“Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now, if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence...---which is absurd.”

**A Defense of the Crucial Premise of the Third Way**

“The third way is taken from possibility and necessity, and runs thus. We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to corrupt, and consequently, they are possible to be and not to be. But it is impossible for these always to exist, for that which is possible not to be at some time is not. Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing. Therefore, if at one time nothing was in existence, it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist; and thus even now nothing would be in existence---which is absurd. Therefore, not all beings are merely possible, but there must exist something the existence of which is necessary. But every necessary thing either has its necessity caused by another, or not. Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes. Therefore we cannot but postulate the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.” (1)

Although the Second Way comes in for the most criticism among the *quinquae viae* of St. Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the most maligned of all his proofs for God’s existence is the Third Way, in which Thomas argues from the contingency of the physical universe to the existence of a necessary being as its cause. Even those sympathetic to Thomas’s philosophy seem unable to mount any credible interpretation of this proof. The following comments of Msgr. John F. Wippel, a leading authority on the metaphysics of Aquinas, are typical:

But what of Thomas’s next statement? If all things are possibles (capable of existing or not existing), at some point in the past nothing would have existed. The statement goes considerably farther than the previous one. If we suppose that every individual being is a possible being and therefore has not existed at some point in the past, how does it follow from this that the totality of existing things will all have been nonexistent in the past? While some have defended Thomas against the charge of committing the fallacy of composition or a quantified shift fallacy, it is difficult to regard such defenses of h is reasoning as successful. (2)

It is now generally agreed, apparently, that the Third Way is just a howler.

I do not agree. I think that the *lacuna* in this argument can be closed, at least as it is presented in the above translation.(3) My argument will provide a direct answer to Wippel’s question and show that, if everything in the (physical) universe is, in Aquinas’s sense, a merely possible being, so too is the physical universe and shall do so without committing any composition or quantifier shift fallacies. The Third Way will thus be vindicated so far forth, i.e. against one sort of conception of the physical universe often taken to be logically possible but which proves not to be so upon examination.

First, I will sketch this universe. I shall then argue that such a universe is a metaphysically contingent state-of-affairs, one whose non-existence is metaphysical possible. I shall then argue that the probability of the existence of such a universe is equivalent to 0, and that thus that it is virtually logically impossible for such a universe to exist. This does not rule out the existence of an observable universe that appears to conform to this model, only one that exists without an external cause to account for its existence. Thus, in accordance with the above translation, if everything that exists is contingent, then there could have been a time in the past when nothing existed, and if that is so, then it is metaphysically necessary that there was such a time, in which case nothing would exist now.

I

By *metaphysically contingent*, I mean a being or state-of-affairs whose non-existence is really possible at some moment in time in the actual world (which in this context I hold to be conceptually distinct from the physical world even if in fact ontologically coincident with it).(4) To be metaphysically contingent in this sense requires not only that the non-existence of such a being or state-of-affairs be logically possible (at the bare minimum, both intrinsically and extrinsically epistemically possible) but also physically possible (not excluded somehow by the laws of nature) and thus causally and really possible as well in such a way that it could come about, occur, or obtain in the actual world.(5) To say this is to envisage a set of causal circumstances that are sufficient to bring about that the thing or state-of-affairs ceases to exist, at least minimally with the proviso that no external force capable of interfering with the operation of those causes acts to prevent the realization of this outcome. An entity of this sort could be said to be one for whom its non-existence is *materially possible* as well, meaning that it could actually obtain at some moment or other in the actual world.

Opponents of the third way propose that perhaps, and contrary to what Aquinas thinks, the physical universe is a metaphysically contingent state-of-affairs consisting solely of metaphysically contingent beings actually existing without any external cause either to bring it into being or sustain its existence through time. On this suggestion, such a world could, in principle, cease to exist. Nevertheless, while it *could* go out of existence, as a matter of fact it *just never does*. The easiest way to secure this with regard to the origin of the physical universe is to suggest that the physical universe is beginningless and just consists of a series of metaphysically contingent beings whose limited existences overlap so that, while every physical thing ceases to exist as some point, the physical universe never ceases to exist without remainder. These metaphysically contingent beings could either be discrete material things, or a series of physical universes each of which exists for a while and then is succeeded by some other, numerically distinct universe with its own distinct set of laws, etc., that arises from its predecessor through some sort of law-governed mechanism.

Aquinas’s argument seems to exclude the possibility of such a universe existing and this seems initially both puzzling and implausible. Why couldn’t the physical universe be as just described above? Unless and until Aquinas shows this to be the case, the scandal of a metaphysically contingent state-of-affairs whose continuous existence is simply a surd fact has not been excluded and seems quite plausible to many. In the next section I shall argue that there are good (indeed, in this context conclusive) reasons for doubting that such a state-of-affairs is metaphysically possible after all.

II

According to the view under consideration, the physical universe *could* go out of existence, it just never *does*. In that case, the event of the physical universe going out of existence is not excluded by any fact about or condition obtaining in the universe. It is intrinsically epistemically possible (i.e. conceivable without any internal contradiction), extrinsically epistemically possible (i.e. not logically excluded by anything else we know about the universe), and physically possible as well (i.e., not excluded by the operation of the laws of nature). Unless this were so, we would be committed to the thesis that the physical universe would be a necessary being, one whose non-existence is somehow metaphysically impossible. *Ab* *initio*, there seems no reason to suppose that this is true.

The event of the physical going out of existence of the physical universe at some point is thus not excluded: the universe could cease to exist at some time or other. How could this come about? Once possibility, suggested by Wippel, is that there might be a moment in time at which everything existing at that moment simultaneously ceases to exist at that moment, without remainder. This could occur, for example, as the product of pure chance. It could just be, for example, that due to the operation of discrete causes prior to that moment, each and every thing existing at that moment is caused to go out of existence at the same time. There is thus no general cause for the cessation of the physical universe at that moment – its ceasing to exist is simply the mass effect of all of these individual extinction-events taken together. Such a concatenation of events would be highly improbable, but hardly impossible. It could happen, in principle, in the actual world. As such, the going out of existence of the physical universe is not just physically possible – it is *metaphysically possible* as well.

Of course, many people nowadays, including apparently most scientists, affirm a physical cosmology according to which the physical universe in which we live is neither beginningless nor everlasting, but which came into existence with the “Big Bang” and governed by an internal mechanism operating to insure the “heat death” of the physical universe and its cessation without remainder in a finite period of time. On this scenario, the physical universe in which we live is itself a metaphysically contingent state-of-affairs, whose ceasing to exist is, in fact, physically predictable given the initial state of that universe after the “Big Bang,” the amount of matter it contains, and the expansion rate of the universe. In that case, after the “heat death” of the universe, nothing will exist and there will be no prospect of “restarting” the physical universe, so that it will cease to exist without remainder, and without generating any sort of successor universe to take its place. At least, so many people presently believe. However, given the instability of our scientific beliefs about cosmological matters, I will not depend in this context on the actual truth of any such account. Nevertheless, if this account is *in fact* true, then the metaphysical contingency of the physical universe is entailed by its physical contingency.

The point to be emphasized here is that, in envisaging the metaphysical possibility that the physical universe might cease to exist we are not considering a merely abstract or purely “logical” possibility. We are envisaging an event or state-of-affairs for which we can conceive of circumstances or conditions that, if they existed, occurred, or obtained, would actually bring that event or state-of-affairs about in the actual world, as something physically, causally and so really possible in the actual world. Even so, even if it *could* happen, why *must* it happen – a thesis crucial to Aquinas’s argument? The answer is supplied by a pattern of reasoning commonly employed by opponents of theism who offer a beginningless universe as proof against the “Fine-Tuning” teleological argument, as follows.

Proponents of the “Fine-Tuning” argument assert that the fundamental constants in the most fundamental laws of nature are set at just the right values to permit the existence of beings such as ourselves. In principle, these values could have been set anywhere within a characteristically wide range, and that since each of these values is set independently of the others, the odds against their being set just where they are by mere chance are astronomical – something like 10 to the 41st power on some calculations. In response to this, it is claimed that a combination of chance and time can account for this apparently surprising fact. This claim rests on the following principle: if the actual world containing or constituted by the physical universe in which we live is beginningless, then every metaphysically possible state-of-affairs is bound to be realized at some time or other simply through the operation of chance. (6)

The reason for this is that, while the probability of any event or state-of-affairs occurring on any particular occasion is unaffected by the length of the run of events of which it is a member, nevertheless the probability that this event or state-of-affairs should occur *at some point or other in that run* increases as the run increases; as such, in an endless run, the probability that the event will occur approaches 1. In fact, it is as close to 1 as you like. Helping ourselves to the mathematician’s magical notion of “the limit,” we can prove that “as close to 1 as you like” is equivalent to 1, and thus that it is virtually certain that the event or state-of-affairs will occur at some time during that endless run. Further, given the usual equation of “having probability 1” with “being logically necessary” and “having probability 0” with “being logically impossible,” we can say that the occurrence or obtaining of any event or state-of-affairs with a positive (i.e. non-zero) prior probability is virtually logically necessary given an actually elapsed, endless run of prior events or states-of-affairs.

We are thus told that, if the actual world is beginningless, then given that the existence of the physical universe in which we live has a positive prior probability, no matter how low, mere chance is bound to produce it at some point. Thus, given that the physical universe in which we live is preceded by an actually elapsed endless run of events and states-of-affairs, that such a world as we live in should exist is no surprise at all, since given the universe’s positive prior probability and unlimited prior time, the probability of its existence at some time or other is, for all intents and purposes, 1.(6) Indeed, one might even arrive at the belief, evinced by the Epicureans, Hume, and Nietzsche that each physical universe with a positive prior probability has existed an infinite number of times in that endless run of events and states-of-affairs.

Thus, the long odds against the existence of the observable physical world prove to be unremarkable after all, and thus no basis for an argument for the existence of an intelligent designer or providential God. In an actually endless run of events and states-of-affairs, mere chance can be counted upon to produce such a universe in the career of the actual world, so the fact that it exists now and contains us is to be expected rather than something that should surprise us. Quite the contrary, since it is virtually necessary that such a physical universe should exist, it is virtually impossible that it not do so, despite the fact of the astronomical improbability of that universe existing now, or at any particular moment in the career of the actual world. Thus, given this scenario, if a physical universe like our *could* exist, then at some point or other in the history of the actual world it *would* exist, simply because given the operation of time and chance it *must* exist. To put it another way, given an actually elapsed endless run of events or states of affairs in the actual world, it is metaphysically necessary that whatever is metaphysically possible should actually occur or obtain at some point or other in that actually elapsed, endless run of events or states-of-affairs.

III

I don’t know if the foregoing line of reasoning is sound or not. (7) I’ve certainly heard it often enough, asserted with an air of great assurance by critics of religious belief. Nevertheless, I will not critically examine this line of reasoning here. Instead, I will simply limit myself to applying this line of reasoning to the *Tertia Via* in order to fill the *lacuna* in the argument as translated above. The reader will recall that the *lacuna* is this: Aquinas asserts that if the physical universe (and so, in this case, the actual world) is composed solely of existentially contingent beings, then it *could* have gone out of existence in the past, and that if that had happened, nothing would have existed now, something clearly contrary to fact. The missing piece seems to be: just because it *could* have gone out of existence in the past, why suppose that it *would* have done so, let alone that it *must* have done so, as Aquinas seems to think is too obvious to require explaining?

The foregoing line of reasoning answers that question. Let’s suppose, as many atheists have proposed, that the actual world is nothing over and above the physical universes, or the sum of a succession of such universes, that exists or exist in that world, so that the existence of the actual world is wholly constituted, without remainder, by that physical universe or some series of such universes. In that case, if any of those worlds were to altogether cease to exist at any moment, then so too would the actual world, since it is constituted solely and wholly by whatever physical universe happens to exist at that moment and so would cease to exist if that universe, or any of those universes, were to cease to exist without remainder at any moment. Such a world, then, will be metaphysically contingent simply through that fact.

Now suppose that the event or state-of-affairs consisting in the ceasing to exist of the physical universe has a positive (i.e. non-zero) prior possibility. This will be the case simply due to the fact that the physical universe in which we live, so conceived, is a metaphysically contingent being, one that we can coherently conceive of as actually going out of existence at some moment through, e.g., its being the case that everything existing at that moment simply ceases to exist at that moment, or as a consequence of the “heat death” of the universe, or in accordance with some other physically possible scenario in which the physical universe in which we live ceases to exist without remainder. The reasoning of the previous section now shows us how to get from *could* to *would* to *must*, with the result that the actual world in which we live cannot be a world of the sort envisaged above.

According to the model for the actual world we are here considering, the present moment has been preceded by a beginningless series of events and states-of-affairs constituting an actually elapsed, endless run of prior events and states-of-affairs. In such a run every metaphysically possible event or state-of-affairs is bound to have occurred, no matter how intrinsically improbable it is, just so long as that event or state of affairs has a positive (non-zero) prior probability, as must be the case if that event or state-of-affairs is to be metaphysically possible in the first place.. Now, as we have seen, one event or state-of-affairs that is metaphysically possible in a world that consists solely of metaphysically contingent entities is that the physical universe that constitutes that world should go out of existence at some moment of time or other as a result, e.g., of everything that exists at that moment ceasing to exist at that moment, *without remainder*. Although such an event may have a very low prior probability, so long as it is greater than zero, in an endless run the probability that this event occurs at some moment or other is as close to 1 as one likes, is equivalent to 1, and so virtually necessary despite the fact that at any particular moment the probability that the universe ceases to exist never gets above a very small positive probability. (8)

In the envisaged scenario, we are invited to suppose that an endless run of this sort has actually preceded the present moment – it is posited as something real and actually existent, not as something merely hypothetical. As such, we must also suppose, on this scenario, that the probability of the occurrence of this event at some moment in that endless run is as close to 1 as we like, equivalent to 1, and so virtually necessary. Given that the actual world at that moment consists wholly and solely of the physical universe, then if it is virtually necessary that the physical universe has ceased to exist prior to the present moment, then since occurrence of that event excludes the possibility of the existence of that world at the present moment and the probability of that world existing at that moment is as close to 0 as one likes, equivalent to 0, and so virtually impossible. After all, if the actual world is in fact nothing but the physical universe, then if the physical universe ceases to exist without remainder and thus without any prospect of generating a successive world or physical universe, then so too does the actual world cease to exist without remainder and without any prospect of coming-to-be once again. (9)

It gets worse. The foregoing argument can be generalized for every moment of time posited in the envisaged scenario. Since the physical universe is posited as beginningless, every moment of time posited in that universe is preceded by an actually elapsed, endless run of events and states-of-affairs. In that case, for any moment that we choose, the probability of that universe having ceased to exist prior to that moment is as close to one as we like, equivalent to one, and virtually necessary. In that case, the existence of the physical universe at that moment is as close to 0 as one would like, equivalent to 0, and so virtually impossible. As such, there is *no* moment of time we can posit for the physical universe in this scenario at which the probability of the existence of that the envisaged universe, or the world it constitutes, is greater than 0. Since this result holds for *all* moments we might posit for the envisaged universe, we may conclude that the existence of a universe such as the one envisaged in this scenario is as close to 0 as one would like, equivalent to 0, and so virtually impossible *simpliciter*. It would seem, then, that there can be no such universe after all and so no possible world constituted by such a universe, or set of such universes. By *reductio*, the supposition that a world such as the one envisaged could possibly exist entails that not only is there not, but also that there cannot be, any such world. The world thus envisaged in this scenario turns out not to be a possible world after all.

To put the point in a slightly different way, it turns out that in the envisaged universe that at any moment we may choose it is metaphysically necessary that, if it is metaphysically possible for the universe to have ceased to exist without remainder prior to that moment, it has in fact *actually* done so prior to that moment and so, contrary to hypothesis does not, indeed cannot, exist at that moment after all. Therefore, as Aquinas says, if this event had occurred at some time prior to the present moment, nothing would exist now. Since the foregoing applies to every moment in the envisaged actually elapsed, endless run of events or states-of-affairs, such a world can never exist at any of those projected moments, and so cannot exist at all.

IV

We may now proceed to the second, less controversial part of Aquinas’s argument. If the actual world were a world of the sort envisaged in the previous two sections, then according to the argument of the last section, it should have ceased to exist without remainder ere now. However, the actual world has not ceased to exist ere now – it manifestly does exist and we are each of us witnesses to that fact, so that it would be absurd to deny it. It follows, then, that the actual world is not such a world and differs from all such worlds in such a manner as not to exclude the possibility that the physical universe exists at the present moment. The coming-to-be and persisting in being of the actual world, then, cannot be accounted for by mere time and chance. Such a scenario, then, is no alternative to positing the actual existence of a Necessary Being to account for this fact.

This result can be enforced by considering some ways in which the actual world might differ from the world of the envisaged scenario taken in relation to the traditional theistic arguments. For example, one could deny that the present moment in the actual world is in fact preceded by an actually elapsed, endless run of previous events or states-of-affairs, such as a beginningless series of previous physical universes. In that case, the physical universe either has an absolute beginning, or is part of a series of physical universes originating from such a beginning, in which case nothing pre-existent preceded that universe or series of universes in existence. This naturally invites the positing of a non-physical cause for the coming-to-be of the actual world in the form of the coming-into-being of the first event occurring in that world, as the traditional cosmological argument proceeds to do and thus arrives at the existence of God as First Cause.

Alternatively, one could abandon the claim that the actual world is nothing more than the observable physical universe, or some series of such universes, and posit some additional reality that provides the ontological ground of the existence of such a universe or series of universes. This is Aquinas’s preferred alternative, the one he thinks is naturally indicated by the first part of the Third Way. In that case, says Aquinas, we have to consider the nature of this additional, foundational reality. Is it a metaphysically contingent being? In that case, not only is its own existence not accounted for, positing it is to no purpose since it is contingent in exactly the way that the entity it is posited to explain is contingent, and so leaves the fact that motivates that act of positing unexplained. We are either simply putting off answering the question why the physical universe exists because we have no such answer, or (given the relation of existential dependence between the physical universe and its external cause) facing the looming prospect of positing a non-terminating, vicious, explanatory regress appeal to which is ultimately equivalent to an admission that one has no answer to that question. The appeal to such stopgaps, then, is at best obfuscatory and at worst mere subterfuge.

If this being is metaphysically necessary, we need to consider what sort of metaphysically necessary being it is. Perhaps this additional reality that accounts for the existence of the physical universe or series of universes contains, or is constituted by, some sort of intrinsic mechanism that somehow excludes the going out of existence of that universe or that series of universes at any moment in time. If so, is this fact about the additional reality itself something that could have been otherwise? If so, then this fact, in its turn, is merely metaphysically contingent. In that case, there remains something unexplained, namely the fact that the mechanism is this way when it might not have been, either by failing to exist or by being different than it just happens to be. Once again, the same motive for positing such an additional reality in the first place to account for the existence of a metaphysically contingent physical universe urges us to posit some further additional reality to account for this fact about whatever constitutes our original posit as well. Concerning this further posit, however, the same question arises, and once again threatens us with either an explanatorily futile, non-terminating series of such posits or a series of such posits that simply terminates in a member that is metaphysically contingent in precisely the same respect as the posit(s) it is invoked to account for. If that happens, our explanation is truly futile, since it terminates without explaining the very feature of the physical universe that all of these posits were enlisted to explain through providing an ontological ground for the previous posits possessing that feature. In so doing, we are at most putting off the Day of Judgment.

Nor, for the same reason, will extending the number of these posits so that they constitute an endless series of vertical, simultaneously acting causes all of which are metaphysically contingent in exactly the same way as the posits they are invoked to explain do anything to resolve this problem or repair the defect of this procedure. Precisely because each of the members of this endless series is metaphysically contingent in exactly the way that each of the posits ontologically (and hence explanatorily) dependent on it are, to posit them as the ontological ground or explanation for those other posits makes no odds and amounts to mere mystification of the sort evinced Kierkegaard’s shopkeeper who sold 4 penny beer for 3 cents and, when informed that this would result in a financial loss, defended his practice by saying, “No, the big number does it.” (9) Of course, the truth of the matter is the opposite: the more beer he sells, the more money he will lose. In the same way, the longer we extend such a series, the less plausible it is that it actually explains anything, or actually exists.

In this context, Grisez’s example of a check with an endless series of endorsers comes to mind. A man writes a friend a check for $100.00 even though he has no money in his account to cover the check. “No matter,” he says, “the check has been endorsed by an endless series of endorsers.” To the query “Does any of these endorsers have $100.00?” the friend replies, “No, all of them are broke. The beauty of this check, however, lies in the fact that the bank can never get to the end of the list and so can never discover that fact. So go and cash the check!” Even if the bank honors the check and gives the man the $100.00 it remains that the check is worthless and the means through which the money was obtained is fraudulent. (10) Extending the series of metaphysically contingent causes of metaphysically contingent facts in this way is just as fraudulent. If we think that “the big number will do it” we are either merely confused, kidding ourselves, or practicing intellectual sleight-of-hand.

Ultimately, thinks Aquinas, the only kind of necessary being that can satisfactorily terminate such an explanatory series is one that is not only necessary but self-existing, containing within itself the explanation for its own existence in such a manner that its non-existence is excluded as metaphysically impossible. Only a perfect being, one in whom there is no distinction between essence and existence and who, in that sense, is such that its essence is to exist, could constitute such a satisfactory terminus for the explanation of the metaphysically contingent.(11) This, says Aquinas hopefully, “all men call God.” All men – not just Christians. This argument carries us only to the God of the Philosophers. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph can be reached only by faith, which in turn is possible only through the grace of the very God in which that faith ultimately comes to reside.

A further option would be to abandon the thesis that, in an actually elapsed, endless run of events and states-of-affairs, every metaphysically possible event or state-of-affairs, which thereby has a positive (non-zero) prior probability, will be produced simply as a result of the operation of chance and the passage of time. If we abandon this principle without replacement, then no matter how long the run, the probably of the actual occurrence of such an event or the obtaining of such a state-of-affairs never rises above the prior probability of its occurring or obtaining at any particular time. In that case, its probability remains always the same, i.e. the same at all times without ever increasing simply as a function of the passage of time. In that case, the probability of its actual occurrence remains equivalent to its prior probability and so, if that prior probability is low enough, results in the overwhelming improbability of its ever actually occurring or obtaining regardless of how long the actually elapsed prior run of events or states-of-affairs happens to be. In that case, “chances are” it will *never* occur, even in an actually elapsed, endless series of events or states-of-affairs.

To adopt this expedient requires that we abandon the “could, would, must” line of reasoning that many have found intuitive as a means of evading the force of the “Fine Tuning” teleological argument. In that case, given the astronomically improbable odds against the existence of the physical universe in which we live, no matter how long the run is, the probability that such a physical universe as the one we live in would ever exist in the actual world remains vanishingly low. In that case, it is not unsurprising after all that this universe should actually exist as in fact it does. To the contrary, it is every bit as surprising and amazing as the mind-boggling odds against it naturally lead us to suppose. In any event, we cannot retain that principle and the “could, would, must” line of reasoning founded on it without allowing defenders of the Third Way to use it in a parallel fashion to fill the *lacuna* in that argument as Thomas presents it in the *Summa Theologiae* and arriving at the existence of God by a different route – or at least so it seems.

Of course, if there is some metaphysically contingent mechanism or process operating in the physical universe in such a way as to prevent the probability of the universe going out of existence at any moment in time from increasing with the lapse of time, then this argument will be unsound. Luckily for the argument, this does not appear to be the case for the physical universe in the actual world – our best science tells us that not only did the universe have a temporal beginning, but that it is doomed to go out of existence without remainder or residue in a calculable amount of time. So the point is moot.

However, even if there were such a mechanism or process, its existence invites a version of the teleological argument, since the intrinsic probability of such a mechanism or process is very likely low. If such a mechanism or process is metaphysically contingent, and so such that the physical universe could have been otherwise, then we can raise the question why the universe is as it is and not otherwise. If no explanation internal to the universe can be found, then we are free to propose some external explanation for that fact. One such explanation would be that the provision of the Designer of the Universe. On the other hand, if one fled from this alternative and posited some further, quasi-physical entity or mechanism (e.g., a multiverse) that would produce the physical universe in the actual world merely through brute chance, one invites a further iteration of the argument given in this paper in that new context. Presumably, this quasi-physical entity would also be metaphysically contingent, so that we could ask the question why it exists rather than not. Unless we can answer that question by reference to some intrinsic feature of that entity, then once again we need to have recourse to some cause external to that entity to account for its existence. In that case, we either arrive at a metaphysically necessary being external to that entity, or posit yet another metaphysically contingent entity as its cause, and we are off to the races.

It would be premature to draw any final conclusions at this point. I offer the foregoing simply as a *point du depart* for further discussion. I am satisfied here simply to show that the generally dismissive attitude taken by philosophers to the *Tertia Via* is not justified. The argument is not the howler that critics and interpreters have taken it to be. On at least one reading, it is a sophisticated argument consonant with a number of modern ideas. More than that, supposing that the “could, would, must” line of reasoning is sound, it is plausible as well.

If so, ultimately one must have recourse to a metaphysically necessary being to account for the existence (as opposed to the non-existence) of metaphysically contingent entities. Since nothing either physical or quasi-physical could be such an entity, that metaphysically necessary being will have to be something non-physical and the God of the Philosophers appears to be the best (indeed, on reflection, the only) candidate for such a being. Unfortunately, for those bound and determined to resist this conclusion come what may, human ingenuity and imagination seems able to furnish a seemingly inexhaustible source of evasions, objections, and alternative possibilities that are constantly recycled, refurbished, and trumpeted as the final refutation of the claims of natural theology. All of these can be and in many cases have been answered many times, to no avail, since those antecedently opposed to belief in God simply take such responses as a spur to further objection. As such, we can rest assured that there will always be work for theistic philosophers to do, and the truth that God exists will never grow stale through lack of challenge.

**NOTES**

(1) Thomas Aquinas, ST I, I, Q. 2, Art 3. The Latin text is as follows: “Tertia via st sumpta ex possibili et necessario, quae talis est. Invenimus enim in rebus quaedam quae sunt possibilia esse et non esse, cum quaedam inveniantur generari et corrumpi, et per consequens possibilia esse et non esse. Impossibile est autem omnia quae sunt, talia esse, quia quod possibile est non esse, quandoque non est. Si igitur omnia sunt possibilia non esse, aliquando nihil fuit in rebus. Sed si hoc est verum, etiam nunc nihil esset, quia quod non est, non incipit esse nisi per aliquid quod est; si igitur nihil fuit ens, impossibile fuit quod aliquid inciperet esse, et sic modo nihil esset, quod patet esse falsum. Non ergo omnia entia sunt possibilia, sed oportet aliquid esse necessarium in rebus. Omne autem necessarium vel habet causam suae necessitatis aliunde, vel non habet. Non est autem possibile quod procedatur in infinitum in necessariis quae habent causam suae necessitatis, sicut nec in causis efficientibus, ut probatum est. Ergo necesse est ponere aliquid quod sit per se necessarium, non habens causam necessitatis aliunde, sed quod est causa necessitatis aliis, quod omnes dicunt Deum.”

(2)John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, Washington, DC, The Catholic University Press of America, 2000, 465. For the classical, sophisticated critique of the *Tertia Via*, see Anthony Kenny, *The Five Ways*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2000, 46-69. For other important discussions of this argument, see Peter Geach, “Aquinas,” in Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, Three Philosophers, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1963, 109-116 and for useful background, Joseph Owens, *St. Thomas Aquinas on the Existence of God*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1980, although Owens spends only one page on the Third Way, and devotes that merely to a summary – see page 136.

(3)The crucial line that constitutes the title of this paper is translated quite differently in the Blackfriars translation of the *S.T.* published beginning in 1964 under General Editor Thomas Gilby, O.P.: “Now not everything can be like this, for a thing that need not be, once was not; and if everything need not be, once upon a time there was nothing. But if that were true there would be nothing even now, because something that does not exist can only be brought into being by something already existing.” This translation is more literal than the one above, but also quite ambiguous, inviting numerous interpretations that I do not here choose to discuss. The interpretation I will give is consistent with, but hardly clearly implied by, this claim as so translated.

(4)More technically, in accordance with the material modal logic I have developed and offered elsewhere (see footnote 5): Something (e.g., a being, event, or state-of-affairs) is *metaphysically possible* if it is *logically possible in the strong sense* in that world. Something is *logically possible* *in the strong sense* (in a world P) if it is both *intrinsically epistemically possible* and *extrinsically* *epistemically possible* in P. Something is *intrinsically epistemically* *possible* if it is apparently coherently conceivable without contradiction or absurdity. (This is sufficient for logical possibility in the weak sense that holds across possible worlds.) Something is *extrinsically epistemically possible* in a world P if it is both intrinsically epistemically possible and such that its *extramental* existence/occurring/obtaining is not ruled out *in principle* by further factors known to obtain in that world. (This is sufficient for metaphysical possibility *simpliciter*). Anything that is metaphysically possible *in the actual world* is such that it is also *physically possible* *in the broad sense*, such that the laws of nature operating in the actual world do not rule out its existence/occurrence/obtaining *in principle*. **Something is *metaphysically contingent* if it both exists/occurs/obtains in the actual world (i.e. exists/occurs/obtains there *really*, *actually*, and *extramentally*) and is such that its *non-existence* is really possible, i.e. metaphysically possible in the actual world.** A metaphysically contingent being would be one whose non-existence is both intrinsically and extrinsically epistemically possible. If such a being is metaphysically contingent and its non-existence is physically possible, i.e. not ruled out in principle by the laws of physics that obtain in the actual world, then it will be *metaphysically contingent in the actual world* as well and so its non-existence really possible, such that some stateable set of conditions or circumstances in that world could bring about its non-existence in the actual world. If the realization of that possibility is not casually excluded from occurring by the actual state of the world at some time T, then it will also be causally and so really possible, though it may lie beyond our power to bring it about through any means available to us at that time. By contrast, a metaphysically necessary being would be one that both exists in the actual world and exists there in such a way that there its non-existence in that world is not materially possible in any sense. This will trivially be the case if the existence of God turns out to be logically impossible through being, e.g., intrinsically epistemically impossible, as the ontological argument avers.

(5)For further definitions for and discussions of all of these various forms of material possibility, see my *Possibilities that Matter* series, especially essays I and II, subtitled “Material Possibility” and “Metaphysical Contingency and Sufficient Reason,” archived to and available on *PhilPapers*.

(6) I know of no argument for supposing that everything than can happen must happen on the supposition that the universe is such that there is a beginningless series of actually elapsed previous events in which that entity could have existed, occurred, or obtained. I can only assume that many people receive this claim as self-evident *a priori*. However, one might challenge this claim, perhaps on the ground that the metaphysical possibility of an entity does not entail that it has a positive, i.e. non-zero probability. Here is my best try at an argument that it does:

Let’s assume, for *reductio*, that some entity is both metaphysically (not just physically) possible and nevertheless such that it has an intrinsic probability of 0. Now no entity can be metaphysically possible without being logically possible. However, if that entity has an intrinsic probability of 0, then it is not logically possible. So, then, the supposition that some entity is both metaphysically possible and yet has an intrinsic possibility of 0 leads to self-contradiction: one and the same entity is both logically possible and logically impossible at the same time in the same respect. In that case, it will follow that every metaphysically possible entity has some non-zero probability, in which case, supposing that every moment of time is preceded by a beginningless series of actual lapsed past events, the probability that that metaphysical possibility has been actually realized is virtually 1, regardless of how low its intrinsic probability happens to be, just so long as it is greater than 0. Therefore, it is virtually logically necessary that that metaphysical possibility has already been realized prior to any moment of time (T) that we may arbitrary choose as a fixed point from which to mount the argument of this paper.

(7)Again, this holds only of an actually endless run, not of any finite run, no matter how long. The gambler’s fallacy consists precisely in the supposition that the convergence toward the proportional occurrence of actual events in accordance with their prior probabilities in an endless run can be used to predict what will happen in some limited run which has not yet been completed.

(8) Please don’t ask me what “as close to,” “equivalent to,” “virtually,” or “for all intents and purposes” amount to in this context. I don’t know.

(9) In this argument, the relevant probabilities concern only entities occurring at some time T that are preceded by a beginningless series of actually elapsed past events, such as the state-of-affairs of the existence of the physical universe at T. Therefore, probabilities calculated for counterexamples to the principle drawn from “bounded infinities,” intrinsically indeterministic processes, or one-off events such as “random” dart-tosses are not sufficiently analogous to count in this context and so are irrelevant to the evaluation of the principle as it functions in the case at issue. The same holds for appeals to the “possibility” that the physical universe might have just “popped” into existence from nothing pre-existing for no cause or reason whatsoever, an “event” for which we may safely set an intrinsic probability of 0 and which, *ex hypothesi*, is not preceded by any actually elapsed past events, let alone a beginningless series of such events to which it is relevantly causally connected.

(10)I note in passing that, so far as I am aware, we are in no position to show that the probability of this being the case is, in fact, infinitesimally low. I am simply allowing this for the sake of the argument.

(11)See Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Parables of Kierkegaard*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1978, 49. This passage is selected from Kierkegaard’s *Attack on Christendom*.

(12)Germaine Grisez, *Beyond the New Theism*, Notre Dame, IN, Notre Dame University Press, 1975, 66. (Republished as *God?* by St. Augustine’s Press (2004).)

(13)I have given an analysis and explanation of these hoary *philosophumenae* in my *Proof of the External World*, Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock, 2008, 112-173.