself.

C. God exists. (7,8)

4. There are no infinite

then God exists.

causal chains.

5. At least one thing has a

6. Every causal chain must be

(i) circular, (ii) infinite,

$(3, 4, 5, 6)$

7. There is a first cause.

or (iii) have a first cause.

8. If there is a first cause,

3. Nothing is the cause of

Three views
about
the universe

Aquinas' first cause argument

Two objections to Aquinas

the kalām argument

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

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

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

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

Aquinas' first cause argument

Two objections to Aquinas

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

particles described?

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

first cause, then

8. If there is a

God exists.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

Two objections to Aquinas

the kalām argument

and indeed nothing in the universe can be.

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

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

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 —

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

was caused to exist by something outside the universe.

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

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

universe is God?

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

Our first topic is the question of whether God exists.

Three views
about
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Aquinas' first cause argument

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