

Arguments for the existence of God have been codified for centuries by theologians, and supplemented by others, including purveyors of misconceived 'common sense'.

THOMAS AQUINAS' 'PROOFS'

The five 'proofs' asserted by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century don't prove anything, and are easily – though I hesitate to say so, given his eminence – exposed as vacuous. The first three are just different ways of saying the same thing, and they can be considered together. All involve an infinite regress – the answer to a question raises a prior question, and so on *ad infinitum*.

1. *The Unmoved Mover*. Nothing moves without a prior mover. This leads us to a regress, from which the only escape is God. Something had to make the first move, and that something we call God.
2. *The Uncaused Cause*. Nothing is caused by itself. Every effect has a prior cause, and again we are pushed back into regress. This has to be terminated by a first cause, which we call God.
3. *The Cosmological Argument*. There must have been a time when no physical things existed. But, since physical things exist now, there must have been something non-physical to bring them into existence, and that something we call God.

All three of these arguments rely upon the idea of a regress and invoke God to terminate it. They make the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress. Even if we allow the dubious luxury of arbitrarily conjuring up a terminator to allow an infinite regress and giving it a name, simply because we need one, there is absolutely no reason to endow that terminator with any of the properties normally ascribed to God: omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, creativity of design, to say nothing of such human attributes as listening to prayers, forgiving sins and reading innermost thoughts. Incidentally, it has not escaped the notice of logi-

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The God Delusion

chians that omniscience and omnipotence are mutually incompatible. If God is omniscient, he must already know how he is going to intervene to change the course of history using his omnipotence. But that means he can't change his mind about his intervention, which means he is not omnipotent. Karen Owens has captured this witty little paradox in equally engaging verse:

Can omniscient God, who
Knows the future, find
The omnipotence to
Change His future mind?

To return to the infinite regress and the futility of invoking God to terminate it, it is more parsimonious to conjure up, say, a 'big bang singularity', or some other physical concept as yet unknown. Calling it God is at best unhelpful and at worst perniciously misleading. Edward Lear's Nonsense Recipe for Crumboblious Cutlets invites us to 'Procure some strips of beef, and having cut them into the smallest possible pieces, proceed to cut them still smaller, eight or perhaps nine times.' Some regresses do reach a natural terminator. Scientists used to wonder what would happen if you could dissect, say, gold into the smallest possible pieces. Why shouldn't you cut one of those pieces in half and produce an even smaller smidgen of gold? The regress in this case is decisively terminated by the atom. The smallest possible piece of gold is a nucleus consisting of exactly seventy-nine protons and a slightly larger number of neutrons, attended by a swarm of seventy-nine electrons. If you 'cut' gold any further than the level of the single atom, whatever else you get it is not gold. The atom provides a natural terminator to the Crumboblious Cutlets type of regress. It is by no means clear that God provides a natural terminator to the regresses of Aquinas. That's putting it mildly, as we shall see later. Let's move on down Aquinas' list.

4. *The Argument from Degree.* We notice that things in the world differ. There are degrees of, say, goodness or perfection. But we judge these degrees only by comparison with a maximum. Humans can be both good and bad, so the maximum goodness

cannot rest in us. Therefore there must be some other maximum to set the standard for perfection, and we call that maximum God.

That's an argument? You might as well say, people vary in smelliness but we can make the comparison only by reference to a perfect maximum of conceivable smelliness. Therefore there must exist a pre-eminently peerless stinker, and we call him God. Or substitute any dimension of comparison you like, and derive an equivalently fatuous conclusion.

5. *The Teleological Argument, or Argument from Design.* Things in the world, especially living things, look as though they have been designed. Nothing that we know looks designed unless it is designed. Therefore there must have been a designer, and we call him God.* Aquinas himself used the analogy of an arrow moving towards a target, but a modern heat-seeking anti-aircraft missile would have suited his purpose better.

The argument from design is the only one still in regular use today, and it still sounds to many like the ultimate knockdown argument. The young Darwin was impressed by it when, as a Cambridge undergraduate, he read it in William Paley's *Natural Theology*. Unfortunately for Paley, the mature Darwin blew it out of the water. There has probably never been a more devastating rout of popular belief by clever reasoning than Charles Darwin's destruction of the argument from design. It was so unexpected. Thanks to Darwin, it is no longer true to say that nothing that we know looks designed unless it is designed. Evolution by natural selection produces an excellent simulacrum of design, mounting prodigious heights of complexity and elegance. And among these eminences of pseudo-design are nervous systems which – among their more modest accomplishments – manifest goal-seeking behaviour that, even in a tiny insect, resembles a sophisticated heat-seeking missile more than a simple arrow on target. I shall return to the argument from design in Chapter 4.

* I cannot help being reminded of the immortal syllogism that was smuggled into a Euclidean proof by a schoolfriend, when we were studying geometry together: 'Triangle ABC looks isosceles. Therefore . . .'