

# Does God Exist?

Is there really a God or is such belief a delusion? Can you objectively prove God exists or is it just a matter of personal opinion? Questions like these are not new. People have been asking them for centuries, even Christians. The First Vatican Council (1870) gave assurance that a positive answer was possible when it proclaimed that the existence of God can be known with certainty by the use of human reason reflecting on created things. In this the Council was simply restating Saint Paul: *"For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them since God Himself has made it plain. Ever since God created the world His everlasting power and deity, however, invisible, have been there for the mind to see in the things He has made"* (Romans 1:19-20).

The most famous rational arguments for the existence of God were articulated by Saint Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. While sound philosophical arguments their abstract nature is hard to grasp and so leaves many unconvinced. This is *not* because they are logically weak, just psychologically and spiritually weak. They are psychologically weak because they do not emotionally satisfy or give one a permanent sense of security from doubt. They are spiritually weak because they do not convert the heart from pride to humility. These types of needs must be met by means other than simply the use of reason. They are answered through sincere prayer and reflection, humbly seeking after the grace of God for conversion and the certitude of faith.

Here we shall present two of the famous five "ways" or rational proofs given by Saint Thomas in his *Summa Theologiae* for God's existence. They are the second and third of Saint Thomas' proofs, often called the arguments from causality and contingency. The presentation made here is adapted from Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli's book *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (InterVarsity Press, 1994). These arguments are basically very simple, natural, intuitive, and commonsensical. We have to become clever and complex in order to doubt or dispute them. They are based on an instinct of the mind that we all share. The instinct says *everything needs an explanation*. Nothing *just is* without a reason *why it is*. Everything that is has some adequate or sufficient reason why it is. We look for causes of things. No one believes in the "pop theory" - that things just "pop" into existence for no reason at all.

First let us look at the argument from causality. The whole universe is a vast, interlocking chain of things that come into existence. My parents caused me, my grandparents them, etc. But it is not that simple. A multitude of events, each the cause of some other - from the Big Bang, to the cooling of the galaxies, to the development of the protein molecule, to the marriages of my ancestors - made me and everything else possible. The universe is a vast and complex chain of causes.

But does the universe as a whole have a cause: A *first cause* that is uncaused in itself and so transcends the whole chain of caused beings? If not we have a dilemma: An infinite regression of causes, with each particular thing explained in the short run but nothing explained in the long run. If there is no first cause then the universe is like a great chain

with many links, each held up by the link above it but the whole chain held up by nothing. Serious reflection indicates this is impossible.

Here is an analogy to help make the dilemma clearer. Suppose I tell you there is a book that explains everything you want explained. You want to read that book and ask whether I have it? I say "No, I have to borrow it from my sister." Does she have it? No, she has to get it from a neighbour, who has to get it from his teacher, who has to get it from etc., *ad infinitum*. If no one actually has the book himself then you will never get it. You will only get the book if someone actually has it and does not have to borrow it.

Existence is like the book. Existence is handed down the chain of causes, from cause to effect. If there is no First Cause, no being that has existence by its own nature and does not have to borrow it from something else then the gift of existence can never be passed down the chain to others and no one will ever get it. We exist. Therefore, we got the gift of existence from our causes. Therefore there must necessarily be a First Cause of existence. This First Cause we call God.

Let us now state the closely related argument from contingency. Every being that exists either exists by itself (by its own nature) or it does not exist by itself. If it exists by its own nature then by definition it exists necessarily and eternally, and explains itself. It cannot not exist, just as a triangle cannot not have three sides. If on the other hand a being exists but not by its own nature then it needs a cause, a reason outside itself for its existence. Because it does not explain itself something else must explain it. Beings whose existence (nature) does not contain the reason for their existence, beings that need causes, are called contingent, or dependent beings. Our study and reflection on the nature of the universe shows that it contains only contingent beings. God would be the only necessary being if He existed. Does He? Does a necessary being exist? Here is the proof that He does. Dependent beings cannot cause themselves. They are dependent on their cause. If there is no independent being then the whole chain of dependent beings is dependent on nothing and could not exist. But they do exist. Therefore there must be an independent being. This independent, or self-sufficient, or Necessary Being we call God.

This is tight logic and many have tried to squirm out of it. Here are several common objections:

- 1. The argument is self-contradictory. One of the premises is that everything needs a cause but the conclusion is something (God) that does not need a cause. The child's question "Who made God?" is valid in this regard. Thus objects Bertrand Russell.*

The answer to this objection is very simple. The argument presented does not use the premise that everything needs a cause. Everything that has a beginning, everything that changes, everything dependent, everything imperfect, needs a cause. Only finite, contingent things - that have limits and need not exist - need a cause. That is, all material things (i.e. the physical universe). God (as First Cause) is the logically necessary explanation for the existence of finite and contingent beings, and therefore infinite and

necessary in Himself. He is the infinite cause of finite things. We cannot ask, "Who caused God?" because He is the First Cause of all that exists and you cannot go back any further than first. He is the effect of nothing but the cause of everything finite. The uncreated Creator is not a created creature.

Let us state the problem with this objection another way that may make its fallacious nature more clear. In the manner of how things exist there are only three possibilities. Something can be self-caused, caused by another, or uncaused. Self-caused is impossible with respect to existence: Neither we or any other thing can bring itself into existence. Uncaused would mean we are necessary, eternal, infinite beings - which we obviously are not. We are caused by another. If we, all of us and all other material things in the universe, are caused by another what must that other be? Obviously it must be uncaused. Otherwise we are back to infinite regression. God is the uncaused cause of all finite beings.

*2. Why can there not be an infinite regress with no first cause? There can be an infinite number series in mathematics. Why can time not be like that, with no highest number negatively (no first moment in the past) and no highest number positively (no last moment in the future)?\**

The answer to this objection is that real beings are not like numbers - they take up real space and use up real time. Abstract mathematical infinities are possible. For example, mathematically there are an infinite number of points on a line between point A and B, no matter how short or long the line may be. But you cannot put an infinite number of concrete, real things between any two objects - no matter how thin the things nor how far apart the two objects. Space is taken up.

The same is true of time. It is impossible to pass through an infinite series of moments. You might *imagine* passing through an infinite number of dimensionless points on a line but time is not dimensionless or imaginary. It is real and each moment that passes "uses up" measurable time that we cannot go back to. If the past were infinite (i.e. "If the universe had always existed without a beginning") then we could never have passed through time to get to today. If the past is an infinite series of moments, and right now is where the series stops, then we would have passed through an infinite series and that is self-contradictory. Real time is not abstract like numbers. It moves in one direction only: From past to future. And the future is caused by what passes before it. Positive numbers are not caused by negative numbers.

*3. The concept of cause is ambiguous and, as commonly used, not applicable beyond the physical universe. Thus objects David Hume.*

It is true the concept of causality is not used univocally in all instances. This is not because it is ambiguous but because it is analogous. That is, it differs somewhat, but not completely, from one example to another. The way an author conceives a book in his mind is not the same as the way a woman conceives a child in her body but we call both causes. The objection is right to the point out that we do not fully understand how God causes

the universe as well as we understand how parents cause children or clouds cause rain. But the term remains meaningful. A cause is the *sine qua non* (thing without which you cannot have) for an effect. If no cause then no effect. If no First Cause then no secondary causes. If no God then no universe.

*4. The proof does not bring us to a belief in the Christian God but only an intellectual acknowledgement of some vague First Cause or other. Thus complains Blaise Pascal.*

Pascal wanted people to believe in the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, not the God of philosophers and scholars." It is true that the proofs of Saint Thomas do not confirm everything Christians mean by God. But they do prove the existence of a transcendent, uncaused, eternal, infinite, all-perfect, intelligent, creative being. That certainly sounds more like God than superman or some impersonal "force"! It is a pretty big slice of God. Much more than any atheist can digest. Saint Thomas never meant the proofs to be a substitute for faith. They were meant only as preambles to faith, overcoming intellectual difficulties that may impede one's receptivity to God's revelation.

*5. God is nothing but a psychological crutch, a wish, a projection of what we hope is true. Thus objects Sigmund Freud.*

Notice how this statement completely avoids any rational argument for the existence of God and redirects us instead to a psychological claim about believers. In this regard it is an *ad hominem* argument - an attack on the believing person rather than a refutation of the argument presented for belief. Thus it is a fallacious argument.

Even if taken seriously it is based on a false assumption. How can anyone know that God is "nothing but" a projection unless one had "more than" knowledge? In other words, this argument assumes that our consciousness directly perceives the limits of reality; that there can be nothing beyond our consciousness. But to know that there is nothing beyond that limit is to go beyond that limit! It is like saying that nothing exists outside of our minds. But to make this claim a person must go outside the boundaries of his mind to affirm it. It contradicts and thus defeats itself.

Second, because people seek and hope in God does not in itself make Him a wish-projection. Such a real need, it can be argued, is likely based on a real object. In fact the believer would say God, as our Creator, loves us and has designed us to seek and love Him in return. Why do we say a real need is likely based on a real object? Based on our human experience. We hunger for food, we thirst for drink, we pine for companionship, and we seek for understanding. These human needs are universal and are fulfilled by real objects. The belief in a supernatural entity, beyond us and yet needed by us, is virtually universal to humanity both historically and geographically. Only a relatively few people in history have denied this need. With all other deep felt universal human needs corresponding to real objects why not this one? The fact that this need is not a physical or tangible one only strengthens the case for there being a real object of its desire. How else explain the existence of the need in the first place?

*\*Saint Thomas Aquinas' argument from contingency applies even if the universe had no beginning (i.e. is eternal). It would still have to be sustained in being at any particular moment by God. According to Aquinas, a contingent universe cannot, at any particular moment, be causing itself. For even if the succession of causes is infinite, the whole chain still requires a cause. To understand this, suppose there exists a causal chain of infinite contingent beings. If one asks the question, "Why are there any contingent beings at all?", it would not help to be told that "There are contingent beings because other contingent beings caused them." That answer would just presuppose additional contingent beings. An adequate explanation of why contingent beings exist in the first place would invoke a different sort of being, a necessary being that is not contingent. So even if causes and effects in the universe were infinite, they would still, at any particular moment, be contingent and thus would have to be held in existence by a non-contingent or necessary being.*