Aquinas’s Third Way
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Cosmology, a branch of astronomy (or astrophysics), is “The study of the origin and structure of the universe.” Thus, a thing is *cosmological* when it pertains to the origin or structure of the universe. The cosmological *argument* is a type of argument of which, historically, there have been many tokens.¹ Like the ontological and teleological arguments, it has as its conclusion the proposition that God exists. But it reaches this conclusion by a distinctive route. According to Richard Swinburne, “a cosmological argument is an argument to the existence of God from the existence of some finite object or, more specifically[,] a complex physical universe.” J. L. Mackie says that cosmological arguments “start from the very fact that there is a world or from such general features of it as change or motion or causation . . . and argue to God as the uncaused cause of the world or of those general features, or as its creator, or as the reason for its existence.”² Here is a simplified version:

1. The world exhibits certain general features (for example, change, motion, causal interaction, contingent existence, and imperfection).
2. These general features would not obtain unless there were a being of a certain sort (unchanging, unmoved, uncaused, necessary, perfect).

Therefore,


2. The type-token distinction is an important one to philosophers. Failure to attend to it can lead to fallacious reasoning. Here is an example of the distinction from another context. My automobile, a 2007 Honda Accord, is a token of the type Honda Accord.

The following individuals have produced tokens of the cosmological argument: Plato (428-348 BCE), Aristotle (384-322 BCE), Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (Avennasar) (873-950), Saint Anselm (1033-1109), Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali (1059-1111), Ibn Rushd (Averoës) (1126-1198), Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon) (1135-1204), Saint Bonaventura (1221-1274), Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), René Descartes (1596-1650), Benedictus de Spinoza (1632-1677), John Locke (1632-1704), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), Samuel Clarke (1675-1729), Demetrius (a character in David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*) (1711-1776), Richard Taylor (1919-2003), and William Wainwright (born 1933). Critics of the argument include Philo (a character in Hume’s *Dialogues*) (1711-1776), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), C. D. Broad (1887-1971), J. L. Mackie (1917-1981), and Paul Edwards (1923-2004).


3. An unchanging, unmoved, uncaused, necessary, perfect being—namely, God—exists (from 1 and 2).

Most cosmological arguments, like this simplified version, are deductive and a posteriori in nature, but Swinburne has developed an inductive version. David Hume, in his posthumously published *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, has one of his characters, Demea, make an a priori version of the argument.

It may be that all tokens of the cosmological argument suffer from the same problem (or set of problems). A single criticism could, in principle, wipe out the entire class (type). But some tokens may be sound and others unsound. Thus, one must examine each token to determine whether it is sound. Let us focus on a token produced by Thomas Aquinas. In Part I, Question 2, Article 3 of his treatise *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas asks “Whether God Exists?” He answers in the affirmative, claiming that “The existence of God can be proved in five ways.” The first three ways are cosmological arguments, although Aquinas did not use that label. Here is the *third* way (translated from the original Latin):

The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be,

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5. An argument, in the technical philosophical sense, is a group of (two or more) propositions, one of which (the conclusion) is claimed (by the arguer) to follow from the other(s) (the premise(s)). A *deductive* argument is one in which the conclusion is claimed (by the arguer) to follow *necessarily* from the premise(s). All other arguments are inductive. Knowledge is of two types: a priori and a posteriori. A priori knowledge is knowledge that is prior to, or independent of, experience. A posteriori knowledge is knowledge that is posterior to, or dependent on, experience. Propositions are said to be a priori or a posteriori depending on whether they can be known a priori or a posteriori. Thus, it makes sense to speak of a priori (or a posteriori) propositions as well as a priori (or a posteriori) knowledge. An *argument* is a posteriori if it contains at least one a posteriori premise; otherwise, it is a priori.


8. To say that a (deductive) argument is *valid* is to say that its conclusion follows logically from its premise(s), i.e., that it is impossible for its premise(s) to be true while its conclusion is false. A *sound* argument is a valid argument that has true premises. Thus, all sound arguments are valid, but not all valid arguments are sound. Validity is a formal or structural property of arguments; it concerns the *relation* between premises and conclusion. Hence, a sound argument has both good structure (validity) and good content (true premises).

then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence—which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.10

Aquinas’s argument rests on a distinction between contingent existence and necessary existence, so it is important to grasp the difference. According to William Wainwright, “Something exists contingently if it is logically possible that it exists and logically possible that it doesn’t.”11 A thing exists necessarily if it is logically possible that it exists and not logically possible that it doesn’t. Here is a taxonomy:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Things</th>
<th>Logically Possible</th>
<th>Not Logically Possible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Logically Necessary</td>
<td>Not Logically Necessary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Existent</td>
<td>2 Nonexistent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aquinas argues, in effect, that there is at least one thing—God—in category 1. Like Anselm, he believes that God is logically possible (i.e., not in category 4). The argument is designed to establish that God is not in categories 2 or 3, either. Here is a modified version of Mackie’s reconstruction of the argument, with exemplary criticisms noted:

1. If a thing is contingent, then there was a time at which it did not exist.12

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12. “[T]he premiss . . . seems dubious; why should not something which is able not to be
Therefore,

2. If everything is contingent, then there was a time at which nothing existed (from 1).\(^\text{13}\)

3. No thing can come from nothing.\(^\text{14}\)
   Therefore,

4. If everything is contingent, then there is nothing (from 2 and 3).
   Therefore,

5. It is not the case that there is nothing.
   Therefore,

6. It is not the case that everything is contingent (from 4 and 5, modus tollens).
   Therefore,

7. At least one thing is necessary (from 6).\(^\text{15}\)

8. The cause of a necessary thing is either outside itself or not outside itself.

9. Not every necessary thing has a cause that is outside itself.\(^\text{16}\)
   Therefore,

10. At least one necessary thing causes itself (from 7, 8, and 9).
   Therefore,

11. God exists (from 10).\(^\text{17}\)

Mackie, who is an atheist, says that “the greatest weakness of this otherwise attractive argument is that some reason is required for making God the one exception to the supposed need for something else to depend on: why should God, rather than anything else, be taken as the only satisfactory termination of the regress?”\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{13}\) “[There might be a series of things, each of which was impermanent and perished after a finite period, but whose periods of existence overlapped so that there never was a time when there was nothing.” Ibid., 89.

\(^{14}\) “[W]e can certainly conceive an uncaused beginning-to-be of an object. . . . Still, this principle has some plausibility, in that it is constantly confirmed in our experience.” Ibid.

\(^{15}\) This ends the “first stage” of the argument. See ibid. Note that the “argument” is really a series of arguments linked together in the form of a chain. This means that there are propositions that serve as conclusions relative to one set of propositions and as premises relative to another set. There is nothing mysterious about this. A given person can be a child relative to X and a parent relative to Y. But just as no person is both parent and child of the same person, no proposition is both conclusion and premise relative to the same set of propositions. In the case of arguments, if any argument in the series (chain) is unsound, then the series (chain) is unsound. So if either “stage” of Aquinas’s argument is unsound, his argument is unsound.

\(^{16}\) “Aquinas (both here and in the first way) has simply begged the question against an infinite regress of causes.” Mackie, *Miracle of Theism*, 90.

\(^{17}\) “As it stands, . . . the argument doesn’t establish God’s existence—that the necessary cause of contingent being is a maximally perfect personal agent.” Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*, 47 (italics in original).

\(^{18}\) Mackie, *Miracle of Theism*, 92.
Please keep the following in mind as you study this argument. First, from the fact that this is an unsound argument (assuming it is), it does not follow that the conclusion is false—i.e., that God does not exist. All sound arguments have true conclusions (do you see why? If not, reread note 8), but not all unsound arguments have false conclusions. Second, even if this token of the cosmological argument is unsound, it does not follow that all other tokens of the type are unsound. As I said at the outset, one must examine each token to determine whether it is sound. It may be that the problems that afflict Aquinas’s third way are peculiar to it rather than inherent in the type.