

## Candidate 3 evidence

“Religious arguments can prove God's existence”. To what extent do you agree?

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### Content

Introduction	Page 3
Chapter 1: The Cosmological Argument	Page 4-10
Chapter 2: The Teleological Argument	Page 11-13
Conclusion	Page 14
Bibliography	Page 15-17

## **Introduction**

The controversial debate around the existence of God goes back centuries, and religions built around these beliefs are key to culture and society's fundamental building blocks. There is a wide variety of opinions and conclusions about whether or not an omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent being can exist. From atheist, agnostic, monotheistic and polytheistic beliefs, there is no simple answer. This dissertation will focus on two main classical religious arguments; cosmological by Aristotle and developed by Thomas Aquinas, as well as teleological theorised by Aquinas and supported by William Paley. I will also explore non-religious counterarguments, scientific alternatives, and philosophical dilemmas raised by religious arguments. Some believe the only explanation for the elaborate universe is a necessary, divine being. While others believe that modern science can now provide a more naturalistic explanation, crediting the complexity to evolution and chance. Ultimately after discussing a variety of evidence and theories, I will conclude that I believe a transcendent being may exist but religious arguments fail to provide conclusive evidence that it must be the Abrahamic God described by classical theism.

## Chapter 1 - The Cosmological Argument

The first religious argument in favour of God's existence evaluated in this dissertation is put forward by Thomas Aquinas in the form of the five arguments; known as the five ways. The first four ways are known as the Cosmological Argument. They are; motion, causation, contingency, and degrees of perfection.

The first way - motion - is built upon Aristotle's theory that everything in motion in the universe must be moved by something else. It is evident that things in this universe move and are moved by other things. He argued this chain reaction of motion could not continue indefinitely, there cannot be infinite regresses. Aristotle said "Nothing can come from nothing"<sup>1</sup> and therefore there must be a first unchanged, unmoved mover to 'set off' all motion and create everything in existence. Aristotle did not explicitly argue this being must be God, however, Aquinas understood that this being could only be the Abrahamic God. Aquinas' later adaptations highlight that the first way can exist legitimately without the first cause necessarily being God. Aquinas used Aristotle's argument that there has to be an origin, and made it fit his pre-existing beliefs. Ultimately this makes the first way less convincing because, for example, a Hindu person could argue the origin of the universe was the Hindu deities who caused everything and set off all motion.

The argument for efficient cause is Aquinas' second way; everything is caused by something else. Nothing can be its own efficient cause, because it would have to exist before itself to bring itself into existence. Which is impossible. Again because Aquinas dismissed the notion of infinite regress, he concluded there must be a first cause uncaused by any other, he identified this must be God.<sup>2</sup> In my opinion there already is an apparent surface flaw of this argument; it entirely crumbles if infinite regress is possible. Both the first and second ways are too weighted on the opinion that endless regression isn't possible while failing to provide evidence as to why, which weakens Aquinas's first cosmological arguments significantly.

Since Aquinas first put forward the first two ways there have been paramount scientific developments that may provide an alternative origin. The Big Bang Theory was discovered; 13.7 billion years ago when time, space, energy and material were all created in one instantaneous moment.<sup>3</sup> The universe began as a singularity and has been expanding ever since. Scientific evidence for this was provided by George

<sup>1</sup>

<https://faculty.fiu.edu/~harrisk/Notes/Epistemology%20and%20Metaphysics/Aristotle%27s%20Metaphysics%20and%20Epistemology.htm#FourCauses> (accessed 19/03/2025)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/the-Five-Ways> (accessed 22/11/2024)

<sup>3</sup> <https://spaceplace.nasa.gov/big-bang/en/> (accessed 19/03/2025)

Lemaitre when he discovered redshift, which is based on the Doppler effect. When objects are moving away from an observer the wavelength frequency emitting from the object is read closer to red on the electromagnetic scale. A consequence of this discovery is that since everything in the universe is getting further apart the universe must be getting bigger. If we reverse this expansion all the way back to the beginning, the universe must've started from one single point.<sup>4</sup>

An implication of The Big Bang as a scientific alternative is that there is no need for God to be the first cause because The Big Bang was the origin of the universe. It removes the need for a transcendent being that humans can't understand because now we have scientific concepts that can explain how the universe came about - which we can understand. However, I believe this still doesn't answer the question of why the universe exists and is the way it is - it only explains how it came about. On the other hand, according to Aquinas' logic, one could argue that even the Big Bang needs a cause, it's not exempt and cannot come from nothing. So they may say God caused the Big Bang and therefore the two can co-exist. However, discoveries about particles in space-time vacuums being created and destroyed seemingly out of nothing<sup>5</sup> can shatter Aristotle's argument that "nothing can come from nothing" because we now know particles can come into existence for no reason and with nothing provoking it. In my opinion, this is a very strong counterargument as it is backed by undeniable scientific evidence that was not known at the time when Aquinas was arguing God to be the first cause. I believe Aquinas was jumping to conclusions while not being fully educated on all the possibilities. Overall in my opinion Aquinas' God seems to be an easy solution to a big question that wasn't explainable by science in his time but nowadays it's more logical to base beliefs on solid evidence. However, ultimately the Big Bang cannot fully disprove God because He may have caused the Big Bang.

A key aspect in regard to proving the existence of God is infinite regress. Aquinas' five ways heavily weigh on infinite regress not being a possibility, there must be an origin of motion and cause. JL Mackie supported Aquinas' rejection of infinite regress by using the analogy of train carriages moving along a track. We know there cannot be carriages moving alone, there must be an engine driving the motion. Things cannot be their own cause of motion.<sup>6</sup> This implies the universe needs an 'engine' - a God to provide a driving force. Just as one train carriage cannot lead to another infinitely, neither can things in the universe, there must be an origin. This argument is strong because it shows it's illogical to accept infinite regress, however, the analogy is

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.space.com/25126-big-bang-theory.html> (accessed 10/03/2025)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/something-from-nothing-vacuum-can-lead-to-flashes-of-light/> (accessed 15/03/2025)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/desmondtsa/aquinas-third-way> (accessed 04/02/2025)

unsound because it compares two dissimilar things. The universe is far more complex and less understandable than a train. Like effects do not always have like causes. Additionally, to compare the almighty God to a simple train engine feels like a contradiction in itself because other Christian ideologies rely upon God being so complex and transcendent that we as mere humans cannot understand Him. Why should we accept that some parts of God are understandable but others we are supposed to leave unquestioned?

Occam's razor provides a reason why we should just accept God as the answer even if we can't fully understand. It is the principle that the simplest explanation for something is usually the truth and, therefore, is the one we should accept.<sup>7</sup> Within the cosmological arguments, it is simpler to accept God caused, moved and created the universe rather than trying to justify infinite regress. However, Occam's razor is flawed as the simplest answer is not always correct, especially when applied to complex problems. For example in medicine the saying; "When you hear hooves, think horses, not zebras" is taught to encourage looking for simpler diagnoses that cover more symptoms rather than niche diagnoses. However, this leads to the danger of misdiagnoses if symptoms are disregarded in order to apply a simpler diagnosis.<sup>8</sup> This highlights striving for the simplest answer should not justify ignoring logical inconsistencies, such as why the origin of the universe must be attributed to God. Infinite regress is completely disregarded and not even considered a possibility in the cosmological argument. I believe Occam's razor provides more of 'a guiding heuristic than as a principle of absolute truth', and is not a solid enough reason to brush over other possibilities and assume God is the origin.

However, in the first two ways, Aquinas fails to determine why there is a need for God to commit the first action, he only assumes the explanation behind it is God and does so with no material evidence to support this. In my opinion, a lack of proof in the first two ways reduces the validity of the argument as a whole. However, an attempt to redeem this is made through the third way of contingency and necessity.

Aquinas said; "Therefore if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence."<sup>9</sup> Here Aquinas is saying if there was once nothing, then nothing can come from nothing and everything is dependent upon the previous things in existence. There must be something necessary otherwise nothing would exist, which is absurd. The series of necessary beings cannot be infinite, therefore there must be a first being that exists because of its own necessity and

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.newscientist.com/definition/occams-razor/> (accessed 20/03/2025)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/story/is-occams-razor-always-true> (accessed 27/01/2025)

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologica (accessed 24/03/2025)

sustains all other beings. This is God. However, this argument raises the question of why God is the exception from all of these laws and requirements for things in existence. Everything needs a cause, to be moved, and is contingent ... except God? It lacks justification and is contradictory.

So the Kalam cosmological argument was presented. The Kalam cosmological argument is as such; everything that begins to exist has a cause. The universe began to exist. Therefore the universe has a cause. This aligns with Aquinas' first way but now justifies why God is exempt from requiring a cause. He is eternal, so doesn't have a beginning and therefore does not require a cause.<sup>10</sup> The Kalam argument is significant because it combated the major criticisms of Aquinas's first two ways and makes undeniable logical sense. However, in my opinion it is still not a convincing argument because it creates a contradiction by accepting God can be eternal while at the same time arguing the universe can't be, because it's illogical.

Overall the first three ways feel incomplete, and alone they cannot prove all the characteristics of the God Aquinas is trying to prove. This leads to Aquinas's fourth and final cosmological way, which is gradation of perfection found among things. The goodness of something represents how well it resembles pure goodness so therefore pure goodness must exist. An analogy used to explain it uses salt to symbolise goodness. The saltier something is, the more 'like salt' it is, therefore for saltiness to exist, salt must exist. This supreme perfectly good being can only be God.<sup>11</sup> However, a weakness of this argument is that goodness is subjective and therefore different people will have different ideas of what pure perfection would look like. Additionally, this argument implies God is perfectly good, but one may argue that God is not a perfectly good being. If a perfectly good being created a world then it is impossible for that world to not also be perfect. A perfect being can only create perfect things.

This leads on to JL Mackies 'inconsistent triad' which comprises three logically inconsistent, contradictory statements. These are;

1. God is omnibenevolent
2. God is omnipotent
3. Evil exists

Implications of the inconsistent triad are; if God is omnibenevolent then he would want to stop evil and suffering. If God is omnipotent then he would be powerful enough to stop evil. But we can see evil does exist, people steal, are murdered, and lie. So therefore an omnipotent and benevolent being cannot exist while evil and suffering

<sup>10</sup><https://www.solas-cpc.org/a-beginners-guide-to-the-kalam-cosmological-argument/> (accessed 11/03/2025)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.thegordianknot.org/post/an-underrated-argument-for-God-s-existence-aquinas-4th-way> (accessed 23/11/2024)

does.<sup>12</sup> A consequence of the evil and suffering counterargument to the fourth way is it discredits the truth and integrity of Aquinas' perfection and gradation argument. It proves stating a perfect being exists is more complex than it seems, and uses undeniable evidence like imperfections in our world that Aquinas claims were caused and created by a perfect being. I believe this is one of the strongest counterarguments to God's existence because it undermines the coherence of God's key characteristics, weakens the credibility of the arguments in favour of God's existence by using solid evidence of suffering all around us and ultimately concludes that an omnibenevolent and omnipotent being cannot logically exist. However the problem of evil doesn't rule out every version of God, for example, deism is the belief in the existence of an impersonal creator who doesn't care.<sup>13</sup> This ultimately means God could exist, but not be benevolent.

Some other major inconsistencies in the Cosmological argument were brought forward by David Hume, an 18th-century Scottish philosopher. He asked why the necessary being must be God. He argued the universe itself could be the necessary being, he agreed with Aquinas that there has to be an origin, but acknowledged it doesn't have to be a transcendent being.<sup>14</sup> This would consequently mean the Big Bang could replace God in Aquinas's logic. I believe Hume's argument is much stronger because it has withstood the test of time. Even with recent scientific advances it's actually become more logical and solidly justified, unlike Aquinas who lacked this knowledge at the time of his conclusion.

Leibniz supported Aquinas' argument for God, especially his first two ways. He argued we should ask "Why is there something rather than nothing?", and his argument rests upon 'The principle of sufficient reason'; everything has a reason why it is the way it is and why it occurred to begin with. The answer 'just because' should never be accepted. For example, if we ask why the sky is blue we can find a resolution whether it is the way light particles interact with the atmosphere or that you are wearing blue-tinted glasses. There is always an explanation for things that could have been different to how they are.<sup>15</sup> Therefore since the world could have failed to be the way it is, or not have existed at all, then there must be an explanation as to why it is the way it is.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://philosophyalevel.com/aqa-philosophy-revision-notes/does-God-exist/#Evil> (accessed 26/01/2025)

<sup>13</sup> <https://heritage.humanists.uk/deism/> (accessed 12/03/2025)

<sup>14</sup> <https://thedailyapologist.com/blog/god-is-necessary> (accessed 23/02/2025)

<sup>15</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sufficient-reason/> (accessed 08/03/2025)

Bertrand Russell took the opposition in a famous 1948 BBC radio debate with Frederick Copleston who was in support of Leibniz.<sup>16</sup> Russell stated the universe was a 'brute fact' and there was no need to question why or how it came into existence. He argued there is a fallacy of composition, which is defined as 'the error of assuming that what is true of a member of a group is true for the group as a whole.'<sup>17</sup> This can be explained further using the analogy of a football team; each player in a football team may play well, but this does not guarantee the team plays well as a whole - they might not have good teamwork skills. This shows we cannot apply the characteristics of individuals to the groups they belong to. So too, even if everything in the universe does require a cause that doesn't mean the universe as a whole requires a cause. Consequently, the apparent need for God to be a necessary creator Leibniz insisted upon, is removed. We could just accept the universe doesn't need a cause despite believing that everything in it does. I strongly agree with Russell, we shouldn't assume the universe has an explanation just because everything in it has one, but I disagree we should accept it as a brute fact. In my opinion, we should keep searching for the universe's reason until we can conclude fully that if there is one, we know what it is, and if there isn't then it would be okay to accept it. I believe neither side has enough substantial evidence to fully back up their conclusion and that applying human-centered expectations to the universe while we know very little about the logistics of it is an ignorant viewpoint. Frederick Copleston then combatted Russell by arguing that just acknowledging the universe was a 'brute fact' is avoiding the question of why the universe exists, and does exactly what the principle of sufficient reason says not to do. Uses 'just because' as an explanation.<sup>18</sup>

This debate can become very back and forth about whether it's okay to simply accept the universe's existence or if we should continue to struggle to find an origin. However, in this debate Leibniz and Copleston's argument is flawed. They argue everything must have a sufficient explanation and reason, yet they fail to provide either for God. Yet still oppose Russell's logic of accepting the universe as a brute fact because it's 'illogical'. This inclines me to believe that until a more sound scientific explanation for the universe's reason for existence, we should not jump to conclude a God must exist. Not repeat Aquinas's mistake of assumption just to be later proved wrong by scientific discoveries.

Overall I believe the cosmological argument is a strong argument to prove a first cause, mover, although I believe Aquinas failed to prove the existence of the benevolent and omnipotent God he was trying to promote. At the end of each

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMsbD1L5IIQ> (accessed 03/02/2025)

<sup>17</sup> Oxford Dictionary

<sup>18</sup> <https://philosophydungeon.weebly.com/copleston--russell-summary.html> (accessed 20/03/2025)

argument, there is an inductive leap to 'this is God' and it is too replaceable. It could just as easily be proving energy or matter in another form. God here feels like a nametag for an unknown being. I feel as though the arguments here are too focused on the creation of the universe, which is a key attribute of God but skips over too many other aspects that make up God.

## Chapter 2 - The Teleological Argument

The Teleological argument is the theory that the order, beauty, and purpose we can see in the world calls for an intelligent designer. It draws attention to the variety of features which suggest the universe has an intelligent creator, such as; the order and regularities in behaviour and properties of the world, beautiful things that are not necessary for life but still exist, the perfect environment for human life to flourish, the purpose shown in individual objects in the universe and the universe's purpose as a whole.

Thomas Aquinas' fifth way describes that non-intelligent organic life acts orderly and in purposeful ways, even though inanimate things have no means to achieve this consciously. He argued therefore there must be a higher power inducing this direction. He further explained his point by using the example of an arrow, in order for an arrow to reach its destination it must be directed and propelled by the archer. In the same way, things in existence working towards a purpose must be directed by a God.<sup>19</sup> We don't have to look far to see this is true, in the correct conditions an acorn will always without fail grow into an oak tree. The acorn's purpose is always to grow into an oak tree, never anything else. However, in my opinion, this argument is not strong because it is not backed by scientific evidence proving non-intelligent organic life can't have its own sense of direction. In fact, modern science has shown plant growth and actions are motivated by chemical reactions rather than a higher power and they have a sense of awareness of their conditions and the world around them.<sup>20</sup> Thomas Aquinas was alive from 1225 - 1274, and the process of plants being able to sense light through the plant hormone auxin was only discovered in 1881. Ultimately this indicates Aquinas lacked explanations of natural laws through science so as a consequence of this it seems he could not find a better explanation and concluded therefore a directional being must exist.

However, William Paley's 'watchmaker analogy' supports Aquinas' theory that the universe is too orderly and purposeful to exist by chance. The watchmaker analogy is; you are walking along a heath and find a rock. You would assume this rock has always been there as it shows no purpose. Whereas if you were to find a watch in place of the rock, you would assume it was too complex to be there by chance, it must have a purpose and also therefore an intelligent designer. He then applied this to Earth and the solar system, they are too complex to have appeared by chance and without a

<sup>19</sup> <https://senecalearning.com/en-GB/revision-notes/a-level/religious-studies/ocr/1-4-1-the-teleological-argument-aquinas-fifth-way> (accessed 20/01/2025)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.jic.ac.uk/blog/how-do-plants-sense-the-world-around-them/#:~:text=Probably%20the%20most%20well%2Dknown,plants%20the%20direction%20to%20grow.> (accessed 04/02/2025)

reason. Paley argued that the only being powerful and knowledgeable enough to create Earth is God<sup>21</sup> This analogy implies the universe is far too complex to have come about by chance and exist as a brute fact and therefore its existence points towards an intelligent designer. Therefore the existence of complex life as we can see, proves the existence of God.

A critic of Paley's watch analogy was David Hume, he highlighted this teleological argument commits the fallacy of the affirmation of the consequent; like effects may not have like causes. Hume wrote that there is no justification for assuming "that instances of which we have no experience must resemble those of which we have had experience". The watchmaker analogy is unsound because the things being compared are so dissimilar, the universe is made up of organic matter so it is more similar to an organism rather than a machine like a watch. He also emphasised nature is flawed and bad things naturally occur so the designer must also be flawed and this cannot be God.

I believe that because one of the main characteristics of God is that he is transcendent it is illogical to apply such a human analogy to justify his existence. God himself is much more complex than a human watchmaker and the universe is much more complex than a watch. It has too many flaws to be a believable argument, it doesn't prove God is an eternal being that still exists now. The watch can still exist even when the watchmaker has died, so too the universe could have been caused by a powerful being but it fails to prove the being is still present today. The watchmaker also doesn't have to care about or love the watch, God loves his creations and so this argument only implies the universe was created not that the creator is benevolent.

F.R Tennent argued in favour of God's existence through his Anthropic Principle. Tennent said; "As we look out into the universe and identify the many accidents of physics and astronomy that have worked together for our benefit, it almost seems as if the universe must in some sense have known that we were coming". This is the strong anthropic principle which describes how the whole universe was designed to hold human life one day. From the moment of the Big Bang, it was determined that 10 billion years later our star would form and 5 billion years later our earth would form with the perfect conditions to allow human life to flourish.<sup>22</sup> The anthropic principle implies that only an intelligent designer could have created the 'Goldilocks zone' because it's too perfect to be chance. It aligns with the Teleological theory that things in the universe have been given purpose, and that the universe as a whole has a purpose - to bear human life. However, I believe this is a very human-centred

<sup>21</sup> <https://study.com/academy/lesson/william-paleys-teleological-argument.html#:~:text=The%20English> (accessed 23/10/2024)

<sup>22</sup> <https://philosophydungeon.weebly.com/anthropic-principle.html> (accessed 01/02/2025)

viewpoint and shows the ignorance of how little humans know about the universe. Overall in my opinion, the anthropic argument is not convincing because it is unfalsifiable, it can't be tested and proven wrong.

On the contrary to FR Tennent, Charles Darwin argued the world is the way it is purely as a result of evolution, not because it was designed by a God for human life. He discovered offspring within a species have a wide range of differences. The individuals with characteristics not suited to their environment will not survive and the ones most suited to the environment will grow stronger and reproduce. These genes will be passed to the next generation and they will be stronger. The result of generations and millions of years of this cycle is animals and plants that are perfectly suited to their environment and show a purpose.<sup>23</sup> Darwin's evolutionary theory implies there is only an appearance of purpose in the natural world, organisms are not designed with a purpose in mind, they are a result of years of natural selection and survival. Therefore an intelligent designer is not required. I agree with this naturalistic explanation rather than the supernatural explanation because Darwin provides

Michael Behe combatted Charles Darwin by arguing some things are too perfect to have come about by evolution. His theory is called 'irreducible complexity' because he saw some things rely on being as they are as a whole to be purposeful. A prime example he used was bacterial flagellum; it could not have evolved gradually because it is made up of multiple parts all of which are necessary for it to function as a system. It would be non-functional without any one of its components.<sup>24</sup> An analogy used to further explain this is a mouse trap, it is made up of springs, a base, a hammer, and a catch, if any one of these parts were missing it would not function so it must have been made with all its parts at one time. He is not arguing that a mousetrap and the universe are similar, but that both are irreducibly complex and can only be explained by design.<sup>25</sup> However in my opinion, this is a contradictory argument because if complex things call for a designer why is God exempt? Who designed the designer?

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2009/02/04/darwin-and-his-theory-of-evolution/> (accessed 23/03/2025)

<sup>24</sup> <https://content.csbs.utah.edu/~rogers/tch/evidevol/ircomp/index.html> (accessed 14/02/2025)

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.ideacenter.org/contentmgr/showdetails.php/id/840> (accessed 03/02/2025)

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Aquinas's five ways only demonstrate that the universe requires a necessary origin and is not sufficient enough to provide conclusive evidence for the existence of God. It is evident Aquinas was a product of his time and his arguments can be easily dismantled by recent scientific advances. Additionally, the Cosmological Arguments are heavily dependent on the impossibility of infinite regress, yet provide no convincing evidence. Although, when combined with the teleological arguments and F.R. Tennant's theories, it becomes more convincing. It proves a personal being rather than merely a creator. After discussing religious arguments in favour of God's existence, and exploring non-religious and scientific counterarguments, I conclude that although religious arguments display striking theories in favour of a powerful deity, they do not fully prove that God exists and ultimately the counterargument of evil and suffering is so weighted that it is improbable that the Christian God can exist.

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