

KNOWING GOD BY THE LIGHT OF REASON

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE LOGICAL IMPOSSIBILITY OF ATHEISM

by Justin Ford

Christians believe that God has revealed Himself to us in Jesus Christ. But even before we know Christ, we can come to know something about God and His greatness from knowing the world He created. Scripture affirms that the recognition of the Creator from His works is something open to every human being. St Paul writes, ‘For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.’ (*Rom 1:19-20*; cf. *Wis 13:1-9*)

In line with this, the Catholic Church holds that God can (in principle) be known by reason alone, even prior to someone having the gift of faith. Thus the First Vatican Council proclaimed as infallible teaching that ‘the one true God, our Creator and Lord’ can ‘be known with certainty with the natural light of human reason through the things that are created.’ ¹

True, this knowledge of God by *natural reason* differs from the saving knowledge of *supernatural faith*. Faith gives total personal trust to God in His act of speaking to humanity, and is possible only by divine grace; it is the free choice to allow God to lift us to a new and steadfast certainty, beyond dependence on reason and motivated instead by God’s absolute truthfulness. ‘The proofs of God’s existence, however, can predispose one to faith and help one to see that faith is not opposed to reason.’ ²

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The questions that lead to the awareness of a Creator arise from the search for meaning present in every human heart. When we reflect on the world, its beauty, its order as revealed in the laws of science, the greatness of the human person, the moral law and the voice of conscience, we experience wonder, and want to know the deepest source of such realities.

As a simple example that many have experienced, signs of God’s beauty and majesty are always available to us in the contemplation of the universe. St Augustine writes, ‘Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air distending and diffusing itself, question the beauty of the sky...question all these realities. All respond: “See, we are beautiful.”... These beauties are subject to change. Who made them if not the Beautiful One Who is not subject to change?’

But above all, we sense that the universe needs an explanation for its very existence. When we think about the universe generally – whether looking at its individual constituents, or at the whole of perceptible reality in its entire history – it does not seem to contain such an explanation in itself. As far as we can tell, everything we see might just as easily not have existed at all. Things come into existence and pass out of existence; they are able not to be. But if it is possible for things not to be, then why does anything actually exist in the first place? What causes things to be? Why is there something rather than nothing?

These are the questions that can lead us to an almost instinctive rational awareness of God as the source of the realities we experience: ‘The world, and man, attest that they contain within themselves neither their first principle nor their final end, but rather that they participate in Being itself, which alone is without origin or end...the first cause and final end of all things, a reality that everyone calls God.’ ³

Science and philosophy

This search for final explanation can also be given more rigorous and detailed logical form. Rational arguments for God's existence are found in the ancient Greek thinkers, and early Christian writers also followed this path. The most famous arguments are the 'Five Ways' of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-74). Proofs of this kind lie in the realm of philosophy rather than science.⁴ Philosophy is a form of human knowledge that uses logic to understand basic realities of human experience more deeply. Science, based on experiment and observation, far from dispensing with philosophy, actually presupposes those basic realities.

For example, physics deals with concepts such as energy, mass and gravity (that apply to physical realities), whereas the branch of philosophy called 'metaphysics' deals with concepts such as existence, substance, cause, and the laws of logic (that apply in some way to all realities, physical or not). So in philosophy especially, 'reason' stretches broader and deeper than specific experimental sciences (such as physics).

The Church and science

In the contemporary mind, science has more prestige than philosophy. One sometimes finds Catholics who wrongly imagine science as somehow undermining faith (causing them either to disdain science itself, or to have an 'inferiority complex' about their faith). Actually, like faith itself, reason (including both philosophy and science) is God's gift, and used properly never contradicts faith: truth never contradicts truth. Philosophical reason proves the existence of God and of the spiritual immortal human soul; science, while unable by itself to do this, gives us ever greater knowledge of the wonders of creation, leading us to glorify God all the more. There are of course countless scientists who are and have been religious believers, and the Catholic Church in particular (despite the one well-known misstep over Galileo in 1633) has been a great patron of science – for instance by fostering for centuries (from 1088) all the first universities.

Research in the history of science has shown how the foundations of modern physics were already laid in these medieval universities. However, an especially interesting example of Catholic influence on science is the 'Big Bang' theory (that the universe and time itself originated in an 'explosion' of matter and energy condensed in a single point 13 billion years ago). Far from being a rival to Catholic belief, this was actually first proposed by Catholic priest-physicist Fr Georges Lemaître (1931).⁵ Today the accepted scientific view, it went against the assumption by scientists of that time that the universe was eternal, but harmonized with the Catholic dogma of divine creation 'in the beginning' of time, and this presumably influenced Lemaître in his development of the theory.

The origin of the universe

Sometimes one hears it naïvely expressed that 'God didn't create the universe – the Big Bang did!' The obvious question of what caused the Big Bang itself isn't asked: of how the universe could just 'pop into existence' without a cause. Nor does it solve the problem, as some atheists have suggested, to say the Big Bang was caused by physical laws and by energy fluctuations in the quantum vacuum. This only pushes the question a step further back: why do those laws and that energy exist?

Atheists reply, 'Can't we ask the same question about God? Who made God? Why can't atheists say the Big Bang or energy fluctuations have no further explanation, if believers can claim God has no further explanation?' But in searching out the answer to the questions, 'Why do things exist? Why is there something rather than nothing?' we find God to be in a totally different 'category' of explanation and being. Only God brings the 'Why?' question to a satisfactory conclusion.

Existence and nature

To show this, we turn to an exposition of a formal philosophical proof of God's existence, drawn from the teachings of St Thomas Aquinas. **In any being, we find the two aspects of existence (the fact *that it is*) and nature (what kind of being it is).** We can know all there is to know about the nature of an elephant, or a sub-atomic particle, or a dinosaur, or a unicorn, without knowing whether any such beings really exist.⁶ This is because existence is not part of their nature. So to discover whether these things actually exist, we have to look at the real world, not just think about the idea of their natures. Thus the two aspects of existence and nature are known in quite distinct ways – it is not just 'a matter of words'.

The study of all this falls under philosophy, not science – 'Existence' and 'nature' are not items that could be 'isolated in a test tube' or 'seen in a telescope'. Rather, science simply presupposes these realities recognised by the mind. Thus the philosophical proofs transcend the various scientific debates on the beginning of time or multiple universes. St Thomas designed his proofs to work even supposing the universe itself had extended everlastingly into the past, with no beginning to the time sequence.⁷

Now, some being exists. And for any being (inside or outside time) in which these aspects of existence and nature truly differ, there is a question of how those two differing realities at its heart are yet found to be truly united – i.e. why the nature, which *is not its existence* (since they differ), nonetheless *exists (i.e. somehow is one with its existence)*.⁸ In the simultaneous 'non-unity yet unity' of existence and nature found at the being's very core, is a looming contradiction.

The logically necessary search for final explanation

The foundational logical principle of non-contradiction states, 'The same thing cannot be and not-be at the same time and in the same respect'. The looming contradiction with a thing's nature and its existence is that the nature and the existence are both one and not-one with each other at the same time. Thus the contradiction will only be avoided if they are one and not-one at the same time but *in different respects*. In respect of what they are in themselves, they differ, that is, they are not-one. Thus it must be that they are one / united / synthesised in respect of a factor in the situation other than what they are in themselves. This other factor we term the 'cause' of the nature having existence. That is to say, the contradiction is only prevented, and the existence of the being made logically possible, if there is another factor in the situation, in relation to which nature and existence are united – causing the being's existence.

Now, nothing can cause itself, since in order to cause, it would (impossibly) need to exist prior to itself in the chain of explanation.⁹ Rather, the cause must exist beyond, and logically prior to, the being which is caused. So, a being whose nature does not possess existence *of itself*, must receive that existence *in virtue of something other than itself*. It cannot 'just be'. **A being whose existence and nature differ, must have an external cause to hold its existence and nature in union (i.e. to give to its nature the act of existing; to 'make it be').**¹⁰ The difference of existence and nature is the reason we intuitively realise the beings that we experience *logically need* a cause beyond themselves. There must be explanation.¹¹

This is why, both in everyday life and in science, human reason always intuitively looks for explanations of things and events. We always ask, 'Why?' It makes no sense to our reason for something to 'pop into existence' without a cause or explanation: from nothing, nothing comes.

Yet, if this external cause is *itself* a being in which existence and nature differ, the original problem fully remains. We now have to explain the existence of this external cause. And we haven't yet truly resolved even the original contradiction that loomed within the first being we considered. Within its very identity (indeed constituent of its very possibility) is 'relationship to the

(equally problematic) cause' on which it depends. Thus adding another being of similarly problematic nature to the first being does not advance us one iota towards a resolution of the original problem.

The problem remains if there is a *series* of such causes, 'A' causing 'B' causing 'C', etc. Even if this series were to stretch back infinitely, the looming contradiction would still run through the heart of the entire series. Not just each member, but the series seen as one 'causally linked whole' (whose existence and nature are 'different yet one'), remains a contradictory entity – *unless* it has quite a different cause explaining it, a cause that is not 'just one more member of the series' of problematic beings (which would solve nothing).

(As a parallel, imagine a train with one hundred carriages, but no engine: it would have nothing to get it moving. Increasing the number of carriages to infinity wouldn't remedy the situation: we would have an infinite but stationary train. Carriages are receivers of motion, and maybe transmitters of motion to other carriages further down the chain, but only engines are originators of motion. To get motion into the system, we need to pass outside the chain of carriages altogether, whether that chain is finite or infinite.

Likewise, a thing that does not have existence as part of its own nature is fundamentally a receiver of existence, and maybe a transmitter of existence to other things, but only a Self-Existent Being Whose nature includes existence (and therefore doesn't need to *receive* existence from another being) is a basic originator of existence. And just as, if there is no engine there is no motion for any of the carriages (whether finite or infinite in number), if there is no Self-Existent Being there is no existence for any of the beings which are not self-existent.)

The only possible cause: God, Subsistent Being

So a further cause is called for, but this time quite beyond the series of causes of this problematic type. We can only solve the problem by stepping altogether outside the category of beings *in which existence and nature differ*. **The question 'Why does anything exist at all?' is resolved only if the chain of explanation reaches a Being Whose existence and nature**, did we directly experience them, would be seen to be **fully identical, thus needing no prior cause to hold them in union.**

This uncaused First Cause, we name 'God': the One Whose nature is Existence, and so does not need to receive existence from another.¹² (God is thus by nature unable to not-exist.)¹³

This First Cause must be completely indivisible, without parts.¹⁴ This follows from similar considerations to those showing that a being whose existence and nature differ must have an external cause in the first place. Multiple parts that yet form a composite unity are simultaneously many yet one – a looming contradiction. To avoid this there must be a factor in the situation, a cause, *in virtue of which* these many are one. Therefore an *uncaused* being, conversely, cannot have distinct parts, as if it did it would need to receive the action of a cause uniting the parts.¹⁵

As the One Who *is* pure Being itself (without admixture or addition, as these would form a composite with Being and so require a cause), God does not merely (like us) *share* in being in a limited way. The being of created things is limited by being received into this or that particular finite nature.¹⁶ When existence is not part of something's nature, but differs from the nature possessing existence, then the 'nature' of the being is what defines and limits the thing to being 'this sort of being' or 'that sort of being'. God, by contrast, is simply 'Being' in its fullness, unlimited – 'undiluted' as it were – by any admixture of anything not identical to itself. He is thus unlimited in all possible perfections of Being – for example Goodness, Holiness, Beauty, Life, Knowledge, Wisdom, Freedom, Love, Mercy, Justice, Power, Happiness.¹⁷

The multiplicity of various natures into which being is received from God is what enables the existence of a multiplicity of beings distinct from one another. In contrast, only one ‘pure unlimited indivisible Being’ can exist – a hypothesised second such ‘Being’ would be in no way logically distinguishable from the first.¹⁸

Neither we individually, nor the universe around us, can ourselves be this one Self-Existent Being, because clearly neither we nor the universe possess the unlimited perfection that the Self-Existent Being must have. ‘Above’ time, God creates and sustains the entire time sequence,¹⁹ continually ‘pouring into’ all things their own limited share of being, different from His own Being, and proportioned to their particular natures – each one a ray reflecting His²⁰ infinite divine glory.

We cannot properly understand what it means to say ‘God is Being’ or ‘God is Existence’: His infinite essence is inconceivable Mystery to our limited minds. But unless there is such a Being, an independent *Giver* of existence Who does not need to receive existence from another being, then no finite sharers in being, no dependent *receivers* of existence, could possibly exist. The world we experience would be without a cause, an explanation for its existence. And that would be not merely inconceivable – breaking the bounds of our limited concepts, as God Himself does, which is not impossible – but (as has been shown) contradictory and against logic, which *is* impossible.

The argument summed up

To sum up, if there actually is a Self-Existent Being, with its existence identical to its very nature, it must be infinite in all the perfections of Being, and must be one only. So the finite beings we experience do not have their existence identical to their nature. This is the basic reason why they need an explanation for their existence outside themselves.

In things where existence and nature differ, human reason will never be satisfied by saying, ‘There is no explanation for that thing’s existence’. Rather, there must be a cause. Nothing can cause itself, since it would thus be prior to itself. So every finite thing has an external cause of its existence.

Could there be an infinitely long causal chain of finite and dependent beings, each one causing the next, but never reaching a Self-Existent First Cause? If this were so, even the whole chain taken collectively would still remain just a ‘sharer in existence’, limited in perfection. The whole causal chain of finite beings might just as easily not have existed, so would still call for an explanation beyond itself as to why it actually did exist, equally as much as an explanation beyond itself was required for the original finite being we were considering. Extending the length of a causal chain of finite beings, whether finitely or infinitely, does not advance us even slightly towards resolving the original problem, and gives us no real answer to the existential question, ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’

Instead, we necessarily conclude that the chain of causes comes to an end, and that there actually exists a First Cause which needs no explanation, Whose very nature is to exist: the Self-Existent Being, the ultimate Cause and Creator of all other beings, Whom we call ‘God’.²¹ If we would be fully rational beings, with minds in harmony with reality and knowing the most fundamental of truths, this is the affirmation a human being holds to most deeply and firmly.²²

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Afterword: Does logic convince?

A possible reaction to this argument is to say that it is logically irrefutable, yet psychologically unconvincing; or that the logic is so abstract that the individual cannot feel confident that they have rightly assessed its validity. However, unless actual flaws can be identified in the logic, this reaction says more about the psychology or emotions of the person, or the limitations of their reasoning powers, than about the actual soundness of the argument. (We might just as well reject the Theory of Relativity if we cannot follow the argument for it.)

All this may indeed limit the practical value of the argument as a widespread tool for *completely* convincing the average person of God's existence, but again, that says nothing about the argument's intrinsic logical force, or its power and value for convincing those individuals who *are* capable of assessing that intrinsic logic. And even those less capable of that assessment are not able to show the argument is invalid – as far as they can tell, it might very well be true.

Another variety of the same reaction might be that 'It's all just words', or that 'We can't trust mere logic'. To successfully argue that 'It's all just words' or 'It's all just ideas in the mind', one would have to show just which words or ideas in the argument were critically lacking a referent external to themselves. Blanket dismissals of the proof are baseless without specific identification of flaws. Importantly, the argument commences not with mere 'ideas in the mind', but with the actually experienced real existence of finite beings – whose existence then needs explanation. We are in the real world from the start.

As for 'not being able to trust mere logic', if logic is not trustworthy in and of itself, then its use both in science and everyday life falls to the ground. The objector is then inconsistent or hypocritical if they continue trusting logic in science and everyday life, while rejecting it in a proof for God's existence. The reality that we as rational beings all experience is that the foundations of logic are *self-evidently* true.²³ We see directly, for example, the truth of the fundamental 'principle of non-contradiction' – that the same thing cannot be and not-be at the same time and in the same respect. Once we understand the meaning of the words, we intuitively see that the concepts and realities which those words signify cannot fail to have the relationship that the sentence expresses.²⁴ So we can and must most certainly 'trust' logic. ('Trust' is really too weak a word, as no trust is actually required. We intellectually *see* that logic is valid – we do not speak of 'trusting' another person's word about something that we can see for ourselves is true.)

In science and in everyday life, it may be said, we have the possibility of a further empirical (experiential) check on our logical conclusions, unlike in the case of the proof for God's existence. Against this, however, it can be said: 1. Since logic is inherently trustworthy, it has no real need of a further check. 2. We trust the conclusions of pure mathematics, which have no such empirical check. 3. This argument (for giving more trust to the use of logic in science and in everyday life than its use in proving God's existence) is itself a purely logical argument with no experiential check – so if mere logic is untrustworthy, so is the very argument. 4. We often confidently draw logical conclusions about *future* events in science and everyday life, which of their nature cannot yet be checked. Yes, similar conclusions about the future have proven trustworthy *in the past* – but that is no guarantee at all that they will do so *in the future*, unless we place confidence in the logically-based general principle that the future will resemble the past.

The reality is that unless we give fundamental 'credence' to the foundations of logic as self-evident, knowledge in every field of life collapses catastrophically. Logical scepticism is untenable, indeed intellectually impossible. Such an extreme hypothesis is usually only appealed to in the case of proofs for God's existence because of a fixed prejudice against the conclusion of those proofs.

Endnotes

¹ Vatican I, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius* (1870). See also Vatican II's reaffirmation of this in *Dei Verbum* 6; Pope St John Paul II, Audience, 10 July 1985: 'When we reflect, we observe that proofs of God's existence are not lacking. These have been elaborated by thinkers under the form of philosophical demonstrations in the sense of rigorous logical deductions.'

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 35.

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 34.

⁴ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 31: 'These are also called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of "converging and convincing arguments", which allow us to attain certainty about the truth.' The proofs do not fall within the realm and competence of empirical and experimental 'natural sciences' such as physics or astronomy, but in the more foundational rational fields of philosophy and logic.

⁵ Pope Pius XII, addressing the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on 22 November 1951, expounded the new theory as a confirmation of Catholic doctrine.

⁶ As will be seen as the proof develops, with God on the other hand, if we fully understood His nature, the 'type of being' He is (if we can speak in that way), we would also know that He necessarily existed. In our imperfect earthly mode of knowing Him, His nature and existence are *conceived by us* by distinct concepts (just as with any other being). Yet they are *in actual fact* perfectly identical – we just have no positive concept that captures this in a unified way.

⁷ For St Thomas Aquinas, philosophy left this an open question; only divine revelation confirmed that *de facto*, time had a beginning.

⁸ This unity of nature and existence is grammatically expressed in an affirmative sentence such as 'This nature exists', which denotes a synthesis, a union, of the sentence's subject ('This nature') and its predicate ('exists').

⁹ That is, the united entity, 'nature + existence', cannot cause itself, as it cannot exist prior to itself in the chain of explanation (as though the two elements of nature and existence were already united prior to their union). Neither should we imagine that either of the separate elements, 'nature' or '[finite] existence' could act as cause of the union all by itself. In the case of the nature, this is to imagine the nature as already 'being there' to act as cause, prior to its existence – whereas in reality, prior to existing (i.e. union with existence) the nature is simply nothing. Alternatively, to imagine the existence as 'already there' to act as cause, prior to its union with the nature, is to imagine the existence of pure unmixed being, already able to act as cause all by itself. But as we will see, this is simply to hypothesise the existence of God, Who is Pure Being – in which case we have already arrived at our conclusion. It is only the synthesis with a nature that constitutes a given act of existing as finite, limiting it to being 'this particular kind of existence'.

¹⁰ These different grammatical formulations express one and the same basic reality, which is independent of which formulation is used. This highlights the fact that we are not dealing with mere matters of grammar, which often differ from language to language.

¹¹ According to one interpretation of Quantum Mechanics, some subatomic processes do happen 'without a cause'. However, even if this interpretation were correct, science can only verify what happens within the *physical* universe, so a more accurate statement would be that, as far as science can tell, some subatomic processes happen without a cause which is *within the physical universe*. But if our fundamental rational intuition is valid that anything in which existence and nature differ must have an explanation external to itself, it necessarily follows that any events lacking a cause *within* the physical universe, must therefore at least have a cause *outside* the physical universe, e.g. in the action of God. Thus Quantum Mechanics can never succeed in producing a counter-example to the universal logical principle of causality: at best, it can force us to look elsewhere for a cause than within the physical universe. (Indeed, as a general rule, science can never invalidate basic logic: science presupposes logic, and the two fields of knowledge operate on distinct planes.)

¹² This Self-Existence of God, the fullness of Being, is one of the explanations of the name God reveals to Moses in the Bible, 'I Am Who Am' (*Ex* 3:14) (Hebrew: YHWH = Yahweh).

¹³ Rather than saying God is 'self-explanatory' or 'self-causing', we say He 'needs no explanation'. The problem of difference yet unity of existence and nature that required causal explanation for other beings never arises for God in the first place.

It may be tempting to bypass the whole causal argument and simply argue, 'The very nature / identity / definition of God is "Necessary Existence"; therefore *by definition* God must exist.' This is a variation of the invalid 'Ontological Argument' first proposed by St Anselm and later by Descartes, but rejected by St Thomas among others. We do not experience the divine nature directly or fully conceive it as it really is, and without the causal argument, philosophy cannot establish whether such a nature expressed by the terms 'Necessary Existence' or 'Pure Being' is even possible.

¹⁴ The normal theological term for this is the 'simplicity' of God. Conversely, a being which is a whole made up of parts is a 'composite' being rather than a 'simple' being.

¹⁵ A consequence of this is that an uncaused being cannot be *extended* in space or time, as extension involves spatial or temporal parts. Rather, it must exist independently of those categories.

¹⁶ Again, this does not mean that the nature somehow 'exists' before receiving its existence. It comes into being (together with its existence) at the same moment as it receives and limits that act of existence.

¹⁷ It would take too much length to rationally establish here the various divine attributes in detail, as Aquinas does. However, a further consideration to keep in mind is that something cannot give to another what it does not somehow possess itself. A greater effect cannot come from a lesser cause, since an effect has its identity constituted in relationship to its cause. (For example, philosophy shows rational intelligence to be an immaterial quality transcending the power of mere matter. If God did not have intelligence Himself, He could not give intelligence to His creatures; He could not bring rationally intelligent beings into existence.) Therefore, for every perfection in the universe, God must also somehow possess that perfection – though in a more exalted way, not involving spatiality, temporality or finiteness.

Only 'pure perfections' not intrinsically involving spatiality, temporality or finiteness can be attributed to God *literally*. So we can say that God is literally 'good', but only metaphorically that He is 'like a rock' (in steadfastness) or 'like a human being' – we are not 'anthropomorphists' inventing God in our own image, as is sometimes claimed. Even a 'pure perfection' such as goodness is known by us only through a finite concept, which is only analogous to the infinite and inconceivable divine reality. For example, we say that God is not merely 'good', but Goodness itself, and the very standard of all goodness: in God there is no distinction between the real and the ideal, the concrete and the abstract. (This implies, incidentally, that His actions cannot be judged by an impossible further standard of goodness 'beyond' himself; accusing God of 'bad' actions is not just false but in the end meaningless.)

Each of our distinct finite concepts of various divine attributes corresponds to and imperfectly reflects in its own way, the same indivisible divine essence which contains them all in perfect unity without distinction – God *in Himself* is not 'divided' into the multiple attributes that *we* necessarily conceive distinctly and finitely.

¹⁸ The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not against this. The three co-equal divine Persons are not three Gods, or three 'parts' of God. They are each fully identical to the one and only God, but are distinguished from *each other* only by Their mutual relationships, these *subsisting* relations indeed constituting the very Persons themselves. The Son or 'Word' eternally comes forth from the Father as His perfect self-expression, and the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from Both as One, 'breathed forth' as Their infinite mutual Love. This doctrine is not itself provable by reason (being known only by God's revelation) but neither does it contradict the divine unity of Being as established by reason and as taught in the Old Testament. The principle that 'Two things identical to a third thing are identical to each other' is not violated, because of the *conceptual* non-identity between our finite ideas of nature and person, of substance and relation. Looking through the imperfect 'lens' of the finite concepts of *being* or *substance*, we see the unity of the divine Nature; looking through the imperfect 'lens' of the finite concept of *relation* (which like being and substance is a reality in our world), we see the threeness of Persons. But there is no human concept that lets us look through both 'lenses' at once. We cannot conceive what it is for a relation *to itself* *subsist as an entity*: thus the supreme Mystery of the 'Three in One'.

¹⁹ God's creative act is not merely triggering the Big Bang at the beginning of time, and then leaving the universe to itself. God is outside time, without past or future, having all His being at once in a changeless 'Now'. His eternal Being is thus simultaneously present to beings at all moments of time. Each finite nature needs to be constantly held in existence by God because of the basic ongoing non-identity between its nature and its existence. Finite beings have causal relationships with other finite beings in the time sequence, *changing* each other in various ways; but only God, the One Who *is* Being, can bring something into being totally *from nothing*, and then maintain the whole causally interrelated space-time structure in distinction from nothingness. This clarifies why the proofs for God's existence are independent of whether the universe extends infinitely into past time. The entire past infinite sequence would still have needed God's causal act to make and keep it distinct from nothing.

²⁰ We maintain the traditional Christian use of the male pronoun for God. The impersonal pronoun 'it' is inappropriate for an intelligent personal being, so either 'he', 'she' or a combination of the two, must be used (unless we massacre English by avoiding pronouns for God altogether). God, having no body, is neither male nor female in the literal

physical sense. However, because of the parallels to the male and female roles in intercourse, notions of a transcendent God ‘imparting life from beyond’ historically correlate with male imagery, while more pantheistic notions of a God ‘receiving life within’ historically correlate with female imagery. As the proofs demonstrate a transcendent God *giving* existence to beings distinct from Himself but not *receiving* existence from any being distinct from the divine Being, the male imagery is more appropriate.

This does not mean the superiority of human males to females. In this cosmic imaging scheme the male represents the infinite Creator, yet falls infinitely short of adequately doing so, whereas the female represents the finite Creation, and (as herself a created being) does so with perfect adequacy. Precisely to the extent the male ‘gains’ by the perfection of the Being that is represented, he ‘loses’ by the imperfection of the representation, and conversely with the female. Thus their imaging qualities are different yet perfectly equal. In the language used for the Trinity, as each of the three Persons is really identical with this one transcendent Creator God (Who is imaged as male) each Person is likewise imaged as male. So not by chance, when (without change or addition to the divine nature) God made a human nature having a relationship of personal union with God the Son, it was as male (Jesus), while the most perfect created being and model of faith is female (Mary). And every man and every woman is called to imitate, in different ways, *both* Jesus and Mary.

²¹ Whether or not we call the one, infinite, perfect First Cause ‘God’ is not of philosophical importance, but is only a linguistic point. Use of this term simply maintains standard English, which normally uses the word ‘God’ for the being of this description. Is He the ‘Christian’ God? Well, He certainly matches the description of the infinite Creator as believed in by Christians: this one and only Creator is the One Whom Christians (and many others) desire to affirm the existence of, and to worship. From the point of view of rational argument however, it is not assumed thereby that the Creator God we have proved, also revealed Himself in Jesus Christ or revealed that He was a Trinity of Persons in the one divine Nature. Those are points remaining to be established at this point in the argument. (This would be by means of such things as the historical evidence for the miracles of Jesus and of Christian history, and the rational arguments that the only adequate and reasonable explanation of those historical data is the direct and immediate action of this one all-powerful Creator, bypassing the secondary created causes He normally makes use of, and thus ‘testifying’ to the truth of the teachings associated with the claimed miraculous events.)

²² It is well-known that various writers since Aquinas’ time have rejected the validity of his proofs (and thereby the notion that God’s existence cannot be proved has seeped into ‘popular wisdom’). What one invariably finds, however, is that the critics of Aquinas are considering only superficial or incomplete forms of the argument. (For example, they consider only the comparatively brief passage in Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* entitled ‘Whether God exists?’, and not the explication of his argument in the subsequent sections and in other works.) Thus one reads or hears naïve ‘refutations’ such as the following:

(a) ‘Supporters of the causal argument suppose that everything must have a cause. But this actually contradicts the conclusion of their argument, that God has no cause.’ [It is not maintained that ‘everything must have a cause’, but that ‘everything *composite* (e.g. a composite of nature and existence) must have a cause’.]

(b) ‘We can’t prove that every finite thing must have a cause, an explanation. Why *couldn’t* something ‘just be’, ‘just pop into existence’, without a cause? At any rate, any thinker, theist or atheist, just has to come to a halt *somewhere* in the chain of explanations.’ [There is general unawareness amongst philosophers of Aquinas’ *proof* of the need for a cause in the non-identity of nature and existence. Atheists arbitrarily halt the chain of explanations in a being equally problematic as the first being that was to be explained; theists halt the chain of explanation in a Being Whose nature and existence are fully identical, Who thus never falls into the category of ‘beings requiring explanation’ in the first place.]

(c) ‘Aquinas believed an infinite series was impossible, but mathematicians have shown otherwise. Thus in fact there could be an infinite series of causes.’ [Aquinas did not base his proof on the impossibility of an actual infinite series *as such*, which he discusses elsewhere. His point is rather that even an infinite series of causes of the same problematic type as the first being under consideration simply doesn’t solve the original problem, as the main text above shows.]

(d) ‘Aquinas might have established a First Cause, but how do we know this cause is God? It might just be the universe itself.’ [This shows total ignorance of Aquinas’ subsequent proofs of the *attributes* of the First Cause, such as absolute simplicity, infinite perfection, knowledge or unity. Neither the universe nor its parts possess the required attributes.]

²³ Self-evidence is stronger than proof. Only a statement or truth which is not sufficiently evident of itself needs to *derive* its evidence from other statements or truths by means of proof.

²⁴ Neither is this *merely* a matter of words, since the same identical and unchanging set of conceptual relationships can be expressed by different words in a variety of languages.

APPENDIX 1: THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

It was once popular to argue from the order in the universe to the necessity of an intelligent designer of the universe. This is the ‘Argument from Design’. For example, how could the human eye, with all its complexity, come into existence just by chance? Darwin’s theory of evolution made this less convincing, however, since it seemed to offer an explanation for how such things could evolve gradually through random events over a long period, apparently without intelligent design.

Some thinkers, based on recent scientific discoveries, have put forward new forms of the argument from design, known as ‘Intelligent Design Theory’. (This is what converted Antony Flew, arguably the world’s most prominent atheist philosopher of recent years, to belief in God.) Unlike the purely philosophical / metaphysical / rational nature of the Causal Argument above, these arguments are heavily scientific in nature, and need considerable detail to explain properly. We can only mention them briefly here, without attempting to evaluate their validity.

- a. The individual cells of a living thing operate in such a way that for some of their functions, many components of one biological system all need to be simultaneously in place from the start if the system is to operate at all. Such a system, it is said, could not evolve gradually, becoming fine-tuned over millions of years. All the components would need to come together more or less fully developed at once, and (it is mathematically calculated) it is very unlikely, even with the huge dimensions of our universe, that this would happen by chance. Therefore, an intelligent designer is hypothesised.
- b. For the first living cell to reproduce itself (and so enable evolution by ‘natural selection’ among the products of reproduction to get going in the first place), it seems that a DNA molecule of great chemical complexity is needed. Again (it is calculated) it seems mathematically extremely unlikely, even with the huge dimensions of our universe, that the chemical elements of such a molecule would ever come together in the right order just by chance.
- c. Other thinkers point out that if certain ‘physical constants’ – mathematical properties affecting the whole universe – had been only very slightly different, the universe would have developed in such a way that life could not have existed. It seems very unlikely that this would happen by chance: these physical constants must have been fixed by an intelligent designer who had the specific intention that life would come into being. (True, if life hadn’t evolved, we wouldn’t be here to wonder at its existence. But by a parallel argument, consider someone facing a firing squad who inexplicably survives all the bullets being fired. Yes, if they hadn’t survived, they wouldn’t be here to wonder at their survival – yet it still calls for explanation why not one of the bullets reached its target. To solve the problem we might hypothesise an infinite number of universes – in which case at least some small proportion would be guaranteed of containing life. But such an extravagant hypothesis is gratuitous and unproven, and violates the intellectual principle of ‘Ockham’s Razor’ that we shouldn’t multiply hypothetical beings without necessity but rather look for the ontologically most ‘economical’ solution.)

These theories of ‘intelligent design’ have been criticized by some scientists as not being scientific, since they can’t be tested by experiment. Even if we grant this however, it does not mean the theories are not *rational*, a form of ‘faith in disguise’ – it is just that they employ philosophical reason in addition to scientific reason, since they use logic to pass beyond the universe observable to science. They should be considered on their merits.

(Intelligent Design Theory’ is different from so-called ‘creationism’ – the belief (derived from a very literalist interpretation of the creation account in the biblical Book of Genesis) that the world was created in six actual days only several thousand years ago, and the attempted scientific justification of this belief. Catholics believe in the Creator, and creation (in the sense that they believe that God brought the whole universe into being from nothing) but generally do not favour ‘creationism’ in this narrow sense, since it is not really scientifically tenable, and does not seem to be based on a sound interpretation of the meaning actually intended by the author of Genesis.)

APPENDIX 2: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

The primary ‘counter-argument’ we find against God’s existence is the ‘problem of evil’: if God is all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful, how can He allow suffering and evil to happen? Here are a few reflections on the question from a Christian viewpoint:

- We shouldn’t be surprised at the presence of mystery – this word isn’t an evasion of the question but an acknowledgement of the obvious truth that the human mind, its concepts and its information, are a drop in the ocean compared with the reality of God and His plan for the universe.
- Evil isn’t a positive being but essentially a *privation*, the lack of a good which ought to be present. (This is not a claim that evil is not real – it is a real privation. Similarly, blindness is something real, without being a positive entity like a rock or a tree.) This can refer to a ‘physical’ evil, such as sickness (the privation of bodily health, order and harmony) or death (the privation of life); it also applies to the moral evil of sin, the deepest evil, in which a freely chosen act of a person lacks due harmony with reason and moral law. Since evil is an ‘absence’ of being rather than a positive thing, we do not need to trace its existence back to the direct activity of the First Cause: since God is Being and Goodness, His creative act, which always produces a reflection of Himself, can only be of being and goodness.
- Still, it seems that God, while not creating evil, often allows it to happen when apparently He should be able to prevent it. ‘The fact that God permits physical and even moral evil is a mystery that God illuminates by His Son Jesus Christ who died and rose to vanquish evil. Faith gives us the certainty that God would not permit an evil if He did not cause a good to come from that very evil, by ways that we shall fully know only in eternal life.’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 324)
- What are some of the goods for the sake of which God allows evil? Firstly, created freedom itself is a great good, a primary good of the person-centred universe, since it is a necessary condition of love, in which lies our ultimate fulfilment. God has created human persons so that they can freely choose to enter into loving relationship, and ultimately union, with Him. However, this means there is the possibility that any individual will instead freely choose to reject relationship, and will rather choose distorted self-love, isolation and sin. God allows that possibility to be realised, and, respecting the human freedom He has created, allows our evil choices to have their natural consequences.
- Even from these consequences, further good is possible. Certain goods, such as compassion, patience and forgiveness, are only logically possible as the responses to perceived evil. Acts of mercy, or of courageous resistance to injustice, are good and beautiful, not merely because of their utility in fighting evil, but in themselves. The world would be a lesser place without them, and would be a less complete reflection of the full range of divine goodness.
- These acts of loving response to evil are not mere passing moments. United with Christ, Who in love and obedience to His Father fully entered into our human suffering and experienced the ultimate injustice on the Cross, they also enter into His victory over evil in the Resurrection: each of our loving actions will bear fruit in an eternal reality beyond our understanding. In this way, God comes into the very heart of each place of human suffering and injustice, and draws it into the Resurrection – but only if we are willing to respond to His grace and bring love into those places ourselves. So the mystery of the Cross illuminates the nature of God’s providence, which does not operate by forestalling all possible evil, but by bringing life out of death.

Although then we cannot resolve all the mysteries and see the specific reason God allows *each individual instance* of evil, as an attempt to *disprove* the existence of an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God, the ‘problem of evil’ is inconclusive, since we can never prove there is no greater good for which He permits a given evil. The argument thus has no rational force against the logically conclusive proof that we have already considered *for* the existence of an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God. (The above discussion makes no claim to *take away* evil, or to reconcile us *emotionally* to our sufferings: it works on the level of logic, establishing what truth and reality are in this matter of God, evil and suffering.)

From Catholic Teaching – The God of Infinite Majesty

‘The Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church believes and acknowledges that there is one true and living God, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immeasurable, incomprehensible, infinite in understanding, will and every perfection.

*Since He is one unique, completely simple and unchangeable spiritual substance,
He must be declared to be, in reality and in essence, distinct from the world,
supremely happy in and from Himself, and inexpressibly exalted
above all things that exist or can be conceived besides Him.*

*This one true God, in His goodness and almighty power and by an absolutely free plan,
at the beginning of time created from nothing both spiritual and material creation,
that is to say angelic and earthly, and then created human beings composed as it were
of both spirit and body in common. He created not to obtain or increase His own happiness,
but to show forth His perfection in the goods which He bestows upon His creatures.*

*Indeed, God protects and governs by His providence all that He has created, reaching
from one end of the earth to the other and ordering all things well. All things are open
and laid bare to His eyes, even those which will take place by the free action of creatures.’*

First Vatican Council: Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith ‘Dei Filius’ (1870)

*‘We believe in one God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Creator of things visible – such as this world in which our brief life runs its course –
and of things invisible – such as the pure spirits which are also called angels –
and Creator in each man of his spiritual and immortal soul.*

*‘We believe that this only God is absolutely one
in His most holy essence as in His other perfections,
in His omnipotence, His infinite knowledge, His providence, His will and His love.*

*“He is ‘Who is’”, as He Himself revealed to Moses; (Ex 3:14)
and He is “Love”, as the Apostle John teaches us: (1 Jn 4:8)
so that these two names, Being and Love, express ineffably the same divine reality
of Him who has wished to make Himself known to us, and who, “dwelling in light inaccessible,”
is in Himself above every name and every created thing and every created intelligence.*

*‘The mutual bonds which eternally constitute the Three Persons,
each of whom is one and the same divine Being,
are themselves the blessed inmost life of the most holy God,
infinitely beyond all we can humanly understand...’*

Pope St Paul VI, ‘Credo of the People of God’ (1968)