

CLASSIC PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

TWELFTH EDITION

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Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 07458

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Classic philosophical questions / edited by James A. Gould, Robert J. Mulvaney.—12th ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-13-194961-6

1. Philosophy—Introductions. 2. Philosophy. I. Gould, James A., II. Mulvaney, Robert J.

BD21.C594 2007

100—dc22

2005034623

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Full-Service Project Management: Penny Walker/TechBooks/GTS

Printer/Binder: The Courier Companies

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
ISBN 0-13-194961-6

Can We Prove That God Exists?

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The Cosmological Argument

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), born in Roccasicca (lower Italy), received his education at the Monte Cassino Abbey and in Naples, Cologne, and Paris; he taught theology in Paris, Rome, and other cities. He is generally regarded as the greatest of the Scholastic theologians. His two major works are Summa Theologica and Summa Contra Gentiles, which respectively synthesized Aristotelian and Christian doctrines and attempted to answer the objections against Catholicism.

St. Anselm's line of argument can be described as nonexperiential, or *a priori* in character. But many philosophers have claimed that arguments for existence must be "empirical," or based on experience. The proof of God's existence that argues on the basis of many experiences is called the *cosmological* or *first cause* argument. This argues that all things in the world must have had a cause, and since there cannot be an infinity of causes, there must be a first cause, which is God. St. Thomas Aquinas is most famous for arguing in this manner. In the following essays, he argues that five arguments (or "ways") can be used to demonstrate the existence of God. The first four of these arguments take the basic form of causal argumentation. Some things in the world are caused, but nothing can be caused unless caused by something else. There must then be either an infinite series of causes or a first uncaused cause. Since the infinite series is impossible, the only alternative is a first cause, itself uncaused, which we commonly call God.

We begin this section with St. Thomas's critique of the ontological argument, a more formal and precise statement of Gaunilo's objection made to St. Anselm (see page 68 above). It is clear that St. Thomas thinks that some arguments for God's existence are sound and others are unsound. A critical approach of this kind shows the

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difference between a philosophical approach to these issues and an apologetic one. St. Thomas is interested in the cogency of arguments, not in making converts or proselytizing.

Finally, you will notice that Aquinas structures his argument by introducing two “objections” to the existence of God and answering them at the end of his essay. Note that the first of these objections is the problem of evil, which we shall consider in Readings 11 and 12. And finally, the fifth “way” or argument, although drawn from experience, is properly a different kind of argument from the others. It is really a form of the “teleological” argument, which we shall consider next.

To Study

1. What does Aquinas mean by claiming that the existence of God is “self-evident in itself, though not to us?”
2. State the two objections Aquinas gives that are used to deny God’s existence.
3. What are the five ways in which Aquinas claims that the existence of God can be proven? Construct three of the arguments in logical form.
4. What are Aquinas’s replies to the objections stated at the beginning of the discussion?

WHETHER THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IS SELF-EVIDENT?

Objection 1. It seems that the existence of God is self-evident. For those things are said to be self-evident to us the knowledge of which exists naturally in us, as we can see in regard to first principles. But as Damascene says, *the knowledge of God is naturally implanted in all*. Therefore the existence of God is self-evident.

Obj. 2. Further, those things are said to be self-evident which are known as soon as the terms are known, which the Philosopher says is true of the first principles of demonstration. Thus, when the nature of a whole and of a part is known, it is at once recognized that every whole is greater than its part. But as soon as the signification of the name *God* is understood, it is at once seen that God exists. For by this name is signified that thing than which nothing greater can be conceived. But that which exists actually and mentally is greater than that which exists only mentally. Therefore, since as soon as the name *God* is understood it exists mentally, it also follows that it exists actually. Therefore the proposition *God exists* is self-evident.

Obj. 3. Further, the existence of truth is self-evident. For whoever denies the existence of truth grants that truth does not exist: and, if truth does not exist, then the proposition *Truth does not exist* is true: and if there is anything true, there must be truth. But God is truth itself: *I am the way, the truth, and the life* (*Jo.* xiv. 6). Therefore *God exists* is self-evident.

On the contrary, No one can mentally admit the opposite of what is self-evident, as the Philosopher states concerning the first principles of demonstration.

But the opposite of the proposition *God is* can be mentally admitted: *The fool said in his heart, There is no God* (Ps. lii. 1). Therefore, that God exists is not self-evident.

I answer that, A thing can be self-evident in either of two ways: on the one hand, self-evident in itself, though not to us; on the other, self-evident in itself, and to us. A proposition is self-evident because the predicate is included in the essence of the subject: e.g., *Man is an animal*, for animal is contained in the essence of man. If, therefore, the essence of the predicate and subject be known to all, the proposition will be self-evident to all; as is clear with regard to the first principles of demonstration, the terms of which are certain common notions that no one is ignorant of, such as being and non-being, whole and part, and the like. If, however, there are some to whom the essence of the predicate and subject is unknown, the proposition will be self-evident in itself, but not to those who do not know the meaning of the predicate and subject of the proposition. Therefore, it happens, as Boethius says, that there are some notions of the mind which are common and self-evident only to the learned, as that incorporeal substances are not in space. Therefore I say that this proposition, *God exists*, of itself is self-evident, for the predicate is the same as the subject, because God is His own existence as will be hereafter shown. Now because we do not know the essence of God, the proposition is not self-evident to us, but needs to be demonstrated by things that are more known to us, though less known in their nature—namely, by His effects.

Reply Obj. 1. To know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature, inasmuch as God is man's beatitude. For man naturally desires happiness, and what is naturally desired by man is naturally known by him. This, however, is not to know absolutely that God exists; just as to know that someone is approaching is not the same as to know that Peter is approaching, even though it is Peter who is approaching; for there are many who imagine that man's perfect good, which is happiness, consists in riches, and others in pleasures, and others in something else.

Reply Obj. 2. Perhaps not everyone who hears this name *God* understands it to signify something than which nothing greater can be thought, seeing that some have believed God to be a body. Yet, granted that everyone understands that by this name *God* is signified something than which nothing greater can be thought, nevertheless, it does not therefore follow that he understands that what the name signifies exists actually, but only that it exists mentally. Nor can it be argued that it actually exists, unless it be admitted that there actually exists something than which nothing greater can be thought; and this precisely is not admitted by those who hold that God does not exist.

Reply Obj. 3. The existence of truth in general is self-evident, but the existence of a Primal Truth is not self-evident to us.

WHETHER GOD EXISTS?

Objection 1. It seems that God does not exist; because if one of two contraries be infinite, the other would be altogether destroyed. But the name *God* means that He

is infinite goodness. If, therefore, God existed, there would be no evil discoverable; but there is evil in the world. Therefore God does not exist.

Obj. 2. Further, it is superfluous to suppose that what can be accounted for by a few principles has been produced by many. But it seems that everything we see in the world can be accounted for by other principles, supposing God did not exist. For all natural things can be reduced to one principle, which is nature; and all voluntary things can be reduced to one principle, which is human reason or will. Therefore there is no need to suppose God's existence.

On the Contrary, It is said in the person of God: *I am Who am* (Exod. iii. 14).

I answer that, The existence of God can be proved in five ways.

The first and more manifest way is the argument from motion. It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is moved is moved by another, for nothing can be moved except it is in potentiality to that towards which it is moved; whereas a thing moves inasmuch as it is in the act. For motion is nothing else than the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality. But nothing can be reduced from potentiality to actuality, except by something in a state of actuality. Thus that which is actually hot, as fire, makes wood, which is potentially hot, to be actually hot, and thereby moves and changes it. Now it is not possible that the same thing should be at once in actuality and potentiality in the same respect, but only in different respects. For what is actually hot cannot simultaneously be potentially hot; but it is simultaneously potentially cold. It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved, *i.e.*, that it should move itself. Therefore, whatever is moved must be moved by another. If that by which it is moved be itself moved, then this also must needs be moved by another, and that by another again. But this cannot go on to infinity because then there would be no first mover, and, consequently, no other mover, seeing that subsequent movers move only inasmuch as they are moved by the first mover; as the staff moves only because it is moved by the hand. Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, moved by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

The second way is from the nature of efficient cause.¹ In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, 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, whether the intermediate cause be several, or one only. 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 efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

¹ *Efficient cause:* The entity which immediately brings the effect, such as one billiard ball striking another. [ED.]

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 be corrupted, and consequently, it is possible for them to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which cannot-be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything cannot-be, then at one time there was nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist begins to exist only through 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 admit 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.

The fourth way is taken from the gradation to be found in things. Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like. But *more* and *less* are predicated of different things according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best, something noblest, and, consequently, something which is most being, for those things that are greatest in truth are greatest in being, as it is written in [Aristotle's] *Metaphysics* ii. Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus, as fire, which is the maximum of heat, is the cause of all hot things, as is said in the same book. Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.

The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world. We see that things which lack knowledge, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result. Hence it is plain that they achieve their end, not fortuitously, but designedly. Now whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is directed by the archer. Therefore some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end: and this being we call God.

Reply Obj. 1. As Augustine says: *Since God is the highest good, He would not allow any evil to exist in His works; unless His omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil.* This is part of the infinite goodness of God, that He should allow evil to exist, and out of it produce good.

Reply Obj. 2. Since nature works for a determinate end under the direction of a higher agent, whatever is done by nature must be traced back to God as to its first cause. So likewise whatever is done voluntarily must be traced back to some higher

cause other than human reason and will, since these can change and fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle as has been shown.


To Think About




1. "A church is a community that keeps alive the dangerous memories of its classics. The memory of Jesus, for example, disconcerts all present reality, including that of the church, because He essentially afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted. So theology makes religious institutions aware of their true spiritual resources and of their explicitly religious character. And it makes the wider culture aware of the religious dimensions of life by seeking better ways to ask *the* religious questions. This is a dangerous occupation. . . . This voice threatens those in the establishment who want religion to endorse comfortable, white, middle-class values. That is also a factor working against one person's assuming a truly prophetic role in our culture." **Paul Tillich**
2. "Monotheism seems to me to be quite strongly associated, as both cause and effect, with intolerance." **George Santayana**
3. "Protestantism acknowledges the paradox that sin is necessary because of the human condition, but unnecessary if man remains strong in his faith in God." **Arthur Smith**
4. "Our religions—with their Crusades, their crucifixions, and their bloodshed of various sorts (depending on which religion you happen to be concerned with)—find their own excuses for having this kind of relationship to cruelty that kids have when they're looking at a scene that they want to see but don't want to see, so they put their hands over their eyes and then they spread their fingers, in order to see and yet not see the horror." **Arnold Toynbee**
5. "Modern man is, as Sartre has presented him to us, man torn from his traditional group, traditional religion, his traditional metaphysics or ethic. He is the spiritually unaccommodated man, and nothing is impermissible for him. He must decide himself just what it is he forbids himself to do." **Phillip Thody**
6. ". . . those in whom the sense of dread is so acute that they turn to extreme and doomed commitments; I know something about dread myself, and appreciate the elaborate systems with which some people manage to fill the void, appreciate all the opiates of the people, whether they are as accessible as alcohol and heroin and promiscuity or as hard to come by as faith in God or History." **Joan Didion**, in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*
7. "Primitive religion is not believed. It is danced." **Arthur Darby Nock**
8. "[W]e turn our attention to the psychical origin of religious ideas. These, which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of

thinking: they are illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—for protection through love—which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfilment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfilments shall take place. Answers to the riddles that tempt the curiosity of man, such as how the universe began or what the relation is between body and mind, are developed in conformity with the underlying assumptions of this system.”

Sigmund Freud

9. “After Russell, many philosophers in the analytic tradition began to argue that the standards of rationality in science are no more than human habits which are open to empirical and historical study like any other natural phenomena; and these habits could have no ultimate and permanent justification in timeless philosophy.”

Unknown

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