

Candidate 1 evidence

Advanced Higher Dissertation 1

To what extent does Aquinas's proof from motion prove the existence of God of classical theism?

"The five 'proofs' asserted by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century don't prove anything, and are easily - though I hesitate to say so, given his eminence - exposed as vacuous." So writes Richard Dawkins, the atheistic materialist and biologist. Is this really the case? Today, in our scientific era, the fallacious belief abounds that the only proof worth considering seriously is based upon empirical evidence - and everything that does not cater to this limited definition of the word should be barely heeded.

However, to discuss Aquinas properly it is necessary to banish such prejudice. Aquinas himself believed that theology could be classified as a science, in its rigour and ability to discover truths about God and the world.? Therefore, when we talk of proving the existence of God, we believe that this is possible to do through strictly logical arguments; that it is only a prejudice birthed of the modern world which stops us taking abstract evidence as seriously as empirical evidence. In this essay, I aim to explore whether Aquinas's proof from motion is sound or whether it can be refuted philosophically. And if it is sound, if it necessarily follows that the God described is the God of classical theism, who is involved in His creation, both immanent and transcendent. This is opposed to a deist God, detached from his creation, and the pantheist God, no more than his creation.

Aquinas's argument from motion, in its most populist form, goes as follows: we can observe things in motion. Now motion is not meant only in the sense of movement, as in, an object moving from A to B, but also in "the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality." Simply put, potentiality is the potential something has, that is latent in its nature, that must be awakened and transformed by something else; when that potentiality manifests, it becomes actual. To use the example Aquinas himself gives, wood has the potential for fire, but it is only when it is brought into contact with heat that this potential manifests into actuality. The wood can obviously not set itself on fire, as this is manifestly absurd: it relies on an agent to act upon it. However, if this is the case, and everything requires something before itself to initiate change, to initiate motion, then one can trace everything back to infinity. Aquinas rules out the possibility of this in finite regress, as it would mean that nothing could have begun to change in the first place; if there is no unmoved mover, none of the subsequent movers would not only not have the capacity to act upon other things, to reduce their potentiality to actuality, but would probably not even exist in the first place.

David Hume would reject Aquinas's argument from motion on the basis that his leap from observation - things change and move - to this thus necessitating the existence of God is too great.

David Hume was an empiricist, meaning that what he considered worth investing belief in had to be corroborated by the senses.' Have we any experience of a Prime Mover? No - and nor do we have any experience of concepts like infinity. It is surely right to maintain, Hume would insist, a healthy scepticism that a human being, with his limited sense experience of a small portion of the world, could make judgements about concepts as huge as infinity. This argument does not rule out the existence of a theist God, it just makes the claim that, even if He does exist, He is ultimately unknowable by the human project of philosophical inquiry. I think this argument has some strengths. Is it not presumptuous to believe we can make grand statements about God, concepts far beyond human understanding? It is surely safer to reserve judgements for what we can understand and verify. However, I do not think this necessarily disproves the logic of the argument from motion. Hume's argument rests upon the assumption that empirical evidence always trumps logic. However, how can one prove the validity of empirical evidence without recourse to logic?

By failing to address the logical core of Aquinas's argument, Hume diminishes his own case. Hume argues that Aquinas cannot be right, not that he is wrong; surely he is begging the question here.

Therefore, one could say that this does not sufficiently address the argument from motion - and so it cannot be said to act as a rebuttal to the existence of the God of classical theism.

However, one could argue that logic can be used to prove the absurdity of an infinite series of events.

William Lane Craig, in an attempt to defend the separate and quite different Kalam Cosmological Argument, differentiates between potential infinities and actual infinities. A potential infinity refers to something limited, holding the possibility of being extended or added to indefinitely. A common example might be history: one can add on to the past and conceive of it continuing onwards. Features within the potential infinity can be dedicated. An actual infinity, however, is already complete: there is nothing to add to or extend; it already is everything; it lacks nothing. Such a concept, Craig believes, cannot be translated into reality: "While the actual infinity may be a fruitful and consistent concept in the mathematical realm, it cannot be translated from the mathematical world into the real world, for this would involve counter-intuitive absurdities." For example, in counting a collection of shapes that is actually infinite, the sum of red triangles would be equal to the sum of all the triangles, and these triangles would be equal to the sum of all the shapes. One can therefore quite convincingly *reductio ad absurdum* the argument for an actually infinite universe. There would have to be an equal amount of planets created in an actually infinite universe as events altogether, which is manifestly ridiculous. I think this argument from William Lane Craig allows one to see a logical and convincing reason for accepting the rejection of infinite regress. If an actual

infinite is impossible, this then means that the universe must have had a beginning. To dismiss the possibility that philosophy could reach such a conclusion as Hume does seems little more than prejudice. What makes empirical evidence superior to logic - and can the empiricists answer to this question be empirically proven? Therefore, I do not think that either Hume's criticisms of Aquinas's argument from motion weaken the case it makes for the existence of the God of classical theism

J. L. Mackie, the atheist philosopher, would dispute the notion that what Aquinas is dealing with is an "actual infinite." Mackie claims that when Aquinas says infinite regress is absurd, it is an "actual in finite" he is talking about. He is merely speaking about a finite chain of causes that can be traced back temporally. What Aquinas is saying is that it is impossible for a really long finite chain of causes to exist.

However, Mackie would claim, if every cause in a causal chain can be explained by a prior cause, then it is unnecessary to refer to a prime mover at all. Aquinas's claim that infinite regress is impossible is in this case a philosophical misunderstanding. Before considering if this is really what Aquinas meant by infinite regress in his argument from motion, let us first consider if Mackie's argument is logical. If everything in a chain of causes can be explained, nothing beyond it need be invoked. To use an analogy, say, for example you come across a hundred-mile line of dominoes. You can only observe a fraction of the dominoes from where you stand. Each domino that falls has the adequate explanation for its falling in the domino prior to it. In Mackie's words, "In an infinite series, every item is caused by an earlier item. The way in which the first item is 'removed' if we go from a finite to an infinite series does not entail the removal of the later items. To paraphrase, everything that has a sound explanation in a finite chain does not cease to have a sound argument when this chain is extended indefinitely. One can imagine this quite simply. If there are complete causal sets that are finite, and one duplicates them until the sets are of an infinite amount, there is no need for an Unmoved Mover, as all the causes are explained. I think this is a strong argument because, although it might go against common sense to claim that, in the prior example, these dominoes erected themselves to fall, one certainly cannot infer from this specific and limited observance that it is possible for there to be an unmoved mover. After all, everything in our ordinary experience is adequately explained without resorting to God, so why is God suddenly necessitated if one traces causes far enough backwards in a chain. No material change happens to the items over a causal chain the further back they are traced that suddenly makes the causal explanation that works for every other member inadequate and, even if this were the case, we as human beings would have no way of knowing that from our limited experience. "We have no reason for accepting (the) implicit assumption? that this being must be God. Whilst Mackie's argument might fail the principle of sufficient reason, his argument does not aim to provide an alternative explanation; it is only to show

Aquinas's reasoning as false. Hume claims that perhaps the universe does not need a cause, that since we can imagine something without a cause existing it is therefore possible for this to be the case. Mackie would respond that everything in our experience has a cause that can be accounted for by materialism. This is a far more reasonable claim than Hume's, as it lacks any dogmatism and is instead based purely on logic. I think Mackie's claim does weaken Aquinas's argument for the existence of God at least to a limited extent. He fulfils the criteria set by Ockam's razor. Formulated by William of Ockham, it is the claim that one should not needlessly introduce new entities which complicate that which can be explained in simpler terms. By introducing God, Aquinas introduces an entity whose role could be fulfilled by simpler effects that require less explanation. Mackie does not disprove the existence of the God of classical theism; nor does his rebuttal dispute that it is possible to reach proof of Him through logic. However, he does show some insufficient elements in Aquinas's reasoning that may make his argument an unconvincing one to arrive at the conclusion of God's existence from. In many ways, Mackie's arguments that material explanations are adequate and no recourse to anything greater is necessary, are similar to Bertrand Russell's arguments. Russell saw no reason for discussion about beginnings to the universe. "There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all." There is no way to know whether the universe was created - and all philosophical arguments trying to prove this are sophistry. Russell is operating within his logical positivist framework when he make such assertions. All talk of "prime movers" fails to correspond to any meaningful reality; they are empty phrases." I think this is a weakness of Russell's argument. Mackie critiques the ideas informing Aquinas's conclusion; Russell refuses to consider them in the first place. Much the same question that can be applied to the empiricists can be offered here: can logical positivism affirm its own beliefs? Besides, Russell surely begs the question by refusing to even address Aquinas at all. Russell would simply declare that concepts like potentiality and actuality are meaningless - but what about them arouses such contempt? It is hardly in the spirit of philosophical inquiry to so dogmatically refuse this viewpoint any consideration. I think this is a significant weakness in Russell's argument against Aquinas's proof from motion as it fails to criticise its substance. In fact, one would be forgiven for thinking that it almost makes the atheist opposition look as though it concedes in its unwillingness to address any points that Aquinas might make from the beginning.

John Hick, philosopher of religion, subscribes to much the same view as Bertrand Russell does, although admittedly under a more intellectual veneer. Hick asks whether a constant participation in a world which provides for everything neatly aligned answers might not influence our thinking on a much larger scale.

The reason we are so intent on finding an answer to the universe is that we are used to answers. The cosmological argument, by providing God as this answer, fulfils a basic human need and one that we have learned to become used to. On one level Hick's argument makes sense: if we are used to dealing with a reality that is logical, where everything has purpose and meaning to it, it makes sense to extend this line of enquiry and this mode of thought to the universe itself. One could go as far to say that this is collateral evidence for the cosmological argument itself as opposed to an argument against it. If mathematics, for example, provides us with answers, conclusions, and solutions to all its problems; if order and purpose are features of both the external world we observe and our internal consciousness; what are the chances that the universe as a whole is unique among them as the only inexplicable and illogical entity? Besides, even if one does not think this strengthens the argument made it is difficult to see how it could weaken it. Just because something can be given an adequate psychological explanation, that does not mean it does not correspond to reality. A man may be convinced that he is being tracked by government officials due to his paranoid constitution; however, to believe that his paranoia rules out the possibility of him being tracked is surely ridiculous; doubly so if he is being tailed constantly by men in black suits with dark shades who are constantly muttering suspiciously into walkie-talkies. Everything in existence is explicable. Why should this not apply to the universe as a whole? Regardless, Aquinas's argument from motion is not based on some feeling that the universe is explicable - although that might be a reason for its conception; there is a clear and obvious logic to every one of the steps. Because Hick's argument refuses to engage with the logic of Aquinas's argument, it is weak and can offer no rebuttal for it beyond a general dismissal of why it should not be taken seriously. I do not think therefore that Hick's argument sufficiently weakens Aquinas's proof from motion for the existence of a classically theist God. However, it is possible to dispute the claim that Mackie's reputation is based upon; namely that Aquinas misconceived the concept of infinity in his proof. When Mackie writes of causes and their explanations being adequately provided by materialism, he is writing of temporal courses causes ordered within space-time; for example, the row of dominoes. But this is not what Aquinas was writing about. Thomistic philosopher Edward Feser writes of the proof from motion that:

"Aquinas is not saying that if you trace the series of movers back in time you must eventually get to some temporally first mover... The series of movers he has in mind is one of all whose members exist together here and now... and by saying that there must be a first mover he doesn't mean first in order of time but rather first in the sense of being most fundamental in the order of what exists »¹²

In other words, what Aquinas is arguing for is a hierarchical as opposed to temporal series of causes. The temporal series of causes could indeed be traced back to infinity, Aquinas concedes. ¹³ He would agree with Mackie: there is no way to philosophically prove the impossibility of infinite

regress temporally although, of course, he did believe that through divine revelation this had been made known to man (Genesis 1:1, for example. Evidently then, this disputes the criticism levelled at the argument for motion by Mackie. Aquinas did not misunderstand infinity - although, in all fairness to Mackie, many who espouse the same argument do in fact make this error, so perhaps it can be said that he dismantles the populist renditions of Aquinas's argument. There are two different types of causes that are important to keep in mind when discussing Aquinas's philosophy: causes per accidents and causes per se. Causes per accidents have causal power of their own that they themselves can exert. ¹⁴ For example, a father actualizes his potential to create offspring when he begets his son. If the father dies, then the son still retains the causal power to actualize his potential to beget children. So why do causes per se necessitate the existence of a Prime Mover? Without the existence of a first mover there is no basis from which other causes can operate. If causes per accidents can be visualised as dominoes, then causes per se can be compared to "the sun" which "is the cause of the growth of plants that have secondary causes that produce them season after season." Everything in our material existence derives its causal power from God. If God stopped creating, the world would cease to exist. Aquinas is therefore not describing a deist God but the God of classical theism, an eternal basis from which all other things derive. It aligns with Patristic accounts of what God is like, further strengthening Aquinas's case. "God always was and is and will be, or rather always "is," for "was" and "will be" belong to our divided time and transitory nature; but he is always "he who is," and he gave himself this name when he consulted with Moses on the mountain. For holding everything together in himself, he possesses being, neither beginning nor ending " This description by St Gregory of Nazianzus aligns perfectly with how Aquinas conceives the Prime Mover, demonstrating that the God of classical theism is identical to it. Kenny, for example, questions if the prime mover need be God; could it not be a stationary object, one that is admittedly eternal, but still merely material, not in movement - like a rock, for example?! Evidently not, as the Prime Mover does not merely set things off in a chain reaction but rather allows existence itself to happen. Hume suggested a deist God, for example, writing that perhaps this world was the creation of some "infant deity", a God who had abandoned a failed creation purely necessary to explain the universe's beginning but wholly irrelevant after the initial act of creation. But we can see that the God Aquinas describes must necessarily be intimately involved in his creation at every moment.

Nor is Aquinas describing a pantheist God. Paul Davies, a British physicist, has attempted to create a theory for everything, suggesting that within the universe there is a conscious energy, a creative will "The universe is a huge self-regulating, self-sustaining mechanism, with the capacity to self-organize ad infinitum writes in his 1986 book *The Cosmic Blueprint*. Davies believes, if it can be reworded philosophically, that the universe is the necessary being and that an immanent force within it can be

described as the "prime mover." This is not the God of classical theism. This God is immanent but not transcendent - if this uniting force" can be described as "God" at all. Davies's ideas are not incompatible with Aquinas's, in and of themselves. Aquinas believed there were other necessary beings besides God; for example, angels. The universe might be a necessary being; but the question remains as to whether it could also be the prime mover who actualises all of reality. Many philosophers have made this case, including Hume and Russell. Why must, they inquire, we always attempt to go beyond the universe? Why can the universe not be the ultimate explanation? The prime mover could be the universe; the causal series ordered per se could have the universe as its first member and from there would come all secondary causes. I think this argument has its strengths and weaknesses. A strength is that it utilizes the logical reasoning of Aquinas - demonstrated to be sound - only to substitute God for a more scientific explanation, combining science with philosophical reasoning. But surely the whole of Aquinas's argument is useless here and should be discarded since it deals explicitly with the supernatural. It is not particularly scientific to place faith in a theory that only has the potential to be true. There is therefore a choice between a metaphysical theory affirmed by its respective field of inquiry and a physical theory which lacks the same benefit: it seems only more logical to choose the first. Thomistic scholars would also argue that the idea that the universe could be the prime mover is absurd. If the universe was the prime mover, it would contain within itself potentialities that had yet to be actualised." Therefore, the universe as a whole could not be the prime mover. The prime mover cannot have any potentiality in it. Davies believed that the universe is evolving; that is, its potentialities are still being actualised. This is irreconcilable with Thomist thought. The only thing that can be considered the prime mover is a being who is *actus purus*.

Actus purus is a concept meaning the absolute perfection of God. God is already perfect and complete within Himself; He has no potentialities to actualise. Hume asks why there must be a prime mover and not prime movers. It is because only a completely perfect being, actual in all its potentials, could be the proper prime mover - as opposed to merely another thing in a causal chain that required its potentials to be actualised. I think Aquinas's argument is good because it conclusively proves that the only possible contender for the prime mover must be the God of classical theism. Many -time people have objected to the supposed leap between the rest of the proof and the fact that it is then said to be God who is the prime mover. However, if one agrees with the premises and cannot find a logical reason for rejecting them, then it is necessary that one accepts the existence of the God of classical theism. The natural conclusion to his argument is God's existence.

Many philosophers today consider the argument from motion redundant. Hume criticises its inability to fall within the confines of empiricism. Mackie fleshes this out, as well as pointing out that Aquinas misunderstands the concept of infinity and fails as a result. However, this dismisses only the popular misconception of Aquinas's argument, namely that it is based on a need to terminate infinite regress.

When this proof is placed within the context of Thomist philosophy, Mackie's claims are dismissed. The difference between causes *per se* and causes *per accidens* clarify Aquinas's thinking and shows that his argument from motion is based on hierarchy as opposed to temporality. It makes clear the role that the Prime Mover plays in sustaining all of reality, clearly identifying the Prime Mover with the God of classical theism. It cannot be a deist god. And because it requires a being without potentiality, it cannot be one of many gods or a stationary object. However, the argument from motion's logical soundness does not inherently necessitate a shift in belief in the individual. The theist might be reassured that his beliefs have a reasonable and logical basis. It is difficult to say whether the atheist can find himself moved by logic to the acceptance of a loving God. However, the doctor universalis, Thomas Aquinas himself, despite spending his entire life expounding logical and philosophical arguments for the Christian faith, understood this all too well, writing: "For those with faith, no evidence is necessary. For those without it, no evidence will suffice."