

1.3

Arguments for the existence of God

The Cosmological Argument

This chapter will cover:

- Aquinas' Way 3: The argument from contingency and necessity
- Criticisms from Hume and Russell

Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* starts with the following anecdote:

A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: 'What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.' The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, 'What is the tortoise standing on?' 'You're very clever, young man, very clever', said the old lady. 'But it's turtles all the way down!' [Note 1]

You will need to consider six things for this section

- 1 The basis of Aquinas' argument in observation.
- 2 Aquinas' Way 3: The argument from contingency and necessity.
- 3 Criticisms from Hume and Russell.
- 4 The strengths and weaknesses of Aquinas' argument.
- 5 The status of Aquinas' argument as a 'proof'.
- 6 The value of Aquinas' argument for religious faith.

Aquinas' Cosmological Argument appears in the first three of his five 'Ways' for proving the existence of God, in his *Summa Theologica*, which is available online, for example, at: <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/>

Way 1 is his argument from motion and change, and Way 2 is his argument from causation. You need to study only Way 3, the argument from contingency and necessity. The three arguments are interrelated, but Way 3 will give you a good understanding of the trend of Aquinas' argument.

The basis of Aquinas' argument in observation



▲ The Andromeda Galaxy

Part of our undoubted fascination with the Andromeda Galaxy lies in the fact that it is the nearest major galaxy to the Milky Way (about 2.5 million light years away). It is the largest in the local group of galaxies, and contains over 1 trillion stars. Moreover Andromeda is on a collision course with the Milky Way, at an approach speed of around 68 miles per second, so the two galaxies are expected to collide in about 4 billion years. The result is likely to be a giant elliptical galaxy. Whether or not the Earth could survive such an event is unknown, but at least we have plenty of time to think about it.

It is useful to bear in mind here that when we observe the Andromeda Galaxy, what we observe is 2.5 million years in the past, since the photon stream reaching our eyes takes that long to get here. What we see when we observe the universe, then, is an information stream stemming directly from the Big Bang. This is the way the biophysicist Werner Loewenstein puts it:

So heaven's vault is crisscrossed with information arrows. The arrows hailing from out there are long – some have been on the fly for nearly 14 billion years. Those are the lines of information issuing from the primordial kernel, the initial state of information in the universe. Eventually that initial state led, in the course of the universe's expansion, to the condensation of matter locally and the formation of galaxies ... [and] as those vast structures evolved, more and more structures – stars, planets, moons, etc. – formed inside them.

From our perch in the universe, we ordinarily get to glimpse only segments of the arrows – local arrowlets, we might say. We therefore easily lose sight of the continuity. But as we wing ourselves high enough, we see that those arrowlets get handed down from system to system: from galaxy to stars to planets ... to us. [Note 2]

Key terms

cosmos 'The cosmos' usually refers to this space-time universe. The study of the universe is called cosmology.

contingent contingent beings or things are dependent for their existence on other beings or things. In the Cosmological Argument, contingency implies the existence of something necessary – God.

It is this same information stream from the Big Bang that fascinated Aquinas as fascinates us now. Aquinas of course knew nothing of the Big Bang, but his observation of the **cosmos** convinced him that its basic processes did not explain themselves. Galaxies, stars, planets, moons: all things in the universe move and are changed, and those changes are the result of cause and effect.

From here we can make the following points about the basis of Way 3 in observation:

- 1 As with Paley's Design Argument, Aquinas' Third Way is a *posteriori* and inductive, so it is based in observation, in Aquinas' case the observation that the universe exists. I am currently looking at a cup of tea currently resting on the table in front of me, and I can touch the mug, taste the tea, see its colour, hear the gurgle of the liquid and smell its aroma; so my senses come together to verify what I observe. The same is true of the universe: sense experience can verify its existence and its properties.
- 2 Way 3 is the observation that all things that we see in the universe are **contingent**: they are moved, changed and caused; they need not exist, but they do. This applies to galaxies, stars, planets, people and trees;

in fact – to everything. Even galaxies can collide, with immeasurable further consequences and changes. Stars can explode and create new stars from their debris. All the heavy elements come from such explosions, including those which make up your body. Metal rots, even stainless steel. All living things die and become compost for new life. Since the first microsecond of the Big Bang, the universe as a whole has been in a relentless process of expansion and change. Nothing stays the same – everything is contingent.

- 3 From this observation – that all things are contingent – Aquinas concluded that something must exist necessarily. If everything we observe is contingent, then the explanation for the existence of the universe would seem to lie outside it. There seems to be nothing in what we observe that can explain why contingent things exist. The Cosmological Argument therefore deduces from this that this external reason must itself be necessary.

Aquinas' Way 3: The argument from contingency and necessity

Thomas Aquinas 1225–1274

Aquinas was descended from the Italian aristocracy and was a member of a Roman Catholic religious order called the Dominicans. He had an astonishing intellect and is widely considered as the greatest theologian and philosopher in the Roman Catholic tradition. Tradition has it that shortly before his death he had a religious experience, after which he ceased to write, since what he previously regarded as works of learning were nothing but 'straw' by comparison with one such experience. He was made a saint in 1323CE.



The text of Aquinas' third way

In Aquinas' third way, he uses the word 'being' to mean both 'beings' (as in human beings) and things – in other words, anything that exists. Where he talks about things that 'are possible to be and not to be', he means contingent things.

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, 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.

▲ Aquinas: *Summa Theologica* (1265–1274) [Note 3]

The argument in the form it is expressed today

- P1** Everything can exist or not-exist: that is, everything in the natural world is contingent.
- P2** If everything is contingent, then at some time there was nothing, because there must have been a time when nothing had begun to exist.
- P3** If there was once nothing, then nothing could have come from nothing.
- C1** Therefore something must exist necessarily, otherwise nothing would now exist, which is absurd.
- P4** Everything necessary must either be caused or uncaused.
- P5** But the series of necessary beings cannot be infinite, or there would be no explanation of that series.
- C2** Therefore, there must be some uncaused being which exists of its own necessity.
- C3** And by this, we all understand God.

Explanation of the argument

The argument has two parts:

In **P1–P3**, the core of the argument stems from **P2**, that: ‘If everything is contingent, then at some time there was nothing.’ Aquinas is claiming that all contingent beings / things have a finite lifespan: there is no contingent being that is everlasting, (Note 4) so there must have been a time when nothing existed. If there was a time when nothing existed, then nothing would now exist, because *ex nihilo nihil fit* – ‘out of nothing nothing can come’. That is absurd, because vast numbers of contingent beings / things now exist.

C1: So something must exist necessarily.

In **P4–P5**, Aquinas deals with the possibility that there might be an infinite series of *caused* necessary beings. That would also be absurd, because then there would be no ultimate cause of the series.

C2: So there must be an ‘uncaused’ necessary being who sustains all caused necessary beings and all contingent beings.

C3: This is God.

The difference between a caused necessary being and an uncaused necessary being is that a caused necessary being receives both its necessity and its existence from something else, that is, from an uncaused necessary being (God). An uncaused necessary being contains the reason for its own existence, in that its essence is existence. By ‘caused necessary beings’, Aquinas is thinking, for example, of angels and of human souls. He would also be prepared to admit that the universe itself is a ‘caused’ necessary being, that is, at its most basic level matter may exist necessarily.

Criticisms from Hume and Russell

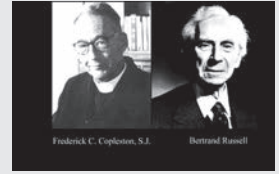
F.C. Copleston 1907–1994 and Bertrand Russell 1872–1970

Bertrand Russell dismissed Aquinas as a man possessing little of the true philosophic spirit, who before he even begins to philosophise already knows he truth, because:

'... it is declared in his catholic faith.' [Note 5]

Russell's best known critique of Aquinas' Cosmological Argument comes in his 1948 radio debate with the Jesuit priest F.C. ('Freddy') Copleston, during which Russell is very cordial towards Copleston, although Russell's conviction that religion is a generally harmful superstition is never far from the surface.

Hume and Russell have very similar criticisms of the Cosmological Argument, which in Russell's case is probably to be expected, since on occasion his ideas depend heavily on Hume.



▲ F.C. Copleston (left) and Bertrand Russell

Criticism 1: Russell argues that Way 3 commits the fallacy of composition

Key terms

fallacy A fallacy is a failure in reasoning which makes an argument invalid.

fallacy of composition This is the fallacy of inferring that something is true of the whole from the fact that it is true of part of the whole, or of every part of the whole. Russell argues that Aquinas' third way commits the fallacy of composition.

A **fallacy** is a failure in reasoning which makes an argument invalid. The '**fallacy of composition**' is the fallacy of inferring that something is true of the whole from the fact that it is true of part of the whole, or of every part of the whole.

A simple example of the fallacy of composition is:

- 1 Hydrogen is not wet; oxygen is not wet.
- 2 Therefore water (H₂O) is not wet.

This is clearly a fallacious argument! It assumes that what is true of the parts of water (hydrogen and oxygen) is true of water as a whole.

Russell's best known example of the fallacy of composition comes in his 1948 radio debate referred to above, where he says to Copleston:

'I can illustrate what seems to me your fallacy. Every man who exists has a mother, and it seems to me your argument is that therefore the human race must have a mother, but obviously the human race hasn't a mother – that's a different logical sphere.' [Note 6]

Russell is aiming his criticism mainly at Aquinas and aims it particularly against Way 2, the argument from causation, in which Aquinas argues:

- from 1 Every single event in the universe has a cause.
to 2 The universe as a whole has a cause.

Copleston claims that Aquinas is right to argue this way, but Russell rejects it completely: there is no reason why we should not argue:

- from 1 Every single event in the universe has a cause.
to 2 The universe itself is uncaused.

What Russell says about Aquinas' Way 2 applies also to Way 3.

In Way 3, Aquinas argues:

from 1 Every thing in the universe is contingent.

to 2 The universe as a whole is contingent.

For Russell, this commits the fallacy of composition, because we can claim that:

- 1 Every thing in the universe is contingent.
- 2 But the universe as a whole is necessary.

So who is right, Aquinas and Copleston, or Russell?

The following argument suggests that Aquinas and Copleston 'could' be right. It is taken from the online resource the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. ([Note 7](#))

- Russell is correct that arguments from the part to the whole can commit the fallacy of composition. For example:
Argument 1: 'All the bricks in the wall are small, so the wall is small.'
Argument 1 is clearly fallacious.
- But this does not apply to all arguments from the parts to the whole. For example:
Argument 2: 'The wall is built of bricks, so the wall is brick.'
Argument 2 is clearly not fallacious, because here the whole (the wall) has the same quality as the parts (the bricks).
- Bruce Reichenbach ([Note 8](#)) suggests that Way 3 resembles Argument 2, so is not fallacious. Compare the form of Argument 2 and Way 3.

Argument 2	Way 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The wall is built from bricks. ● So the wall is brick. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The universe is built from contingent things. ● So the universe is contingent.

If you check lines **P1–P3** in Way 3, you'll see the point.

- On this reading, then, Way 3 does not commit the fallacy of composition. If the things that make up the universe can cease to exist, then the universe, which is no more and no less than the sum total of its parts, can also cease to exist. What can cease to exist requires an explanation beyond itself. A necessary being beyond the universe is a good explanation.

As in many philosophical arguments, however, either Russell or Aquinas / Copleston could be right. We do not know enough about the universe to decide one way or the other. What is true is that it is not necessarily the case that Way 3 commits the fallacy of composition.

Criticism 2: Hume and Russell both reject the claim that any being can be necessary

The following gives Hume's version of the criticism. ([Note 9](#)) (For those who want to read it, Russell's version can be read in the radio debate with Copleston.)

- Any being that exists can also not exist.
- There is no contradiction in thinking that any being does not exist.

- This is true of God also, because there is no contradiction in saying, 'God does not exist'.
- So when Aquinas' Way 3 requires God to be a necessary being, this is false logic.

To be clear about this, Hume is assuming that where Aquinas in Way 3 argues that God is a necessary being, Aquinas means that God's existence is 'logically' necessary. You will remember that Hume has already rejected that claim in the Ontological Argument, so he thinks that Aquinas is making the same claim in his Cosmological Argument; so Hume now insists again that all statements about existence are 'synthetic' – they are based on sense experience, so they cannot be 'analytic' (they cannot be logically true). Whereas we have to think of $2 + 2$ being 4, because that is logically true, the mind never has to suppose that some object has to remain in existence, so the words 'necessary existence' have no meaning. So Hume holds that Way 3 is making the same mistake as the Ontological Argument. (Note 10)

To make Hume's point clear, consider the following statements:

- Unicorns exist
- Peter Pan exists
- Hume exists
- You exist
- God exists

None of these statements can ever be analytic (logically true). I can only know that they are true or false synthetically (by experience), if I happen to meet a unicorn, Peter Pan, Hume, you or God. All of these five statements are true or false depending on sense experience, including 'God exists'.

Reply to Hume (and Russell)

Aquinas' third way does not claim that 'God exists' is *logically* necessary – Aquinas in effect claims that God's existence is 'metaphysically' necessary, so Hume's objection fails.

When Aquinas talks about God as a necessary being in the Cosmological Argument, he is not talking about the logical necessity that we have just been looking at in the Ontological Argument. In fact, Aquinas specifically rejects the Ontological Argument as a logical proof of God, so he can hardly be thought to be introducing it (tongue in cheek) through the back door by way of the Cosmological Argument.

To unpack the idea of metaphysical necessity:

- **Metaphysical necessity** is a form of necessity that derives from the nature or *essence* of things.
- So claims about metaphysical necessity are claims about the way things 'really are'. For example, 'Whatever is water is H_2O ' seems to be a metaphysically necessary proposition, because whenever you find water it will be made up of molecules that each have 1 atom of oxygen and 2 atoms of hydrogen. That is the essence of water. It is what water really is.
- Next, compare these two propositions:
 - 1 All bachelors are unmarried males.
 - 2 Whatever is water, is H_2O .
 - Since we define as 'bachelor' as an 'unmarried male', then proposition 1 is logically true – it is true by definition.

Key term

metaphysical necessity A form of necessity that derives from the nature or essence of things. Aquinas' third way in effect holds that God has metaphysical necessity.

- With proposition **2**, however, ‘Whatever is water is H₂O’, is not logically true: rather it is just part of the way things ‘really are’. Water could have been some other compound, but in our experience it is not: it is always H₂O. So we can say that ‘Water is H₂O’ has metaphysical necessity.
- So, you should now be able to see that whereas the Ontological Argument is talking about God’s logical necessity, Aquinas in the Cosmological Argument is talking about God’s metaphysical necessity. Aquinas is claiming that:
 - 1** In our experience, everything is contingent.
 - 2** The existence of contingent things requires the existence of a being whose necessity is from itself and who causes the necessity in other (caused) necessary beings. This is God.

Note: Although this provides a clear answer to Hume, there is no guarantee that Aquinas is right. In particular, his casual claim at the end of Way 3, that the necessary being is God, is far from obvious. If you remember, we said much the same about the ‘designer’ in the Design Argument.

Criticism 3: Hume suggests that the universe itself may be a necessarily-existent being

Why may not the material universe be the necessarily-existent Being ...?
[Note 11]

You can see the force of Hume’s argument: if something has to be necessary, why can’t that be the matter which makes up the universe? Why does it have to be an unobservable God?

Reply to Hume

Aquinas had no problem with the idea that matter might exist necessarily, but for Aquinas, matter would be a caused necessary being (check **P4** in Way 3), and would still need God as an uncaused necessary being to explain its existence (line C2).

Who is right: Aquinas or Hume?

The Cosmological Argument is inductive, so like all inductive arguments it is based on probability. It depends which you think is the most probable explanation for the universe:

- 1** A necessarily existent mind.
- 2** Necessarily existent matter.

Those who prefer **1** are likely to believe that an all-powerful mind can explain the existence of matter better than matter can explain itself, so they will say that (God’s) mind creates matter.

Those who prefer **2** will point out that matter has produced minds such as ours, so matter creates minds.

In summary

Aquinas and Copleston can defend Way 3 against the attacks from Hume and Russell. We do not know enough about the universe to be sure one way or another.

The strengths and weaknesses of Aquinas' argument

In the previous section we have been looking at three alleged weaknesses of Aquinas' argument, and we have concluded that Aquinas' argument does not fail because of those objections. For those who accept the counter-arguments, then obviously those counter-arguments show the strengths of Aquinas' third way:

Suggested weakness	Counter-argument
1 Russell: Way 3 commits the fallacy of composition.	1 Not all such arguments are fallacious. Aquinas' argument is the 'brick and brick wall' kind that is not fallacious and might be right.
2 Hume and Russell: We cannot show that the existence of any being is logically necessary.	2 Way 3 is not talking about God's logical necessity: that would be the Ontological Argument. Way 3 is talking about God's metaphysical necessity and that is a powerful argument.
3 Russell: The universe itself may be the necessary being.	3 The case for necessarily-existing matter is no stronger than the case for a necessarily existing mind.

Remember, in this section that you should aim to talk about the strengths and weaknesses of the third way, and not of the complete argument.

Here are four further areas of discussion, using the same format as above.

Suggested weakness	Counter-argument
4 Russell (in the radio debate): We do not need to talk about a necessary being at all – the universe exists as an unexplainable 'brute fact'.	4 Science works on the assumption that there are no brute facts, otherwise science itself would not work. If things in the universe are not brute facts, why should the universe as a whole be a brute fact? Perhaps Russell is committing the fallacy of composition.
5 Why should there be just one necessary being? Why could there not be a group of necessary beings?	5 Aquinas admits that here could be any number of caused necessary beings, but unless we admit the existence of an uncaused necessary being, there is no explanation for the existence of caused necessary beings. (Bear in mind here that Aquinas is allowing for the possibility that, once created, the universe itself is a caused necessary being, along with angels, and human souls). All caused necessary beings are given their necessity, so the giver of that necessity must contain the reason for its own existence. In other words, God is his own existence. To try to go back any further than existence itself would be absurd.
6 Why can there not be an infinite regress of contingent beings, without any need for a first necessary being?	6a This would still not explain why there is something rather than nothing. b Moreover, although we can understand the idea of an infinite past sequence in mathematics (e.g. -1, -2, -3, -4, -5, etc. to infinity), we have no evidence that an infinite past sequence can exist in the real world.
7 Following on from 6 , some current cosmological theories suggest that the universe may exist eternally and uncaused, without the need for a necessary being.	7 Any such argument still leaves unanswered the question of why such a universe bothers to exist at all. We are still brought back to the idea of a necessary being who is the reason why the reality we experience is a reality in the first place. (You might like to look up Leibniz's 'Principle of Sufficient Reason' here). No scientific cosmological theories can explain why there is something rather than nothing, whereas the idea of God explains exactly that.

Key terms

infinite regress In the Cosmological Argument, this is an indefinite sequence of causes or beings which does not have a first member of the series.

principle of sufficient reason The doctrine that everything must have a reason or cause: every contingent fact about the universe must have an explanation.

The status of Aquinas' argument as a 'proof'

- 1 The third way is one part of an inductive argument for the existence of God, and as we have seen in connection with the Design Argument, inductive arguments deal in probabilities rather than proofs.

For most philosophers today, proof would need to be *a priori*, like the Ontological Argument, except that in the opinion of most people, the Ontological Argument is a failed proof.

- 2 However, there are reasons why we should accept a different idea of proof, namely proof based on overwhelming probability.

In an article written in 2005, which focuses largely on the Cosmological Argument, Gerry J. Hughes argues that as well as the proofs we use in logic and maths, for example, we do accept other kinds of proof based on what we can reasonably conclude about the real world.

Think for instance of proving that sub-atomic particles exist, on the basis of evidence and experiments. The theories in atomic physics might all be wrong, in the sense that there is nothing illogical, nothing contradictory in supposing that there are no such particles. But given the evidence we now have it [is] surely quite unreasonable to believe that they do not exist. [Note 12]

Key term

quark An elementary particle assumed to be one of the building blocks of matter.

To put that in slightly different terms, we have no direct observational evidence that **quarks** exist, since no one has seen an isolated quark, yet the indirect evidence for their existence is so overwhelming that it can be considered to be a proof. The 'Standard Model' of particle physics does not make sense without quarks, so they must exist in some manner.

In short, then, we have what amounts to a sufficient proof of the existence of unobservable entities – quarks – that it would be unreasonable to deny. The implications for the Cosmological Argument are obvious: God is an unobservable entity concerning whose existence it would be unreasonable to deny.

Hughes reduces the structure of the Cosmological Argument to four components:

- Nothing happens without some causal explanation.
- A satisfactory explanation cannot appeal to something which 'just happened' and was not caused. For example, a satisfactory explanation cannot appeal to 'brute facts'.
- The existence of the universe requires an explanation outside itself.
- It is reasonable to think of this 'transcendent' explanation as God.

The crucial line here is the second: Hughes asks what would be a 'satisfactory' explanation of the existence of the universe? It is logically possible, of course, that the universe exists as a brute fact, or that is uncaused, but Hughes suggests that this is about as unlikely as the sudden materialisation of pink sheep or tartan elephants. At this point, Hughes invokes Aquinas' third way:

The chain of explanations will be complete and satisfying only if in the end one reaches something which has not 'just happened', simply come into existence; in short, the chain will end when it reaches something which cannot not exist, that is to say, exists necessarily. In short, the explanation will stop when one gets to a Necessary Being. [Note 13]

What Hughes claims is simply that the argument is a proof as far as he is concerned, because the chain of reasoning for him means that no explanation will satisfy him apart from the existence of a necessary being. He does admit that he could not claim that somebody who disagreed with him was being unreasonable; moreover there would still be a lot of work to do to identify the necessary being with the God of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim tradition.

Hughes' article is short, eminently readable and easily accessible online (http://www.richmond-philosophy.net/rjp/back_issues/rjp9_hughes.pdf), it is recommended that you read it and reach your own conclusions concerning whether or not the third way can amount to a proof in the modified sense in which he uses the term.

3 Whatever conclusions you reached concerning Hughes' argument, it has to be said that the third way does not convince atheists, so it can hardly be a proof of God's existence that satisfies even the majority.

Perhaps now is the time to talk about R.M. Hare's concept of 'bliks', (Note 14) which is often brought up to settle some argument or another, although the usual result is to show that the argument cannot be resolved at all. According to Hare, who follows Hume here, a blik is a view of the world, and our blik governs what is, and what is not, an explanation. Moreover:

'... differences between bliks about the world cannot be settled by observation of what happens in the world'

and:

'... no proof could be given to make us adopt one blik rather than another ...' (Note 15)

Bliks can be sane or insane, rational or irrational; and sometimes we have no blik at all. An atheistic blik about the universe might be said, therefore, to be a rational blik that the universe has no external explanation, whereas a religious blik will generally include an equally rational belief in the necessary existence of God. As Hume might say, where you go from there is up to you (and your blik).

4 For believers today, the third way could give the support of reason and philosophy to what they already believe through faith. For someone who is convinced by faith that God exists, the third way supports this by offering a reasoned proof that God must exist as a necessary being.



The value of Aquinas' argument for religious faith

1 Some will argue that Aquinas' third way has value for religious faith because, as part of his Cosmological Argument, it shows faith to be reasonable. The Cosmological Argument is a reasonable hypothesis that the universe owes its existence and its nature to the existence of an uncaused necessary being. There are alternative explanations concerning the origin of the universe, but they have no more probability than the cosmological argument.

- 2 Those with religious faith can easily understand the evidence used by the third way, which is based on what we can observe. With the Cosmological Argument in general, we observe that the universe is in a constant state of motion and change and that events have causes. For the third way in particular, everything we see in the universe is contingent. Although Aquinas' arguments contain some difficult language, the concepts themselves, particularly that of God as a necessary being, are simple, and so can be understood by any believer.
- 3 Those with religious faith can see that the third way is supported by the Design Argument. The Design Argument is, in effect, a form of Cosmological Argument, since the appearance of design is another feature of the universe that we can all observe and understand.
- 4 It is not the case that all those who have faith in God will accept Aquinas' argument. They might consider that the argument is flawed in one or more ways. For example, Kant believed in God (although the nature of that belief evolved considerably as he got older), but you will remember that he rejected the Ontological Argument. He also argued that the idea of God as a necessary being, as in the third way, is dependent on the Ontological Argument, so he argued that if the Ontological Argument fails, then the Cosmological Argument must fail too. Equally, you will remember that Karl Barth rejected any attempts to prove God's existence, since he believed that God can be known only through Jesus Christ, as revealed in scripture.
- 5 For Aquinas, faith in God is supported by reason (hence the Five Ways), but he believed that faith does not come from reasoned arguments but through God's grace and by accepting the authority of Church doctrines. Aquinas held that knowledge of God comes from natural theology (what we can know by reason and observation) and by revelation (which we receive through scripture). Revelation is necessary, because we could never reason our way to doctrines like the Trinity and the virgin birth of Jesus. God grants people the light of faith to understand these doctrines, whereas natural theology needs only human intelligence.

Technical terms for Aquinas' third way

contingent contingent beings or things are dependent for their existence on other beings or things. In the Cosmological Argument, contingency implies the existence of something necessary – God.

cosmos 'The cosmos' usually refers to this space–time universe. The study of the universe is called cosmology.

fallacy A fallacy is a failure in reasoning which makes an argument invalid.

fallacy of composition This is the fallacy of inferring that something is true of the whole from the fact that it is true of part of the whole, or of every part of the whole. Russell argues that Aquinas' third way commits the fallacy of composition.

infinite regress In the Cosmological Argument, this is an indefinite sequence of causes or beings which does not have a first member of the series.

metaphysical necessity A form of necessity that derives from the nature or essence of things. Aquinas' third way in effect holds that God has metaphysical necessity.

principle of sufficient reason The doctrine that everything must have a reason or cause: every contingent fact about the universe must have an explanation. Leibniz used the principle in connection with his Cosmological Argument to ask, 'Why is there a universe at all, and why is it the way that it is?', from which he concluded that God must exist as a necessary being.

quark An elementary particle assumed to be one of the building blocks of matter.

Summary of Aquinas' Way 3

1 The basis of the argument in observation

As with Paley's Design Argument, Way 3 is a *posteriori* and inductive, so is based on observation. It is based on the particular observation that all things we see in the universe are contingent: they are moved, changed and caused. From the observation of contingency, Aquinas concluded that something must exist necessarily.

2 Aquinas' Way 3: The argument from contingency and necessity

The argument has two parts. In the first part, the core of the argument is that if everything is contingent, then at some time there was nothing. No contingent being is everlasting, so there must have been a time when nothing existed. If there was a time when nothing existed, then nothing would exist now, because 'out of nothing, nothing can come', but of course vast numbers of contingent things now exist. In the second part, Aquinas rejects the idea that there might be an infinite series of caused necessary beings. That would also be absurd, because then there would be no ultimate cause of the series. So there must be an 'uncaused' necessary being who sustains all caused necessary beings and all contingent beings. This is God.

3 Criticisms from Hume and Russell

Criticism 1: (Russell) – Way 3 commits the fallacy of composition.

This is the fallacy of inferring that something is true of the whole from the fact that it is true of part of the whole, or of every part of the whole. Russell aims this criticism at Way 2, but it also applies to Way 3, which goes from: 1 every thing in the universe is contingent; to 2 the universe as a whole is contingent. This is fallacious because we can claim that: 1 every thing in the universe is contingent; but 2 the universe as a whole is necessary. In defence of Way 3, Bruce Reichenbach rejects this claim on the grounds that Way 3 resembles the form of the argument: 'The wall is built from bricks, so the wall is brick', which is not fallacious. Way 3 says, 'The universe is built from contingent things, so the universe is contingent.' This may be wrong, but the *form* of the argument is not a fallacy.

Criticism 2: (Hume and Russell) – the words, 'necessary being' are meaningless

(Hume's version) Having already rejected the claim of the Ontological Argument that 'God exists' is logically true, Hume now rejects Aquinas' claim

in Way 3 that God is a *necessary* being, because he thinks that this is the same claim. However, this is not a valid criticism of Aquinas. For a start, Aquinas rejects the Ontological Argument, so where he refers in Way 3 to God as a necessary being, he means that God has 'metaphysical' necessity, and not logical necessity. Aquinas means that the existence of contingent things requires the existence of a being (God) whose necessity is from itself, and who causes all contingent beings and all caused necessary beings to exist.

Criticism 3: (Hume) – the universe itself may exist necessarily

Aquinas accepts this, but argues that the universe could only exist necessarily if it was brought into existence by an 'uncaused' necessary being. Who is right here depends on what you think is the most probable explanation for the universe: a necessarily existent mind, or necessarily existent matter.

4 Strengths and weaknesses of Aquinas' argument

These are fairly evenly balanced. Aside from the three criticisms and responses above:

Criticism 4: Russell thinks that the universe exists as an unexplainable brute fact, but if the universe is unexplainable, it seems very odd that science works on the opposite principle.

Criticism 5: Some object that there could be a group of necessary beings rather than just one; however Aquinas argues that unless there is one being who contains within itself the reason for its own existence, then the existence of 'anything' is inexplicable.

Criticism 6: Some object that there could be an infinite regress of contingent beings, with no need for a first necessary being; but **a** this still would not explain why there is something rather than nothing, and **b** although we can have mathematical infinities, we have no evidence that an infinite past sequence can exist in the 'real' world.

Criticism 7: Some object that the universe itself may exist eternally and uncaused; but if so, one wonders why. No scientific cosmological theories can explain why there is something rather than nothing, whereas the idea of God explains exactly that.

5 The status of Aquinas' argument as a 'proof'

a It cannot be a proof in the logical sense, because inductive arguments deal in probabilities rather than proofs.

- b** Gerry Hughes suggests that we should redefine 'proof' to include the idea of 'overwhelming probability'. Nobody has observed quarks, for example, yet their existence is overwhelmingly probable. Equally, nobody has observed God, yet a transcendent God is overwhelmingly probable as the cause of the universe (according to Hughes).
- c** However probable it might be, the argument does not convince atheists.
- d** For modern believers, the third way could give the support of reason and philosophy to what they already believe through faith – that God exists as a metaphysically necessary being.

6 The value of Aquinas' argument for religious faith

- a** It does show faith to be reasonable.
- b** Anybody with faith can understand the evidence used by the third way.
- c** Moreover, the third way is supported by the Design Argument.
- d** However, some believers will not accept Aquinas' argument, for example, Kant and Barth.
- e** For Aquinas, faith in God is supported by reason, but faith does not come *from* reasoned arguments, but through God's grace.

Three suggestions for practice and development

Use one or more of these three questions / claims as a homework assignment, a class essay, or as a focus for practice.

- 1** Explain the part played by the concept of an infinite regress, both in objecting to Aquinas' third way and in supporting it.
- 2** 'The third way commits the fallacy of composition.' How far do you agree?
- 3** Evaluate the claim that Aquinas' third way proves the existence of God.