

According To Thomas Aquinas, God Is A Necessarily Existing Being. Created Beings, By Contrast, Are Contingent

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Understanding the nature of existence has long been a central theme in philosophy and theology. Among the most influential thinkers in this realm is Thomas Aquinas, whose groundbreaking synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy offers profound insights into the concept of necessary and contingent beings. According to Thomas Aquinas, God is a necessarily existing being—meaning God's existence is not subject to any conditions or circumstances—whereas created beings, including humans, animals, and the universe itself, are contingent, depending on something else for their existence. This distinction forms the foundation of Aquinas's arguments for the existence of God and shapes much of classical theistic thought.

The Concept of Necessity and Contingency in Aquinas's Philosophy

What Does "Necessary Being" Mean?

In philosophy, a necessary being is one whose existence is not dependent on anything else. Its non-existence is impossible; it must exist in every possible world. Aquinas posited that God embodies this necessity, meaning that God's existence is essential and unconditioned.

Understanding "Contingent Beings"

Contingent beings, on the other hand, are entities whose existence is dependent on other factors or causes. They could either exist or not exist; their existence is not guaranteed and could have been otherwise. Humans, animals, plants, and even the universe itself are examples of contingent beings.

The Significance of This Distinction

This distinction is crucial because it helps explain the difference between the divine and the created. It also provides a logical basis for arguing the necessity of God's existence, as opposed to the contingent nature of everything else.

Aquinas's Five Ways: Evidence for a Necessary Being

Thomas Aquinas articulated his proofs for the existence of God through his famous "Five Ways," which are rooted in observations about the natural world and the nature of causality, motion, and contingency.

1. The Argument from Motion (First Way)

- Everything in motion must be set in motion by something else.
- There cannot be an infinite regress of movers.
- Therefore, there must be an Unmoved Mover—identically, God—who is necessary and self-existent.

2. The Argument from Causation (Second Way)

- Every effect has a cause.
- There cannot be an infinite regress of causes.
- There must be an uncaused first cause—God—that exists necessarily.

3. The Argument from Contingency (Third Way)

- Contingent beings exist, but they could possibly not exist.
- Since at some point, contingent beings would all fail to exist, there must be a necessary being that sustains all contingent beings.
- This necessary being is God.

4. The Argument from Degree (Fourth Way)

- There are varying degrees of qualities like goodness, truth, and nobility.
- These degrees imply an ultimate standard—an absolute maximum—necessitating a perfect, necessary being.

5. The Teleological Argument (Fifth Way)

- Natural things exhibit order and purpose.
- This order suggests an intelligent designer—God—who exists necessarily.

The Nature of God as a Necessarily Existing Being

Divine Necessity

For Aquinas, God's necessary existence is characterized by:

- Self-sufficiency: God does not depend on anything else for existence.
- Eternality: God's existence is outside time; God exists outside of the constraints of temporal change.
- Immutability: God is unchanging, since change would imply dependence on something else or potentiality.

How This Differentiates God from Creation

While God's existence is necessary, created beings are contingent because:

- They depend on causes or conditions for their existence.
- Their existence could be otherwise—they could have not existed.
- They are limited in nature and existence, unlike the infinite perfection of God.

The Implications of Aquinas's View on Contingency and Necessity

The Argument for Theism

Aquinas's distinction provides a logical foundation for the belief in a necessary, uncaused cause—God—who sustains all contingent beings.

The Nature of the Universe

- The universe itself is contingent.
- Its existence depends on the necessary being—God.
- The universe could have not existed, but given its existence, it points back to an uncaused, necessary cause.

The Ontological Status of God

- Necessary existence is a unique attribute of God.
- Unlike contingent beings, God's existence is not contingent upon anything else.
- This attribute makes God the ultimate foundation of reality.

Classical Theological and Philosophical Implications

The Argument from Simplicity

- The necessity of God's existence aligns with the idea of a simple, uncomposed being.
- God is not composed of parts or dependent on anything else.

The Problem of Contingency

- Recognizing the contingency of creation underscores the dependence of everything on divine necessity.
- It emphasizes humility and the acknowledgment of a higher, necessary being.

The Role of Contingent Beings in the Universe

- They serve as manifestations of God's creative power.
- Their transient nature highlights the importance of understanding divine necessity.

Modern Perspectives and Criticisms

Contemporary Support

- Many philosophers and theologians continue to find Aquinas's distinctions compelling.
- The argument from contingency remains influential in philosophical debates about the existence of God.

Criticisms and Challenges

- Some critics argue that the distinction between necessary and contingent beings is not sufficient proof of God's existence.
- Others challenge the assumption that causality must ultimately lead to a necessary being.

Conclusion

According to Thomas Aquinas, the distinction between necessary and contingent beings is fundamental to understanding the nature of existence and the existence of God. God, as a necessarily existing being, embodies pure actuality, uncaused, eternal, and self-sufficient. Contingent beings, by contrast, depend on causes external to themselves, highlighting their vulnerability and transient nature. This philosophical framework not only offers a compelling argument for the existence of a divine necessary being but also deepens our appreciation of the universe's contingency and the divine foundation that sustains it. Through Aquinas's insights, we gain a clearer understanding of the profound relationship between necessary existence and contingent creation, shaping centuries of theological and philosophical thought.

Frequently Asked Questions

What does Thomas Aquinas mean when he says God is a necessarily existing being?

Thomas Aquinas posits that God exists by necessity, meaning His existence is uncaused and impossible to not exist, unlike created beings which depend on something else for their existence.

How do created beings differ from God according to

Aquinas?

Created beings are contingent, meaning their existence is not necessary and depends on a cause or creator, whereas God's existence is necessary and independent.

Why does Aquinas argue that God must be a necessarily existing being?

He argues that for the universe to exist, there must be a being whose existence is necessary and not contingent on anything else, which is God.

What is the significance of contingent beings in Aquinas's philosophy?

Contingent beings highlight the dependency of created things on a necessary being, emphasizing the need for a first cause or necessary being—God.

Can contingent beings exist without a necessary being, according to Aquinas?

No, according to Aquinas, contingent beings cannot exist without the existence of a necessary being who sustains and causes their existence.

How does Aquinas's concept of necessary being support his cosmological argument?

It supports the argument by positing that there must be a necessary being—God—that explains the existence of contingent beings in the universe.

What is the difference between necessary and contingent existence in philosophical terms?

Necessary existence means existing in all possible worlds and not depending on anything else, while contingent existence depends on external causes or conditions.

How does Aquinas's view of God's necessary existence relate to the idea of divine perfection?

Since God's existence is necessary, it reflects divine perfection—God possesses all perfections inherently and necessarily, unlike contingent beings.

What role does the distinction between necessary and contingent beings play in understanding the nature of God?

It helps clarify that God is the uncaused, necessary being upon which all contingent beings depend, emphasizing His unique and independent existence.

Is the concept of necessary existence unique to Aquinas's theology, or is it found in other philosophical traditions?

While prominent in Aquinas's theology, the idea of necessary existence is also present in other philosophical and theological traditions, such as in Aristotelian and classical theistic thought.

Additional Resources

According To Thomas Aquinas, God Is A Necessarily Existing Being. Created Beings, By Contrast, Are Contingent

Introduction

The question of God's existence and nature has been a central concern in philosophy and theology for centuries. Among the most influential figures in this discourse is Thomas Aquinas, whose synthesis of Christian doctrine and Aristotelian philosophy has shaped Western thought profoundly. One of his fundamental assertions is that God is a necessarily existing being, whereas created beings are contingent. This distinction not only underpins Aquinas's proof for God's existence but also influences his metaphysical understanding of the universe. This article explores in detail what Aquinas means by necessity and contingency, how he argues for God's necessary existence, and the implications of this distinction in metaphysical and theological contexts.

Understanding Necessity and Contingency: Definitions and Distinctions

The Nature of Necessity

In philosophical terms, a being or proposition is necessary if it cannot be otherwise; its non-existence is impossible. Necessity implies an unconditioned existence—something that exists by its very nature, independent of external factors or conditions.

Key features of necessary beings:

- Existence is essential: Their existence is not contingent upon anything else.
- Unconditional existence: Their being does not depend on anything external.
- Immutable and eternal: Often associated with divine attributes like omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence.

The Nature of Contingency

In contrast, contingent beings are those whose existence is not necessary—they could possibly not exist. Their existence depends on certain conditions or causes, and their non-existence is a real possibility.

Key features of contingent beings:

- Existence is dependent: Their existence relies on external factors or causes.
- Potentiality: They have the capacity not to exist.
- Temporal and mutable: They are often bound within the realm of change and time.

The Philosophical Significance

Distinguishing between necessity and contingency is crucial because it informs how we understand the existence of the universe and its components. If all beings were contingent, then their existence would require explanation—something that Aquinas seeks to address through the concept of a necessary being.

Aquinas's Argument for the Necessary Existence of God

The Five Ways: A Brief Overview

Thomas Aquinas's famous *Summa Theologica* presents five philosophical arguments for the existence of God. Among these, the first three—the Argument from Motion, the Argument from Causation, and the Argument from Contingency—are most directly related to the concept of necessary being.

The Contingency Argument in Depth

The contingency argument, also known as the argument from contingency, posits that:

1. Everything in the universe is contingent; it might not have existed.
2. If everything were contingent, then at some point, nothing would exist.
3. From nothing, nothing comes—so if everything were contingent, there must have been a time when nothing existed.
4. Since things do exist now, there must be a being whose existence is

necessary—not contingent—who sustains or grounds the existence of contingent beings.

Aquinas’s formulation:

> "It is impossible for the universe to be infinite regress of causes; therefore, there must be a necessary being that causes the existence of contingent beings."

This necessary being, which exists by its own nature and not due to any external cause, is identified as God.

The Concept of Necessary Existence in Thomistic Philosophy

Necessary Being as the Ultimate Explanation

For Aquinas, necessary being is the uncaused cause that explains why anything exists at all. Without such a being, the existence of contingent beings would be inexplicable.

The Nature of God's Necessary Existence

Aquinas attributes the necessary existence directly to God, considering God as:

- Pure act (actus purus): Fully actualized being without potentiality.
- Immutable and eternal: Not subject to change or decay.
- The cause of all contingent beings: The foundational ground of existence.

The Distinction Between Necessary and Contingent Beings

Aspect	Necessary Beings	Contingent Beings
Existence	Exists by necessity; cannot not exist	Might not exist; depends on external causes
Dependence	Independent of anything else	Dependent on other beings or causes
Change	Immutable and eternal	Capable of change and decay
Examples	God (according to Aquinas)	Humans, animals, planets, objects

The Metaphysical and Theological Significance

Why Does This Distinction Matter?

The differentiation between necessary and contingent beings serves as a foundation for understanding the universe's ultimate explanation. It shifts the philosophical inquiry from an infinite regress of causes to the

recognition of a necessary being—God—as the ultimate ground.

Implications for Cosmology and Ontology

- Cosmological Argument: The existence of the universe as a contingent entity necessitates a necessary being to explain its existence.
- Ontological Status of God: God's necessity sets Him apart as the ultimate reality, not just another being among others.

The Problem of Infinite Regress

Aquinas's rejection of an infinite regress of causes hinges on the necessity of a first, uncaused, necessary being. Without such a being, the chain of causes would fail to ground existence itself.

Critical Perspectives and Modern Discussions

Challenges to the Necessity of God

Some philosophers challenge the necessity of a necessary being, proposing alternative explanations such as:

- Multiverse hypotheses: Suggesting multiple contingent universes.
- Quantum indeterminacy: Proposing that some aspects of reality are fundamentally probabilistic.

Reconciliation with Contemporary Physics

While modern physics explores contingency at quantum levels and cosmological origins, Aquinas's metaphysics remains influential in philosophical theology, emphasizing a necessary foundation.

Contemporary Reinterpretations

Some scholars reinterpret Aquinas's necessary being as a metaphor for the fundamental laws or principles underlying reality, rather than a personal deity. However, traditional Thomistic views maintain a personal, conscious God as the necessary being.

Conclusion

Thomas Aquinas's assertion that God is a necessarily existing being—in stark contrast to created beings, which are contingent—remains a cornerstone of classical theistic philosophy. This distinction provides a compelling metaphysical foundation for understanding the existence of the universe and the nature of ultimate reality. By emphasizing necessity, Aquinas offers a rational explanation for why anything exists at all, positioning God as the

uncaused, necessary being that sustains all contingent existence. While modern developments continue to challenge and reinterpret these ideas, Aquinas's insights continue to influence philosophical and theological thought, highlighting the enduring significance of necessity and contingency in understanding existence.

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Final Remarks

The metaphysical distinction between necessary and contingent beings remains a vital element in philosophical theology. Thomas Aquinas's articulation of God as a necessarily existing being continues to inspire debate, serving as a foundational argument for the rationality of belief in a divine existence that is uncaused, immutable, and the ultimate ground of all that exists.

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