

**Aquinas and Hume on the Argument from Contingency for God's Existence**  
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Aquinas, it is generally reckoned, was unsuccessful in his attempts to prove the existence of God, and it is likewise believed that Hume and Kant have between them discredited any such attempt. The thesis which I propose in this article is that an argument for the existence of God is suggested by certain texts in Aquinas and that this argument is able to survive the objections made to such an argument by Hume. I do hold that the argument withstands Kant's attack as well, but I will restrict my examination here to Hume. The argument in question is a version of the 'proof from the contingency of the world', but is distinct from the Third Way. This article, therefore, will fall into two main parts, in which the contributions of Aquinas and Hume will be discussed.

I would like to say at the outset that I very much enjoyed delivering a version of this paper in Claremont last January, and I am grateful for the many helpful suggestions which I received on that occasion, in particular from John Cobb and Phillip Clayton, to whom I take this opportunity to express my warmest thanks. If any readers wish to make comments, ask questions, or even find out what I have to say about Kant, I would be delighted to enter into dialogue with them, and I can be contacted at:  
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## **PART I: THE THOMISTIC ARGUMENT**

There are two statements in the Thomistic corpus of the argument which I wish to consider, namely in the *De Ente et Essentia*, and in the *Summa Theologiae*, works which are separated in composition by roughly two decades. Neither statement is identical to the Third Way. Not all of the argument is unobjectionable, some of it is merely implicit in the text. These factors will necessitate some reconstruction and 'making good' on our part in the course of our analysis. Our claims regarding the success of the argument will, of course, apply to our new version. Despite the relatively long interval which separates their composition, the two statements of the argument are remarkably similar. It would be best to lay them out and allow the reader to compare them. The *De Ente* version is as follows:

Now a thing's attributes are caused either from within its nature (like a human being's sense of the ridiculous) or by some extrinsic source (like the light in the atmosphere by the sun). But the very existence of a thing can't be caused by its own form or whatness—I am talking about agent causality—because then something would be causing itself and bringing itself into existence, which is impossible. So everything in which existence and nature differ must get its existence from another. And because all getting from another must eventually lead to something possessing of itself, there must be something which can ultimately cause everything's existence because it is its own existence; otherwise the causes would go on forever, with everything which is not just existence requiring a cause of its existence, as we have said. Clearly then, intelligences are form and existence, and get their existence from a first existent which is just existence: the ultimate cause which is God. (*De Ente et Essentia, capitulum quartum, 3 - 19* in *Aquinas: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Selected and translated by Timothy McDermott. Oxford: OUP, *The World's Classics*, 1993.)

The *Summa* version is as follows:

Properties that belong to a thing over and above its own essence must derive from somewhere, either from that essence itself, as do properties peculiar to a particular species (for example the

sense of humour peculiar to man derives from his specific essence) or from an external cause (as heat in water derives from some fire). If the existence of a thing is to be other than its essence, that existence must either derive from the essence or have an external cause. Now it cannot derive merely from the essence, for nothing with derived existence suffices to bring itself into being. It follows then that, if a thing's existence differs from its nature, that existence must be externally caused. (*Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 3, a. 4. The edition used is the Dominican edition, volume 2, Timothy McDermott, ed., London: Blackfriars and Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964.)

We need not labour the point regarding these versions' similarity with each other, nor of their difference from the Third Way. The argument suggested here has three stages. First there is a statement of the principle of causality. Secondly, the principle of causality is applied to *esse*. Thirdly, the conclusion that contingent existence requires one and only one external cause is drawn.

Let us examine these stages in detail.

### ***Stage 1. The Principle of Causality***

The form which the principle of causality takes here is the assertion that anything that holds of something is caused either by what that thing (necessarily) is, that is, by its essence, or by some source external to essence, that is, by what something else is. This is based on the assumption that nothing comes from nothing. Is this assumption a merely gratuitous assertion, expressing a leap of faith regarding the rationality of the universe, or is it a more well-founded claim? To put the same question in the terms of modern philosophy: is the principle of causality, as Kant in fact maintained, a synthetic *a priori* proposition?

To classify a proposition as synthetic *a priori* is to claim that it is not an abstraction from experience, and so is immune from refutation by any particular experience, and is confirmed by any and all experience, but, that the universality which it enjoys is conferred on it not by logical necessity, but by the way in which we have to think, and hence we do not contradict ourselves in denying it. Thus, although there are in fact no exceptions to it, we know perfectly well, and can readily imagine, what would count as an exception. Presumably, the appearance of something 'out of no-where', without antecedent circumstance to which its appearance could be attributed, would count as such an exception.

Let us look at this principle from another angle. Something can come into being only if it is possible: something's being possible, therefore, is a necessary condition for its coming into being. Is it also a sufficient condition? The answer, a thesis of the Modal Calculus, may be expressed in the vernacular as follows: possibility is insufficient for actuality. Many possibilities, though genuine, are logically incompatible: it is possible for me to continue sitting, and it is equally possible for me to stand up, but since each involves the negation of the other, they are mutually exclusive. If, then, possibility were sufficient for actuality, all possibilities would, as possibilities, be actual, and the world would become a stack of actually existing, mutually incompatible, situations. Likewise, there could be no unfulfilled possibilities, and unicorns, say, or mammoths, would have to exist, for they are, I take it, possible.

One might say, in sum, that if possibility were sufficient for actuality, everything which was possible would be actual, and since every contingent proposition *p*, precisely as *possibly* true, requires also the possibility of its contradictory  $\sim p$  being also true, it follows that both *p* and  $\sim p$  are true together. Thus, possibility is insufficient for actuality.

Thus, if anything comes into being, or put another way, if any situation is realised, its bare possibility is insufficient to account for its realisation. More formally, if *s* is a possible but non-actual situation, its

realisation requires that there be at least one factor, *c*, itself actual, distinct from *s*, which accounts for the actualisation of *s*, that is, whereby *s* can be made actual. We shall take this proposition to be the principle of causality, and the factor *c* is what is meant by the term '(efficient) cause'. The qualification 'itself actual' is necessary, because, if *c* is itself merely possible, then possibility is sufficient after all to account for actuality. A possibility may be an efficient cause only insofar as it is clothed in actuality, and it is the actual as such which acts as cause. The possibility of my untimely death may be the cause of my taking out an insurance policy, but this possibility comes clothed as my fear of dying and leaving my family unprovided for.

It is clear what a denial of this principle would entail. Such a denial would be equivalent to the assertion that mere possibility *is* sufficient for actuality, with the absurd implication which we have just suggested. This incoherent denial is no more to be imagined than is a square circle. We can, of course, within certain limits, imagine anything we like, and are unconstrained as to assumptions we may wish to make; there is nothing irrational in talking of something without regard to its origins or antecedents. But the proposition 'possibility is sufficient for actuality' is incapable, and on logical grounds alone, epistemologically of being the pattern or principle of any account we can give of how things come to be, and ontologically of being the principle of how things come to be. Therefore, since the proposition 'possibility is sufficient for actuality' is an absurdity, it is *logically* necessary that there be a factor *c* operating in the realisation of any possible state of affairs, whether we advert to it not, or whether we know about it or not. In this way we should rather think of the principle of causality as analytic and *a priori*.

This brings us to another point. *S* itself is not a 'mere' possibility, but what we may call a potentiality. Potentiality is incarnate possibility, anchored in and as what is actual. Potentiality may be defined, therefore, as 'what is possible as a function of what is actual' or, 'that which what is already actual is capable of becoming'. Potentiality thus has a futural aspect, for it is what can be, but is not yet. To deny there is an *s*, taken in this sense rather than in the sense of a pure or unanchored possibility, is to deny that the new situation has emerged from any antecedent, as opposed to denying that it has any cause. In that latter case *s* and *c* dovetail, in that *s* becomes simply identical to what *c* can do. It does not follow from this that *s* determines what *c* actually does do, so that we are not obliged to fall into the trap of asserting that a possibility is sufficient for its own actualisation.

It would seem, therefore, that any assumption of radical novelty, that is, novelty without antecedent, is coherent, unless it can be shown that there must be an antecedent in order for the efficient cause to work. It may well be that every novelty we experience is a development of what is intrinsic to some situation which precedes it, but the assertion that there is radical novelty seems to contain no inconsistencies, at least in that it does not invoke the proposition that possibility is sufficient for actuality. Thus, it is possible for us to entertain the idea of things popping up out of no-where, in a way in which it is impossible for us to entertain the idea of a breach of the principle of causality; indeed it is precisely to this antecedent-less novelty that the notion of the Big Bang, the first event in the universe, which as first can have no antecedent, amounts.

## ***Stage 2: Causality, essence, and esse.***

The second movement of the argument consists in the application of the principle of causality to existence, to *esse*, itself. This is to say that any attribution of existence to a thing must be consonant with the principle of causality, must not, that is, imply or be equivalent to, the assertion that possibility is sufficient for actuality. What is the relation between *esse* and essence, between the fact of a thing's existence on the one hand, and what that thing is, on the other?

Several issues are raised in this question, but it is above all necessary to determine more exactly what the term 'essence' means. As Aquinas himself would point out, essence is understood to be what a thing (necessarily) is, the source of its characteristic behaviour, and, as quiddity, the term of our knowledge of what it is and does. But Aquinas worked out a conception of essence more truly metaphysical and ontologically more profound than these legacies in his thought of earlier speculation. In effect, Aquinas understood the notion of essence in terms of its orientation towards *esse*. I suggest that this is best captured by treating essence simply as those characteristics, or better, as that unitary set of characteristics, which is or are necessary for something to exist, or, equivalently, without which it cannot exist. We might formulate this more accurately:

for any property  $Fx$ ,  $Fx$  is an essential property of an individual  $i$  if and only if  $Fx$ 's not holding of  $i$  is equivalent to there being no entity  $y$ , identical to  $i$ . (That is, that there is nothing which is  $i$ , which in turn means that  $i$  does not exist.)

Moreover, a property's being an essential one implies that individual  $i$ 's existing in turn implies that  $Fi$ , that  $i$  always exhibits the property.

Let us suppose, by way of illustration of these principles, that exhibiting certain kinds of brain activity is an essential property for Jane. If that is so, then, i) if Jane does not exhibit the property, she is not, or is no longer, alive, and vice versa, and ii) if she is alive, she exhibits the property, and vice versa. Moreover, if i) and ii) hold, it follows also that the property is an essential one for Jane. In short, Jane's existing means, or is materially equivalent to, her exhibiting the property in question. To say that two items are materially equivalent, is to say that they are related by the biconditional, as are the propositions 'Jones's fingerprints were on the weapon', and 'Jones touched the weapon with a bare hand'. Although their 'formal' meanings may differ, they describe the same state of affairs—Jones's touching the weapon with his bare hands *is* his leaving his fingerprints on it—and cannot have different truth-values.

But, the crucial point is, that however *necessary* a given property may be for a given individual's existence, it is never *sufficient* for that individual's existence. This is the cardinal point on which the whole argument turns, and it is indeed a familiar one:

To posit a triangle, and yet to reject its three angles, is self-contradictory; but there is no contradiction in rejecting the triangle together with its three angles. (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Norman Kemp Smith. London: Macmillan, 1973, page 502.)

There may be many properties without which a thing cannot exist, and even properties which are materially equivalent to its existing, but there is none that cancels the possibility, or, better, potentiality, of non-existence, so that its existence becomes necessary. This is equivalent to saying that existence is never attributed on logical grounds alone, or that an assertion of the form 'x exists', where  $x$  is a predicate or predicate-string, is always contingent. To know that a predicate-string is consistent is to know that what it describes is possible, but since possibility is insufficient for actuality, this is not sufficient to allow us to know that what it describes actually exists. There is thus no feature that a thing can have which makes actual the case of that thing's existence over its non-existence.

Even if a thing is, it might not have been, and even if it lasts for an indefinitely great period of time, its future non-existence is still possible. If it exists it is *now* a realised possibility, and its future existence is a possibility which has yet to be realised. But the possibility which is now realised and the possibility which has yet to be realised must admit, or have admitted, of their opposite, namely that the thing in question might never have come into being or might cease to be. For if this were not the case, its being and its going-to-be would be necessary. When Aquinas speaks of things in which essence and existence

differ, he thereby refers to this real non-necessity of their being, which had led Avicenna to describe existence as an accident. This is the meaning of contingency.

It is also the meaning of temporality. To exist is to exist over time, and that which exists for zero time fails to exist. For a thing to exist for a time, moreover, is for it to have its (continued) existence or non-existence offered to it as the defining notes of its future: it will either (continue to) exist in the future, or it will not. Both are equally genuine possibilities, or the thing is not contingent. This is to say that there is nothing true of it (now) which guarantees its (future) existence, precisely because, with the removal of the parenthetic insertions, there is nothing true of it which guarantees its existence. Since the possibility of its (continued) existence or otherwise is always futural, it follows that its being contingent implies its being temporal. But it can be contingent only if its (continued) existence is offered to it as futural, and hence as temporal. In sum: if a thing is contingent, it exists in time, and if it exists in time, it is contingent.

In the case of something which cannot but be, the very opposite is true. If something cannot but be, then its existence at any moment guarantees its existence at every moment, so that, if it exists, its existence is never merely potential. Its existence is thus never distant from it futurally, so it cannot be said to have a future. Neither can it be said, for the same reason, to have a past. Its existing is therefore not temporal: it just—atemporally—is. In sum: contingency is equivalent to temporality, as necessity is to atemporality.

Now, let us look at the reason why Aquinas objects to things' essence causing their *esse*. He maintains that if a thing's own essence caused its existence then, as he puts it in the *De Ente et Essentia*, it would be its own cause, and would bring itself into existence—*sic aliqua res esset causa sui ipsius, et aliqua res seipsam in esse produceret*—which is impossible, or, as he puts it in the *Summa*, because nothing suffices to be the cause of its own being—*quia nulla res sufficit quod sit sibi causa essendi*.

The texts read like compacted references to the kind of point we have been making about a thing's necessity and sufficiency for existence. There is nothing which holds of any thing which annuls the possibility of its non-existence, or the thing is no longer contingent and temporal. There is therefore no feature of a thing which accounts for the actuality of its being over its non-being: as he puts it, nothing is sufficient to be the cause of its own existence. This is true instantaneously and over any duration. But, unless possibility is sufficient for actuality, there must be some factor, not identical to the thing's essence, which is the source of its existence. We shall now explore this point, and the conclusion which it yields.

### ***Stage 3: The Conclusion***

Things do not merely exist, they exist for some temporal interval: they last. Since at no moment, and over no period do they make actual the fact of their own existence, on pain of ceasing to be contingent, it follows that there must be some factor, which is no feature of theirs, which accounts for their (continued) existence, for as long, precisely, as that existence lasts. Such a factor is a cause of existence as such, namely, the, or, if there is a plurality of such factors, a, difference between contingent—temporal—reality and absolute nothingness.

What is the nature of such a factor? It would have to be sufficient to actualise the case that some other thing exist, or, more simply, sufficient to cause the existence as such of something other than itself, and would also have actually to exist itself, otherwise it would be the case that a mere possibility is sufficient for actuality. A thing which is receptive of its being, which depends on another for that being, is, equivalently, incapable of making it actual; in contrast, something which is able to communicate existence to something other than itself need depend on nothing other than itself to exist. Something

which both is, and is communicative of existence, therefore, exists of itself. If it exists of itself, it cannot be produced by anything else. In sum, something which does not exist of itself cannot communicate existence, and whatever communicates existence exists of itself. But something which exists of itself would be badly described as self-productive, since, this would imply that as cause it was logically prior, and as effect, as logically posterior, to itself. There is simply no distinction in such a factor between what it is and the fact that it is, and so it follows that the only way in which it is possible to characterise it is in the way Aquinas actually does, namely as 'being (its own) existence'. In sum, this thing must be what it is to be. This is equivalent to saying that the 'is' of predication is inappropriate to it, as bespeaking a lack of such identity, so that the 'is' used of it can only function as an 'is' of identity, or an 'is' of existence.

An implication of this reasoning is that a reformulation of Aquinas's conclusion, at least as expressed in the *De Ente* text, is required. Aquinas maintains there that

there must be something which can ultimately cause everything's existence because it is its own existence; otherwise the causes would go on forever, with everything which is not just existence requiring a cause of its existence.

Since nothing that exists of itself can be produced by anything else, it follows that there is no question of a hierarchy of such causes, ranged so that the one above causes the one(s) below it to exist. Hence, we can reformulate the text to read simply: '*therefore* there must be something which can cause every contingent thing's existence because it is its own existence'.

To be one's own existence, that is, to be what it is to be, is the 'property' which makes it impossible, precisely, either that its possessor be distinct from (its own) existence, or, as sheer existence, have any other properties. This in turn implies that there can be no difference between any supposed two such 'existences', and so unity, in the sense of absolute uniqueness—there is but one God—is a, or even *the*, character of the Divine.

As the final move in this section, I propose the following restatement of the argument, adjusted in line with the foregoing considerations. I shall refer to the following argument henceforth as 'the Thomistic argument'.

What holds of something must do so either in virtue of what that thing is, or in virtue of what something else is. But a contingent thing's existence never holds of it simply in virtue of what it is, on pain of the thing's thereby being a self-actualising possibility, which is incoherent, or of its not being contingent and temporal. Since to exist is to last for some temporal interval, it follows that any contingent thing, for as long as it exists, derives its existence from another. This other must be sufficient to cause something other than itself to exist for as long as that other exists, and it cannot be so unless it actually exists itself. Something which is able to communicate existence need depend on nothing other than itself in order to exist. Something which both is, and which communicates existence, therefore, exists of itself, and so cannot be produced by anything else. But, something which exists of itself is identical therefore to its own existence, or is just existence, or is what it is to be, and so is unique. Thus, since there are contingent things, there exists one and only one thing which is of itself, and is what it is to be, the difference between contingent reality and sheer nothingness. This is what the word 'God' means.

## PART 2: THE ARGUMENT FROM CONTINGENCY IN HUME

Does the argument of which we are now in possession successfully repel the attacks mounted by Hume on the argument from contingency? Hume's treatment of the argument from contingency occurs in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part IX. It is noteworthy both that the argument is examined in only one of the twelve 'Parts' which constitute the *Dialogues*, while the argument from design is analysed in far greater detail, and that the contingency argument's proponent is the milk-and-water character Demea, rather than the more robust and acute Cleanthes. Cleanthes, the proponent of the argument from design, figures as Demea's antagonist in Part IX, although the critical voice in the rest of the *Dialogues* is Philo's. No attempt to prove the existence of God, according to the meaning we have here discerned in the term, is attempted or examined in the *Dialogues*; God has been replaced by a demiurge, and the discussion of the relation between God and the world—'creation' as the granting of sheer existence is not applicable here—never goes beyond the model of the craftsman and his artefact, or perhaps we should say, of the relation between an Anaxagorean Nous and the matter which it shapes but does not create. Despite this, Hume's treatment is worth looking at, because his analysis raises issues which are nonetheless relevant to the Thomistic argument.

Something to which we must advert at the outset is the disparity of discourse between Hume, and indeed Kant, on the one hand, and the Thomistic argument, on the other. We try to address this issue by 'translating' the claims made by Hume and Kant into the language in which we have framed the Thomistic argument, but the notion which is likely to prove the most awkward is that of 'necessary being' or the like, which is not an expression we favour. Broadly, when it is used by Hume and Kant, it means something like 'entity whose non-existence cannot be thought or asserted without contradiction', and is thus, at least covertly, existential in import. Part of their critique is to show that the implicit existential assertion is not warranted, certainly not by the mere phrase itself, and they accuse proponents of the argument, therefore, of using the phrase to define something into existence. That the phrase itself as such does not warrant any existential belief, and that it is wrong-headed to use it in this way are points with which we are in whole-hearted agreement. It is vital to note, therefore, that the phrases of which we make use, such as 'the difference between finite reality and absolute nothingness' or 'something which is its own existence, or is what it is to be' are not simply identical to 'necessary being' as this phrase is used by Hume and Kant, not least because these phrases are not intended by us to be existential claims, covert or otherwise.

While it is true that something in which 'what it is' is identical to its existence cannot but be, this point alone does not guarantee that there is anything that cannot but be. This is why the Thomistic argument is required. It is the existence as such of the universe which is the evidence for the existence of God, rather than any meaning which goes with the word 'God', and what the Thomistic argument is meant to do is to show that and how the existence of the world is evidence for the existence of God. The fact that the Divine cannot but be is a consequence of the argument, as we have seen, not a premise. For all we know there might have been no world, and no God either, but because there is a world, we know that God exists and cannot but exist. What the argument, if successful, shows to be impossible is that there could be a world and no God.

Thus, though the phrase 'necessary being' occurs in what follows, we now issue the *caveat* that we take it as an equivalent to our own phrases, and that no existential claim is intended in it as such. We recall that these phrases, which give meaning to the word 'God', are worked out in the Thomistic argument as answers to the question regarding what must be true of something which is capable of supporting that kind of being which cannot support itself.

Let us now get down to our analysis of Hume. That he has abandoned, or not truly grasped, the notion of God as creator, as source of existence and all that this entails, is manifest in the interruption made by Cleanthes on the encomium mounted by Demea of the merits of the ‘argument *a priori*’. Demea claims that this argument shows the ‘infinity of the Divine attributes’ including unity, which can ‘never be ascertained with certainty’ from any other kind of argument, or from ‘contemplating the works of nature’. These points are quite correct, even granting the limits of Demean discourse. But Cleanthes will have none of it, and Philo manifests the empiricist’s suspicion of arguments which only people ‘of a metaphysical head’ will find convincing, people, that is, who ‘have accustomed themselves to abstract reasoning’, and who ‘have transferred the same habit of thinking to subjects, where it ought not to have place’, people who, in more modern parlance, confuse empirical, contingent claims with analytic, necessary statements. That this is a travesty of what metaphysics is meant to be need not be underlined, and we leave the point without further comment.

Demea’s argument runs as follows:

Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence; it being absolutely impossible for anything to produce itself, or be the cause of its own existence. In mounting up, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession, without any ultimate cause at all, or must at last have recourse to some ultimate cause, that is *necessarily* existent: Now that the first supposition is absurd may be thus proved. In the infinite chain or succession of causes and effects, each single effect is determined to exist by the power and efficacy of that cause, which immediately preceded; but the whole eternal chain or succession, taken together, is not determined or caused by any thing: And yet it is evident that it requires a cause or reason, as much as any particular object, which begins to exist in time. The question is still reasonable, why this particular succession of causes existed from all eternity, and not any other succession, or no succession at all. If there be no necessarily existent Being, any supposition, which can be formed, is equally possible; nor is there any more absurdity in nothing’s having existed from eternity, than there is in that succession of causes, which constitutes the universe. What was it then, which determined something to exist rather than nothing, and bestowed being on a particular possibility, exclusive of the rest? *External causes*, there are supposed to be none. *Chance* is a word without a meaning. Was it *nothing*? But that can never produce any thing. We must, therefore, have recourse to a necessarily existent Being, who carries the REASON of his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction. There is consequently such a Being; that is, there is a Deity. (*David Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Edited and with an Introduction by Stanley Tweyman. London: Rutledge, 1991, pages 148-149. Emphases in the original.)

There are many good points in this argument, and yet it must generate very grave misgivings. One is, I think, inclined on reading it to say, ‘so near, and yet so far’! Moreover, even the most cursory inspection will reveal its divergence from the Thomistic argument. The failure lies, I suggest, mainly in its logical structure, despite the fact that many of the points made in this argument echo (from afar) the principles on which the Thomistic argument is based. Before examining Hume’s reaction to it, we shall express our own misgivings regarding it. These are three in number.

Firstly, Demea argues:

In mounting up, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession without any ultimate cause at all, or must have recourse to some ultimate cause, that is necessarily existent. (*Dialogues*, page 148)

Demea, unless he specifies more clearly what he means, may be open to the Russellian objection that such an infinite series of (non-creative, i.e., which do not communicate existence as such, but modify in some way what already is) causes is not impossible. We do not need to judge the weight of this objection, since the Thomistic argument shows that the granting of existence is immediate, with no intermediate creators either possible or necessary: something which depends on another for its (continued) existence is not sufficient for its own or any other's existence, and cannot itself communicate existence, while something which can communicate existence as such is sufficient for its own existence and need not and cannot rely on anything other than itself in order to be. Thus there can be nothing which is both, and the notion of an intermediate creator is a nonsense.

Our second misgiving is more serious, and the reason for it is also contained in the text we have just quoted, namely, in the imputation of necessary existence to the final cause. A further text, at the very end of Demea's argument, makes the nature of our worry very clear:

We ... must at last have recourse to some ultimate cause, that is necessarily existent... We must, therefore, have recourse to a necessarily existent Being, who carries the REASON of his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction. (*Dialogues*, page 149. Emphasis in the original.)

This, we may venture to say, is Demea's worst mistake, and is the very error criticised by Kant, one that gives credence to the (mistaken) belief that the argument from contingency collapses into the invalid 'ontological' argument. Instead of clarifying what such intermediate causes must be, thereby showing the notion of an intermediate creator for the nonsense it is, Demea arbitrarily closes the chain of causes, and saves it from being endless by the device of assuming that there must be a last element which qualifies as last precisely by being necessary. This, of course, is to make the argument rely, not on the intrinsic impossibility of the series, but on the putative logical impossibility of God's non-existence.

Thus, Demea abandons the perspective of the argument from contingency in favour of an 'argument' to the effect that God 'cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction'. In other words, 'God does not exist' is a contradiction, presumably because 'God' means 'logically necessarily existent Being', and a logically necessarily existent Being exists necessarily. This (miserable) tautology leaves unanswered the question as to whether or not there is such a being, for the reason that the tautology is really hypothetical, as follows: for any  $x$ , if  $x$  is such that it must exist,  $x$  is necessarily existent. And that, as they say, is a big 'if'.

It would seem that the root of the problem is the lack of clarification of the kind of cause which is in question here. It is more than probable that what Demea has in mind is a series of ancestors, each generation of which begets its progeny, and has no further responsibility for it, which in turn begets its progeny, and so on. But that is not what is really in question, for the kind of cause arrived at in the Thomistic argument is one which actualises the possibility of something's existence *for as long as that something exists*. This is an activity of a wholly different order than the action of a progenitor or series of progenitors.

Our third misgiving is that the Demean argument contains an obvious category mistake, one on which Cleanthes is quick to pounce. The category mistake is contained in the following text on page 148:

the whole eternal chain, or succession, taken together, is not determined or caused by any thing: And yet it is evident that it requires a cause or reason, as much as any particular object, which begins to exist in time.

Hume's elegant diagnosis of the error, on page 150, runs:

Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. That is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.

The only thing that can be said in Demea's defence is that he has dimly—very dimly—grasped that all causality, as communication of actuality, works under subordination to the one cause which is actuality itself, and is the source of any actuality that things possess or come to possess. But this doesn't get Demea off the hook because he has no notion of what amounts to participation in actuality.

Hume's reaction to Demea's argument properly begins with the observation that 'there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*'. In support of this position, Hume offers the following:

Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no Being, therefore, whose existence is demonstrable. (*Dialogues*, page 149.)

Let us consider these points in turn. It is clear that in the first sentence Hume should be taken to mean 'contradictory' rather than contrary, but this is a small point. Now, a proposition  $p$  which expresses a matter of contingency might be either true or false; yet at the same time, be known to be true (or false), and that as a consequence of the truth-value of other propositions. More simply, we are able to ascertain the truth-value of some propositions by argument. If this is so, then  $p$  is, say, demonstrably true, while  $\sim p$  is not inconsistent. Thus it is false that 'nothing is demonstrable, unless the contradictory implies a contradiction'. We generate contradiction when we deny logical laws, that is, those very structures which allow us to infer the contingent truth or falsity of non-tautologous propositions from others.

Further, we may say that the principle 'nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction' is a psychologistic version of the (entirely correct) principle that 'nothing that is consistent implies a contradiction'. The principle 'whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent' is likewise a psychologistic version of the view that all existential propositions are contingent. This is our view also, unless, of course, the proposition in question denies the existence of something which is itself inconsistent, such as a square circle, in which case the denial is necessarily true. The assertion ' $x$  does not exist', therefore, is never inconsistent. But it does not follow that the proposition ' $x$  exists' cannot be demonstrated, unless it is impossible validly to infer its truth from other existential propositions.

The kernel of Hume's objection is the following:

It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the non-existence of what we formerly conceived to exist: nor can the mind ever lie under a necessity of supposing any object to remain always in being: in the same manner as we lie under a necessity of always conceiving twice two to be four. The words, therefore, necessary existence have no meaning; or which is the same thing, none that is consistent. (*Dialogues*, page 149.)

This amounts to saying that existential assertions are never tautologous, and their denial therefore, never contradictory, no matter what the  $x$  in question may be. In particular, the sentence 'there exists an  $x$  such that  $x$  is Divine' is not tautologously true, and its denial, for that reason, is not a contradiction. Thus if 'necessary existence' is a way of referring to the putative tautologous nature of such a sentence, then, at the least, the phrase never actually denotes anything. In sum, while it must be true that 'if something

exists of necessity, it exists of necessity', it would still be possible to say, without contradiction, that there is nothing that exists of necessity.

A vital point must be reinforced here, although we have encountered it already. The Thomistic argument does not hold that God must exist because of any putative tautological characteristics supposed to inhere in a sentence that asserts God's existence. The proposition ' $p$  implies  $q$ ' (say, 'if the world exists, God exists') does not assert either  $p$  or  $q$ , but only the impossibility of ' $p$  and  $\sim q$ ', and to advance validly, one must know that  $p$  is the case (or that  $\sim q$  is). In short, there must be something to activate the implication, there must be a  $p$  (or a  $\sim q$ ) to act as evidence.

The evidence we have for the existence of God is the existence of the world, the totality of contingent reality. Thus, the move characteristic of the Thomistic argument is the disclosure of the existence of the world as evidence for that of God: one contingent existential proposition thereby acting as evidence for the truth of another. Due to the nature of contingent reality, the argument runs, if God did not exist, neither would the contingent reality which is the world. What the argument shows to be impossible, if it succeeds, is that the world should exist while God does not exist. If there had been no contingent reality, for all we know, there might have been no God either, but, precisely because we know there is such reality, we know that God exists and must exist. Thus, at the risk, perhaps, of labouring the obvious, we do not infer the existence of God from God's 'necessity', but rather God's having always to be from the existence of the world.

Another way of looking at the same point is that the argument does not consist entirely of tautologies: the conclusion that God exists is contingent, and indeed contingent on the truth of another proposition, itself contingent, namely that there exists at least one contingent—temporal—thing.

This point is entirely compatible with God's also *having* to exist, since the only thing that can act as the source of the existence of contingent reality is something which is what it is to be and hence not capable of not existing. We might put it thus: although for all we know, there might have been nothing which had or has to exist, we happen to know that there actually is such a thing, and therefore that there always was and would have been, even were there no contingent reality.

This implies at the very least that there can be some other meaning to the words 'necessary existence' than 'tautologous existential affirmation', which is indeed without meaning. Hume himself does seem to treat the words 'necessary existence' as somewhat more than sheer nonsense when he asks:

... why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being... ? We dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities, which, were they known, would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five. (*Dialogues*, page 149.)

Indeed, we dare not, even after some centuries' worth of scientific research into the nature of matter since Hume's time! But do we really need to know all the 'qualities of matter' in order to disqualify it as 'the necessarily existent Being'? The answer, it would seem, is, not if we can find an essential determination of matter which is incompatible with its being such a 'necessarily existent Being'. Can we, in fact, do so? The answer would appear to be 'yes'. Matter exists temporally, only in the now, with an open and undefined future, as we suggested, and this is so even if it is true that matter always exists, or that there is no time  $t$  at which matter does not exist. Matter is always changing, while as we saw, if something cannot but be, then its existence at any moment guarantees its existence at every moment, so that, if it exists, its existence is never merely potential, and so it cannot be said to have a future, nor can it be said, for the same reason, to have a past. Its existing is therefore not temporal: it just—atemporally—is. We concluded that contingency is equivalent to temporality, as necessity is to

atemporality. Thus, the temporality, the being realised through time, of matter is incompatible with the atemporality which must belong to what cannot but be, and there is a difference between being at any and every time  $t$ —as matter may be—and having to be such that the opposite is impossible.

Hume continues:

I find only one argument employed to prove, that the material world is not the necessarily existent Being; and this argument is derived from the contingency both of the matter and the form of the world. ‘Any particle of matter’, it is said, ‘may be conceived to be annihilated; and any form may be conceived to be altered. Such an annihilation or alteration, therefore, is not impossible.’ But it seems a great partiality not to perceive, that the same argument extends equally to the Deity, so far as we have any conception of him; and that the mind can at least imagine him to be non-existent, or his attributes to be altered. (*Dialogues*, pages 149—150.)

It would be as well to rephrase some of these claims, as we have already done with others, in more contemporary terms. The first amounts at least to the proposition that there is no contradiction in the assertion that matter does not exist, or might not have existed. This, indeed, is what the contingency of matter means. From what we have already said, it is clear that we are in agreement with this, and that the same argument extends equally to the Deity, so that the proposition ‘God does not exist’ for all we know might well have been true, and contains no contradiction either.

But there is more than this in the text just cited. Hume claims, in addition, that there is no contradiction in the proposition to the effect that the attributes of the Deity are subject to change. Since the meaning which the Thomistic argument establishes for the word ‘God’, namely, the difference between contingent reality and absolute nothingness, is incompatible with being temporal, at least to the extent that the future existence of God, and all that this logically entails, is not and never open for settlement, it follows that we cannot without contradiction assert that God *as God*, is capable of alteration. It is precisely this point which reveals the poor notion which Hume attaches to the word ‘God’, namely, just another, albeit very powerful and clever, being among beings, an artificer or architect, not a creator. The most important contribution made by Hume to this debate may well be his demolition and removal of this impoverished idea of ‘god’ from the philosophical stage.