

Candidate 3

Is Aquinas' Cosmological Argument strong enough to prove that God exists?

Many would argue that the question of God's existence is one of the most disputed in the whole of human history. Humans are and always have been inquisitive creatures and so seek to have an explanation for the existence of everything. For hundreds of years, countless philosophers and theologians have tried to answer this question, one of the more prevailing theories is the works of holy man, St Thomas Aquinas. St Thomas Aquinas first introduced his philosophical beliefs on the existence of God in the 13th century in his Summa Theologica volumes. He argued five ways that proved God's existence, three of these make up his cosmological argument, these being Motion, Causation and Contingency.

In the 21st Century, nearly 800 years after Aquinas, humans are still looking for the proof of a higher being. Are Aquinas' beliefs on the cosmological argument strong enough to prove that there is a God? The evidence for God, Aquinas claims, has come from the three conventional truths of our existence. In this dissertation, I will examine his concepts of Motion, Causation and Contingency.

Aquinas' argument from motion follows a number of premises; evident to our senses is motion, in everyday life we experience change from actuality to potentiality and this movement can only occur as a result of another mover- whatever is moved is moved by something else. Potentiality is only moved by actuality- an efficient cause. There cannot be an infinite regress¹ of movement taking place. For if there were no first mover, there would be no subsequent movers and thus no present motion. Aquinas draws the conclusion that a First Mover does exist and that this first mover is God.

Aquinas drew on the work of Plato and Aristotle written before him. Plato rejected the idea of infinite regression, as did Aquinas. Both considered the notion of the perpetual motion of the universe as impossible and philosophically unsatisfactory. To claim that motion had consistently been occurring with no beginning point fails to give any solution to the question

¹ Infinite regress is the notion that the universe has been in motion infinitely with no definitive starting point.

of what started motion. Opponents have argued that there is no need for a first mover in our universe, famous Scottish philosopher David Hume argued why the universe even needed a beginning as for all we know it has 'just been' in motion infinitely. We know motion occurs in the world so what's to say that this isn't just an unending chain of movement that has always been happening?²

However, like Aquinas, I believe that this argument for infinite regress is troublesome because it suggests that every single chain of movement either started with nothing or hasn't even started at all, which as we know, is untrue. For example, to suggest infinite regress as the beginning of all movement in our known universe is almost like saying that a bouncy ball has just always been bouncing and nothing started it. We know that a bouncy ball does not have the ability to start bouncing unless acted upon by an outside force nor does it have the ability to have infinitely bounced throughout time. And so, this idea of infinite regression goes against all knowledge we have of our universe. This is why I feel that Aquinas is right in his suggestion that there had to have been a first unmoved mover for without one we will never escape from the continual cycle of questions such as 'but what set that in motion?' and 'what moved that?'.

I personally believe that arguing the idea of a first unmoved mover does provide a satisfactory response to the argument from motion because it gives movement in our universe a definitive starting point. Therefore, I believe Aquinas provides a convincing case for the existence of a prime mover, although, I do not believe that Aquinas provides reason substantial enough for me to believe that this prime mover is God. A weakness of Aquinas' argument from motion is that he leaps from the idea that motion was the result of an unmoved mover to that unmoved mover being the God of Classical Theism. This makes the First Way a Reductio Ad Absurdum structure³. Meaning that if Aquinas' premises are the truth then the conclusion that God is the unmoved mover deductively must be true as well. I feel this weakens his First Way, because, Aquinas uses his own, already established, faith in Christianity to say that the unmoved mover is the God of Classical Theism.

² Mallaband, P. (2012). *AS Philosophy of Religion (written for the Edexcel specification)*. Lulu.com.

³ Denial of the conclusion makes a large contradiction in one's entire argument.

Nevertheless, there is nothing to say that movement could not be as a result of the many Gods of Hinduism or Islam. Philosopher Anthony Kenny said:

“But suppose the conclusion were sound [the need for an unmoved mover]. It would be impossible for Aquinas to go on to prove that there exists an unmoved mover at all resembling the Christian God”⁴

I consider this is a flaw in Aquinas’ argument because he fails to present any reasoned argument why this unmoved mover must be the Christian God for- as highlighted previously- he relies strongly on his already present belief in Christianity and the God of Classical Theism.

I believe a major flaw in Aquinas’ entire cosmological argument are his contradictions. Aquinas questioned the possibility of infinity and rejected infinite regression is as an unsound theory for motion in our universe. Yet, his own beliefs state that God is in fact infinite. Here, it is apparent that there is a major flaw in the rejection of infinity whilst one has beliefs about their own God being infinite?

But, Aquinas believed that this could be probable as God is a matchless, transcendent figure with no ties to the laws of nature that we are familiar with. If God is believed to have created the universe, He would not be bound by its laws nor be confined to our ideas of what could be plausible or implausible.

I would take issue with Aquinas’ line of reasoning here because he hasn’t proven anything with evidence. Aquinas was a very religious man and so he would not need very much convincing that God is powerful enough to be eternal in a world that is not. However, this does not successfully explain why infinite regression could not be impossible, for if God can be exempt from these laws of nature why can’t other things be exempt? Perhaps even the universe? The idea that only God has the ability to be free from the rules of our known universe might be perceived as manipulative of the argument when it benefits Aquinas’ own personal philosophies.

⁴Mallaband, P. (2012). *AS Philosophy of Religion (written for the Edexcel specification)*. Lulu.com. Page 35

I think that Aquinas' argument from motion is inconsistent and disproves his idea that God was the prime mover, as aforementioned, Aquinas relies heavily on his already established and strong faith in Christianity and the God of classical theism. As a result, he does very little to provide strong reason why God must be the first mover. His argument from motion depends greatly upon religion. Hence, I understand that it would be very convincing for a religious person, but I personally believe that it is weak and fails to provide a substantial case for the existence of God. Aquinas does provide significant indication that there must have been a prime mover, but his cosmological argument does not fully persuade me that God exists.

Secondly, causation is the empirical truth of cause and effect in our universe. We can see that things are caused, but nothing in our universe has the ability to cause itself to exist. If there is an effect, it must have been caused by something else and that must have been caused by another, for example- your parents caused you into existence and their parents caused them and so on. The law of cause and effect cannot go on forever, because there must be a first causer who is not-physical, not time-bound and not-caused, Aquinas believed that this spiritual, eternal and necessary being was God.

Aquinas drew on the works of Aristotle once again with his argument for Causation. The God of classical theism is seen to be transcendent, immanent and eternal. It is clear that by the descriptions of the God of classical theism and Aristotle's idea of the Prime Causer there are many similarities to Aquinas' idea of the God of classical theism being the cause of the universe and Aristotle's belief in an eternal uncaused cause. This led Aquinas to believe God to be the First Cause of the Universe.

David Hume, is critical of Aquinas' Cosmological argument. Hume's dispute of the Causation argument is that he feels that there is no reason why the cause of the universe must be explained, when we already have explanations for things already caused and existing within the universe. Hume wrote in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion:

"The cause of the whole is sufficiently explained by explaining the cause of the parts."⁵

Meaning, that the need for the explanation of the entire universe is irrational when the universe is just an assortment of beings and things that have a known cause. For example, if we were to take some planks of wood and build a bench out of these planks. The bench would be made of wood. We are aware that these planks are made of wood and therefore there is no reason to explore what the bench is made of. This example shows that to question the existence of the whole universe when we can explain the existence of things within the universe is illogical.

However, I feel there is a weakness in Hume's argument because wood cannot cause itself into a bench. There needs to be a tree which has been chopped down by a forester, which has then been transported to a factory, has been manufactured into planks of wood and finally crafted by a carpenter into a bench. There is no possible way that a tree can cause itself into existence as a bench. This points to a fault in Hume's argument, because there needs to be a cause for the singular parts' existence which would then account for the existence of the whole.

Another disadvantage of Hume's argument is that he is being rather apathetic in his response to Aquinas. Hume disregards Aquinas' argument but doesn't care to convey his own thinking on what caused the universe. He argues that we should settle with the notion that the universe has 'just been' and is indifferent to investigating the truths of our universe. This I believe hinders his argument because he simply rejects Aquinas' argument without further thinking into the cause of our universe.

A weakness in Aquinas' argument from Causation is the Fallacy of Composition. This is the faulted assumption that a collection as a whole must possess a certain property just because all singular parts of the collection possess that certain property. British philosopher, Bertrand Russell argued a point supported by this fallacy in a 1948 broadcasted radio discussion with priest and religious philosopher, F.C. Copleston. He stated:

⁵ Mallaband, P. (2012). *AS Philosophy of Religion (written for the Edexcel specification)*. Lulu.com. Page 37

“Every man who exists has a mother, and it seems to me your argument [of a First Cause] is that therefore the human race must have a mother, but obviously the human race hasn’t a mother”⁶

The point Russell makes here is that it is illogical to assume that the universe as a whole has a cause just because things within the universe have a cause. This argument is similar to that of David Hume. However, a disadvantage of this argument is that our universe is so vast and intricate that surely its existence must be explored as a separate, individual object to the existence of the beings inside it? Perhaps it may be unreasonable to assume the universe has a singular prime causer, simply because everything else in our universe has a causer, however, I feel this strengthens Aquinas’ argument from Causation because he sees the universe’s intricacies as too special and complex to not require a cause.

Arguably the biggest weakness in Aquinas’ argument from Causation is the glaring contradiction of what caused God. If we compare Aquinas’ 2nd premise and his conclusion there appears to be a major flaw in his entire argument. The second premise states that ‘nothing can cause itself to exist’ surely this means that God could not cause himself to exist and so, required a cause as well? However the conclusion states that ‘there is a first, uncaused cause and this is God.’ This illustrates a flaw in his argument because if everything requires a cause, God too must require a cause. Still, Aquinas argued that God is exempt from the premises of the second way because, given his (God) omnipotent nature, he has always existed and so, has no cause.

To say that God is exempt from the premise that everything requires a cause, because he is eternal and all powerful creates an evident anomaly. As previously stated, Aquinas based the cosmological argument on his already established faith in Christianity and in the God of classical theism. He argued that everything must have a cause but when questioned about God’s cause, he argues that God is the exception. This creates somewhat of an ambiguity in the causation argument because aiming to prove God’s existence whilst making exceptions for that God’s cause- in my eyes- compromises the entire argument. Aquinas has contradicted

⁶ Chucky, A. (1999). *A Debate on the Argument from Contingency*. [online] Ditext.com. Available at: <http://www.ditext.com/russell/debate.html> [Accessed 26 Feb. 2019].

his own premises to provide an explanation for the existence of God. Which in turn, leads me to believe that the argument from causation is not strong enough to prove the existence of God, for Aquinas contradicts his own premises when he fails to give reason as to how God could have caused himself when he stated that nothing can cause itself into existence.

Finally, Aquinas's third way is Contingency. In our universe we can see that things are contingent (they come in and out of existence) and these contingent things are brought into existence by something else which is already in existence. If everything were reliant on something else for its existence then there would have been a time when no contingent thing was in existence and, as aforesaid in Aquinas' second way, nothing can cause itself. Therefore there must have been a necessary, non-contingent being and this is God.

In other words, contingent and necessary beings can be differentiated as the following: a contingent being is something that could have not existed whereas necessary beings are fundamental and must exist. All life on Earth is contingent, our existence has relied upon the specific genes from our parents and their genes from their parents and so on but none of our lives have been necessary. Aquinas believed, as aforementioned, that infinite regress was illogical. There cannot be an infinite regress of contingency in our universe because, if that was the case, the entire universe could have not existed. Therefore, Aquinas concluded that there had to be a necessary being upon whom the contingency of the universe was dependent on, and this was God.

A key criticism of Aquinas' argument from contingency comes from German Philosopher, Immanuel Kant. Kant believed that there could not be any being that owned necessary status. This is because any denial of that things existence would be universally unsound. Kant argues that even if God did exist, his existence could not be necessary.

Meaning that Aquinas' argument is weak because there are atheists who deny the existence of a God and this is not illogical, since it is not an a posteriori truth that there is a necessary being who brought our universe into contingency, it is only a personal belief shared by those who believe in the God of classical theism.

However, a strength of Aquinas' third way is brought to light by Copleston who stated:

“If you add up chocolates to infinity, you presumably get an infinite number of chocolates. So if you add up contingent beings to infinity, you still get contingent beings, not a necessary being. An infinite series of contingent beings will be, to my way of thinking, as unable to cause itself as one contingent being.”⁷

This argument shows that no matter how many contingent beings there are, they could not cause themselves into existence because they all equally could have not existed. Although, one could argue that your parents are contingent and brought to life a contingent being (you), however, no contingent being could bring themselves into existence nor could any amount of contingent beings. All contingent beings rely on a predecessor and there had to be a being that had the ability to bring the first contingent being into existence. If this being did not exist, there would be no life on earth, because as Copleston states:

“an infinite series of contingent beings will be, as unable to cause itself as one contingent being.”⁶

Although, one issue that permeates throughout Aquinas’ and indeed Copleston’s arguments is that there appears to be one rule for God and another rule for everything and everyone else. If God has the ability to bring himself into existence why can’t the universe? Aquinas makes the assumption that because everything in our universe is contingent e.g. human beings and animals, our universe is contingent. But, there is nothing to say that our universe could be non-contingent. Aquinas made the supposition that simply because we are all contingent beings, the universe must also be contingent. It could be equally likely that the universe held necessary status and could bring itself into existence at the same time that God apparently held necessary status.

However, advanced scientific breakthroughs disprove the claim that our universe is contingent because we now know that there was a time when the universe did not exist. Making it contingent, as it needed to be brought into existence, there must have been a being (as aforesaid, a first cause) that was completely necessary in bringing the universe into existence. If Aquinas were alive to argue this, he might’ve argued that because we know

⁷ Chrucky, A. (1999). *A Debate on the Argument from Contingency*. [online] Ditext.com. Available at: <http://www.ditext.com/russell/debate.html> [Accessed 26 Feb. 2019].

through modern advancements in science that our universe has not been existing infinitely- it needs a necessary being who brought our contingent universe into existence.

However, a weakness of this argument is that, if it were true that the universe required a necessary, non-contingent being to bring it into existence, as stated previously, there is nothing to say that this necessary, non-contingent being must be the God of Christian faith. It can be equally argued that this necessary being could be the many Gods of Hinduism or Allah in the Islamic faith. It is simply only said to be the God of classical theism because this was whom Aquinas believed in. Nonetheless, one could argue that Aquinas lived in a time when Christianity was seen to be the only rational faith to believe in. The Christian Church deemed that any events that occurred (for example, the beginning of the universe) could be explained by the existence of God and to suggest or investigate otherwise was seen as blasphemous. And so, Aquinas would have suggested that this necessary being was the Christian God not only because he believed in this God but because if he had explored the presence of any other being responsible for the existence of the universe, he would have been seen as sacrilegious.

Another criticism of Aquinas' argument from contingency is that scientists observed atoms of energy that have erupted into existence from what appears to be nothing. Our universe is seen to be a bundle of immense energy which could have purely burst into existence 13.7 billion years ago from nothing. A disadvantage of this criticism is that we do not know how something can appear into existence from nothing and therefore, we cannot deny that this could not be the work of an omniscient being unknown to us who has the ability to bring something into existence from nonentity.

Aquinas also found flaw in this criticism, he argued that the universe could not 'erupt' into existence. The reason being that, according to the known laws of our nature the action of something appearing from nothing was undeniably improbable. Simply because, say it was possible that things could 'pop' into existence, there has to be rules in our known universe that permit these actions to occur, and all rules require a lawmaker, whom he believed to be God. Contingent beings cannot appear out of nothing unless legislated by an omnipotent, necessary being-God. However, a weakness of Aquinas' counter-claim is that the Big Bang is – by Aquinas' standards- a seemingly impossible occurrence.

One modern explanation for the origins of our universe which invalidates God as a necessary being is the Big Bang. The Big Bang is the notion that our universe began with an infinitely small, infinitely dense singularity that expanded rapidly, bringing all planets and stars into existence. The Big Bang is the most widely agreed upon belief about the cause of our universe. There are three main pieces of evidence for the Big Bang; redshift, an abundance of light elements and cosmic background radiation. The redshift of galaxies beyond our own insinuates that the universe is expanding out from a singular point, this movement outwards could only have occurred if the universe had begun at a single point and had continued to spread out over billions of years. The second indication that the universe was created with a Big Bang is the abundance of Helium and Hydrogen elements. These gas elements suggest an intense build-up of pressure that expanded, releasing large quantities of light elements into the cosmos. Finally, the last piece of proof that our universe began with a Big Bang is cosmic background radiation or cosmic microwave background. This shows itself as excess noise and is indistinguishable to the naked eye. Cosmic microwave background radiation is everywhere in our universe and is the remnants of the massive expansion that brought our universe into existence.

I think that Aquinas' argument from contingency fails to prove that God exists because I consider the Big Bang as an undeniable disputation of Aquinas' argument that God is a necessary being in our universe. Simply because the Big Bang provides with absolute certainty and scientific evidence that our universe is the result of the expansion of a singularity 13.7 billion years ago, providing significant confirmation that the universe does not require a necessary, non-contingent being. Whereas, Aquinas does not offer any real evidence supported by scientific discoveries that suggest there is a necessary being- let alone God- who brought the universe into existence.

Having explored all three contentions in Aquinas' cosmological argument, I believe there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that his three ways fail to prove the existence of God. But, when taking the argument as a whole one major criticism can be applied to Aquinas' argument that is that he uses the philosophical principle of "Ockham's Razor." This is the notion that when faced with a perplexing issue or question, the most straightforward answer must be the correct one just due to its simplicity. Aquinas states that God is the creator of our

universe and believes this because it is the most uncomplicated way to answer the question of what created everything. Aquinas already has a strong connection to the Christian faith and so he does not need strong proof that God is the creator of the universe as he already believes that God is powerful enough to do so. Aquinas has made the abductive⁸ leap from the Universe needing a creator, to that creator being the Christian God. It is no surprise that a 13th century Christian monk would come to the conclusion that God is the creator of the universe without definitive proof. Aquinas already believes in the existence of God, so therefore does not need convincing that God could create the universe. Therefore, it is no surprise that many non-religious philosophers and atheists find fault in his cosmological argument.

Aquinas' cosmological argument requires a strong belief in the Christian faith. He is dependent upon the assumption that the God of classical theism is both omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (all knowing) and therefore great and clever enough to create the universe. But I feel that most of Aquinas' argument can be negated if there is no belief in the existence of God to begin with. No non-religious or atheist individual could believe that God was the creator of the universe if they did not believe in God in the first place. It is much easier for an atheist to prove that God doesn't exist than it is for a religious individual to prove that God does exist. This is because, spiritual encounters in which religious people have claimed to see God are very personal and transcendental experiences which cannot be transcribed as empirical truths. Consequently, Aquinas has tried to give reason for the existence of God through things we can see in our universe. However a weakness of his argument is that the Summa Theologica was written nearly 800 years ago and modern-advancements in science and cosmology are now able to refute much of Aquinas' argument. And, as a result, I believe that Aquinas' cosmological argument is too inconsistent and unsound to prove the existence of God.

4316 words.

⁸A conclusion acquired in the absence of decisive evidence

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