

## On a principle of sufficient reason

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**Abstract:** In *The Metaphysics of Creation* and *The Metaphysics of Theism*, Norman Kretzmann defends an argument for God's existence which he claims to find in Aquinas. I assess this argument's key premise, a principle of sufficient reason, that: 'PSR<sub>2</sub>: Every existing thing has a reason for its existence either in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other beings'. PSR<sub>2</sub> requires God's nature to explain His existence. Kretzmann does not tell us how this explanation is supposed to go. I examine such ways as I can envision that God's own nature might explain His existence. None pan out. I argue *contra* Kretzmann that if God is simple, as Aquinas understood this, His nature does not explain His existence, and while His existence is in itself *per se notum* ('self-evident') this does not entail that it has an explanation. If this is correct, we ought not to read Aquinas as committed to PSR<sub>2</sub>. Further, if I'm right that it's impossible for 'the necessity of a thing's nature' to explain its existence, PSR<sub>2</sub> is true only if every existing thing has a reason for its existence in the causal efficacy of some other beings. So, if I'm right, theists ought to steer clear of PSR<sub>2</sub>, at least read in terms of genuine explanation. I finally offer a weaker reading of 'a reason for its existence' which does not generate the problems of the stronger reading Kretzmann seems to have in mind. This too, though, turns out to have its problems.

Norman Kretzmann was, at his death, the acknowledged dean of analytic historians of medieval philosophy. Analytic philosophers have a distinctive approach to the history of philosophy. They care more for what a text says than for where the author might have got it, or how the author was influenced; they sometimes care more for what the text might say to *us* than for what it might have said to its contemporaries. Though it is, of course, hard to get at what a text says, and to us, without attending to those other questions, the goal of the enterprise is to find arguments which can still stand close scrutiny. Kretzmann's *Metaphysics of Creation* and *Metaphysics of Theism* are sterling examples of analytic history at work.<sup>1</sup> They are both explications of Aquinas and Thomist-influenced contributions to natural theology: at times more clearly one, at times more clearly the other.

In both books, Kretzmann defends an argument for God's existence which he claims to find in Aquinas. I want to assess this argument's key premise, a principle of sufficient reason, that

PSR2 Every existing thing has a reason for its existence either in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other beings.<sup>2</sup>

Few Western theists hold that God exists entirely due to other beings' causal efficacy.<sup>3</sup> This claim would offend against our intuitions that God exists *a se*, in some sense independent of all else. The aseity doctrine has some of its intuitive pull by channelling the strong intuition that God must be the ultimate reality, the deepest source of all else.<sup>4</sup> But nothing with this status exists entirely due to other things' actions. Kretzmann, then, rests on strong intuitions when he infers from PSR2 that 'The universal producer must have a reason for its existence ... in the necessity of its own nature ... its existing and operating are to be explained solely on the basis of its own nature.'<sup>5</sup> Kretzmann does not explain 'a reason for its existence' beyond specifying that he means a reason for a thing's presently existing.<sup>6</sup> But talk of explanation, and the pairing of 'the necessity of its own nature' with causal efficacy in PSR2, suggest that he has in mind something that really accounts for God's existence.

The fact that he rests this conclusion on PSR2 also suggests that, as he sees it, God's nature accounts *entirely* for His existence. For it surely wouldn't do to leave something about God's existence for other things to explain. This would compromise aseity and ultimacy, and would certainly have no claim to represent Aquinas's thinking. Nor would it do to leave something about God's existence unexplained. To allow that would undercut the use Kretzmann wants to make of PSR2. Cosmological arguments contend that since everything's existence must have a *full* explanation, there must be a God to terminate certain series of explanations. If one allows, in one case, that there can be an existence which is not fully explained, one leaves it unclear why we shouldn't rest content with only a partial explanation in other cases. If a partial explanation will do in God's case, why not elsewhere? If God's existence can't be partly explained by other things or partly unexplained, it must be fully explained – and this (says Kretzmann) by His own nature.

Kretzmann does not tell us how this explanation is supposed to go. I now examine such ways as I can envision that God's own nature might explain His existence. None pan out. I argue, *contra* Kretzmann, that if God is simple, as Aquinas understood this, His nature does not explain His existence, and while His existence is in itself *per se notum* ('self-evident'), this does not entail that it has an explanation. If this is correct, we ought not to read Aquinas as committed to PSR2. Further, if I'm right that it's impossible for 'the necessity of a thing's nature' to explain its existence, PSR2 is true only if every existing thing has a reason for its

existence in the causal efficacy of some other beings. So if I'm right, theists ought to steer clear of PSR<sub>2</sub>, at least read in terms of genuine explanation. I finally offer a weaker reading of 'a reason for its existence' which does not generate the problems of the stronger reading Kretzmann seems to have in mind. This too, though, turns out to have its problems.

### **Does anything's nature explain its existence?**

It's not controversial that features of things' natures *help* explain their existence. If the nature of dogs just is to have DNA including sequence *abc*, then the reason there are dogs includes that various efficient causes have brought it about that there are animals whose DNA includes *abc*, and that the nature of dogs is such that whatever includes *abc* is a dog. But Kretzmann, of course, does not want to hold other efficient causes even partially responsible for God's existence. Again, it is not controversial that the content of some natures can entirely explain *some* sorts of ontological status. It is due to the nature round squares would have, were there any, to what it would be to be a round square, that there cannot be a round square. (This nature is in turn determined by the content of the attributes *round* and *square*.) If natures can wholly explain some ontological statuses, it at least makes sense to ask whether they can explain others. Let's ask, then, how features of God's nature might explain His existence.

God's nature could explain God's existence within the overall framework of Leslie and Rice's 'axiarchism'.<sup>7</sup> On their view, at least some things exist simply because it is good that they do so: value is somehow immediately creative or explanatory of existence. God's nature makes it an overwhelmingly good thing that He exist. Given axiarchism, then, God's nature would account for His existence: due to His nature, it would be best that He exist, and so He does. Further, if we take God's nature to be a property – call it *deity*, the property having which makes one divine – this property needn't exist for axiarchist explanation to kick in. There need merely be facts of some sort about what sort of being God would be were He to exist.

Still, there are obvious problems here. The most general is axiarchists' inability to say *how* goodness accounts for existence. The axiarchist might offer theists a *tu quoque* here.<sup>8</sup> Standard theism has it that the mere will of God explains the existence of things. We have no more insight into how someone's merely willing a thing outside the mind could make it so than we do into how the thing's mere goodness could make it so. But on some versions of theism, we have a relatively good grasp of what's involved here. For a theist can maintain that for God to will that *p* is for *p* to be so. That is, theists can hold that God's calling His intentions into existence *is* His calling external things into existence, that a divine creative intention has as its content, not a representation of a state of affairs to be brought about, but that state of affairs itself.<sup>9</sup> A theist can maintain, in short, that God's

creation is *not* a case of calling into existence things ‘outside’ His mind. It is a case of calling intentions into existence. But those intentions have external realities as their contents. Those familiar with recent discussions of externalism in the philosophy of mind will know that such a view doesn’t entail pantheism, panentheism, or any sort of idealism. Items can be contents of mental states without being themselves mental, let alone parts or aspects of the person whose states have these contents.

But theists needn’t go as far as this to defeat the *tu quoque*. We know what it’s like for a mind to call something into existence: we so call our own thoughts. We don’t know what it’s like for goodness to call anything into existence. We can make sense of causal relations between *concreta* (ourselves, God) and other concrete things. We can’t make sense of causal relations between anything abstract and something concrete. But goodness in general is an abstract entity if it is anything (and if it *isn’t* anything, the question of how it accounts for existence gets all the harder). Any particular thing’s goodness is a facet of its nature, and its nature is something abstract if it is anything (and again, if it *isn’t* anything, the question of how it accounts for existence gets all the harder). Perhaps we don’t know how causation works in any case: perhaps it’s just a brute non-analysable relation between events or things. But if the axiarchist claims that goodness, or a thing’s goodness, is an efficient cause, we have difficulties in seeing how this can be so, difficulties that we do not have in ordinary cases or in God’s case. And if the axiarchist doesn’t deal in efficient causes, it’s all the harder to see how goodness is supposed to explain existence.

So far, I’ve discussed a difficulty of axiarchism perfectly generally. But there are problems, in addition, in applying the position to God. If goodness is anything like an efficient cause, theists can’t accept that goodness accounts for God’s existence. But the less it is like an efficient cause, the less (again) we understand the claim axiarchism makes. How does goodness explain God’s existence if He in no sense really derives from it? Someone who asks ‘Why is there a God?’ is not likely to feel satisfied if answered ‘Because it would be so wonderful if there were’. We can think of ever so many things that would be wonderful if they existed, and yet do not. That God would be a great deal better than the rest of them doesn’t *seem* to explain why His goodness would require His existence, but their goodness would not require theirs: the claim that only He is good enough for the axiarchist principle to apply seems hopelessly ad hoc. Whatever the way goodness accounts for existence, theists might still balk at the explicit Plotinianism of most ways of developing the axiarchist picture. As in Plotinus, on most ways to develop axiarchism, the divine mind, the God of theism, is not the ultimate reality. He is just the first being who exists due to His goodness. His existence is explained from beyond Himself; all that He creates, He creates merely as a conduit of the ultimate explanatory force of goodness – even if goodness is not itself some thing that exists.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, on axiarchism, it may not really be the case that God's existence depends solely on His nature, as PSR2 requires. For the axiarchist picture appeals not just to God's nature, but also to whatever makes it the case that goodness generates or explains existence. If this is anything like a mechanism, of course, then we again have an efficient cause of God's existence.<sup>11</sup> But suppose the axiarchist merely appeals to a general, brute-fact principle, that the good/perfect tends to exist. On some ways to explicate axiarchism, this principle is not uniquely lodged in the divine nature.<sup>12</sup> It works there and elsewhere. It is a more general feature of reality from which God's existence derives non-causally. The ultimate level of explanation is again rooted not in God, but in goodness, and the axiarchist explanation appeals to a general feature of reality, not to God's nature alone. Still, it's possible to explicate axiarchism as the view that *only* God exists because of His goodness, all else existing due to His creative power.<sup>13</sup> In this version, the position does not hold that the principle that the good/perfect tends to exist is general: it is instead strictly an explanation of God's existence. It's not that goodness explains existence or God's existence, but that God's goodness explains God's existence. Here, we seem genuinely to have an account of God's existence that doesn't reach outside the divine nature. But we're simply left with the problem raised above: the proposed explanation doesn't seem to explain.

In all save the last version, then, axiarchism can't do what PSR2 requires, i.e. explain God's existence by appeal solely to His nature. And even there it is a frail reed to lean on. It is in any case certainly not something Aquinas would endorse.

### **God's nature as a given**

On the axiarchist view, *deity* needn't exist to explain His existence. On any other account I can conjure up, it must and does. On the most plausible such account, given God's nature, it follows that God exists. For suppose there is such a property as *deity*. There are truths about any property's contents which are conceptually prior to the actual existing of anything having that nature – they would be true whether there is such a thing or not. Perhaps, then, some natures require that something have them – e.g. contain or somehow entail truths which entail that there is such a thing. In effect, these 'elevate' their bearers to existence. Such items 'exist by nature', in that their natures require that they exist, or explain their existence, in the sense just given. If one tried to flesh this explanation out, the results might look like ontological arguments for these objects' existence. One such spelling-out might run thus:

- (1) The nature of God includes being a necessary being and possibly existing.
- (2) For any *x*, if *x*' nature includes possibly existing, possibly *x* exists.

So,

- (3) Possibly God exists.

- (4) For any  $x$ , if  $x'$  nature includes being necessary, then if  $x$  exists,  $x$  exists necessarily.

So,

- (5) If God exists, God is necessary. [1, 4, MP]  
 (6) Possibly necessarily God exists. [3, 5, modal rule]  
 (7) If possibly necessarily P, then P. [Brouwer axiom]

So,

- (8) God exists.

On this scenario, God bootstraps Himself into existence by way of His nature. This is enormously implausible. Further, this scenario is not compatible with God's being the ultimate reality. If God's nature fully explains God's existence, then God's nature's existing and being what it is have some sort of explanatory priority to God's existence.

Now only certain theories about the status of God's nature are compatible with this. Suppose that

- D If that *deity* exists and has its content [henceforth DE] wholly explains it that God exists [henceforth G], G does not even partly explain DE.<sup>14</sup>

Now for any  $pq$ , if its being the case that  $p$  does not even partly explain its being the case that  $q$ , its being the case that  $q$  is wholly independent of its being the case that  $p$ . (This is clear because any sort of real dependence would engender a corresponding contribution to some explanation.) Given this and D, if DE wholly explains G, DE is wholly independent of G. This independence constrains what sort of property *deity* can be. If DE is wholly independent of G, *deity* cannot be taken nominalistically, as (say) the unit set {God} or the way God resembles Himself. For on any nominalist theory, properties' existence depends on instances'. Again, on D, *deity* cannot be an Aristotelian universal, for then its existing would depend on its being instanced, and so on God's existence. Given D, if *deity* is to have the explanatory role PSR2 suggests, it must be an abstract Platonic object, on whose existence God asymmetrically depends.

Now if God comes from *deity*, and everything else (let's say) comes from God, God is not the ultimate source of everything else or the ultimate reality. Deity has these roles. Push this picture very far and it starts to look Plotinian: there is the ultimate abstract source of everything, and beneath it is the divine mind whose thoughts and intentions account for the material world. There is at least a threat of polytheism here – isn't being the ultimate reality a distinctively divine attribute? – but most theists will want off this train long before it reaches this destination. The mere fact that God derives from some other, independent reality

will raise the hackles of all save process theists. God in this picture seems a demiurge serving an ideal master. If PSR2 drives us to take *deity* Platonistically, it cannot provide reason to believe in the sort of God non-process theists favour.

### On the key premise

Obviously, this argument's linchpin is D. To evaluate D we must consider two sorts of case, God timeless and God temporal.

D can seem true if God is timeless. For then we can't index the termini of the explanation-relations we're considering to different times. We can't speak of whether God's existence at *t* explains *deity's* at *t* or at some other time, but simply of God's existence explaining *deity's*. And so the following argument seems to go through: suppose D false. Then if the conditional connective in D is ' $\supset$ ', DE wholly explains G and G at least partly explains DE. But then DE is at least partly explained by a fact it wholly explains. But for all *pqr*, if *p* wholly explains *q* and *q* partly explains *r*, *p* partly explains *r*. And so DE at least partly explains itself. But no state of affairs can do so. So D is true.

This argument assumes that a single, univocal relation of explanation runs from G to DE and back again. This could be denied. Aristotle, for instance, famously held that causation comes in four irreducibly distinct kinds, material, formal, final, and efficient. If anything like this were true, perhaps explanation-relations would not be transitive *tout court*. Instead, explanation might be a relation-kind with several sub-kinds – for Aristotle, for instance, formal, material, efficient-causal, and teleological. We would then have this picture: all explanation-relations are irreflexive: that is, no fact in any way explains itself. Each kind of explanation is asymmetric (that is, is a relation *r* such that if *a* bears *r* to *b*, *b* does not bear *r* to *a*). Each is transitive (that is, is a relation *r* such that if *a* bears *r* to *b* and *b* bears *r* to *c*, it follows that *a* bears *r* to *c*). So each kind generates a series with a relation of priority between its members. But the series are discrete. Let ME be the relation any state of affairs *p* has to another, *q*, just in case *p*'s obtaining contributes to materially explaining *q*'s obtaining. Let FE be the relation any *p* has to any *q* just in case *p*'s obtaining contributes to formally explaining *q*'s. If the existing a clump of flesh bears ME to the existence of a human body, for instance, it does not follow that it explains this in any other way, save generically (of which more anon). We cannot infer from MEclump, body to FE-clump, body. Clumps can't formally explain. Only attributes can.

I now show how an Aristotle-style multiplying of explanation-relations bears on the God/*deity* case. The existing of a clump of flesh could also bear ME to an instancing of the attribute *humanity*. This would be a second sort of ME-relation. For it would not be the case that attributes of the clump explain attributes of *humanity*, as they do attributes of the body. Instead, the clump's existing could help explain *humanity's* being instanced at all. The clump would provide a

subject for it, a place in reality for the form to be instanced, and in *that* way materially explain it. The attribute's instancing, in turn, would explain the clump's character as human flesh. If we assume it essential to the clump to be human flesh, then, the attribute would bear FE to the clump's very existence. Further, if we assume that the attribute is Aristotelian, needing to be instanced to exist at all, it would also seem that the clump's existing helps explain the attribute's very existence. This would seem so all the more if the clump were the only place the attribute were instanced – and still more so if the attribute could have only one instance, or even only the very instance it actually has. The clump would not just help explain but entirely explain the attribute's existence if we added to this last the further Aristotelian claim that the attribute derives its entire being from its instance.

*Deity* can have (let's say) only the instance it actually has. There is no such thing as a clump of God-stuff, so to get something to ME *deity's* instancing, we must speak of the individual who bears deity, God. On the assumptions we've made, God provides ME for *deity's* instancing, a place for *deity* to be instanced. If *deity* is a fully Aristotelian attribute, and God is the only place it can be instanced, then God accounts fully via ME for deity's existence. If it's essential God to be divine, then *deity* helps account in turn for God's existence. Does it account *entirely* for God's existence? That's not apparent, and so it's not clear that the Aristotelian scenario provides a model of *deity* fully explaining God's existence. But it's at least clear that there was no clump of stuff, no further ingredient, needed to generate God. And even if Aristotelianism can't provide a model of an item's nature's fully accounting for its existence, it can still illustrate a strategy for blocking the first leg of my case for D.

Grant that G MEs *deity's* instancing and *deity's* instancing FEs G, and even so, an Aristotelian might argue, it would not follow that G partly really explains G. For G in this case provides only ME. So only facts MEd depend on it. And G does not bear ME to itself. Explanation is not transitive across explanation-kinds; that G MEs DE and DE FEs G does not entail that G MEs G or G FEs G. Thus the Aristotelian counter to the God-timeless leg of the case for D.

I find this counter unconvincing. For one thing, on this picture G may bear ME to G. For if *deity's* instancing does fully account for G, G bears ME to the very fact that fully accounts for G, and so bears ME to G. This clearly follows if the material explanation G provides fully accounts for deity's instancing: for all *pqr*, if that *p* fully explains it that *q* and that *q* fully explains it that *r*, that *p* fully explains it that *r*, and the way *p* fully explains *q* is the way *p* fully explains *r*. If G only partly accounts for *deity's* instancing, still the following seems true: for all *pqr*, if that *p* partly explains it that *q* and that *q* fully explains it that *r*, that *p* partly explains it that *r*, and the way *p* partly explains *q* is the way *p* partly explains *r*. There would be an 'out' from this only if we distinguished a clump of God-stuff from God proper, and said the clump's existence, not God's, MEd *deity's* instancing. But



there is no such clump. If G does not bear ME to G, then, it is only because *deity's* instancing does not fully account for G either. If G only partly explains *deity's* instancing and the latter only partly explains G, it does not follow that G partly explains G. For it is not the case that for all *pqr*, if that *p* partly explains it that *q* and that *q* partly explains it that *r*, that *p* partly explains it that *r*.

Pair is a pair of hydrogen atoms. The Archangel Gabriel made the one on the left. The Archangel Michael made the one on the right. So Michael partly explains the existence of Pair. Right Atom joins some other atoms to constitute a molecule of water. Now the existence of Pair partly explains the existence of Molecule. But though Gabriel partly explains the existence of Pair, and Pair's existence partly explains the existence of Molecule, Gabriel does not partly explain the existence of Molecule. For the part of Pair Gabriel made had nothing to do with it. Now if *deity's* instancing does not fully account for G, there must be something else distinct from God that contributes to His existing, that helps meet some sufficient condition for His existing. If this isn't a clump of God-stuff, it's hard to see what else this could be than some efficient cause. But that is of course unacceptable, and so we're left with God-stuff again. The Aristotelian counter, then, seems committed to 'immaterial matter'.

This problem generalizes. The Aristotelian counter sought to block the case for D by claiming that we cannot infer from

(a) G explains DE

and

(b) DE explains G

to

(c) G explains G

because (a) and (b) involve different explanation-relations. If (a) invokes any R<sub>1</sub> and (b) any different R<sub>2</sub>, then the R<sub>2</sub>-explanation either does or does not fully explain G. If it does, G will turn out to R<sub>1</sub>-explain itself. If it does not, there will still be a partial R<sub>1</sub>-self-explanation, and also there must be some further factor helping explain G. It will not be acceptable to find this factor outside God, and it will not be clear to what within God we can appeal. I take it, then, that the Aristotelian counter fails, the more general strategy it illustrates looks questionable, and the 'God-timeless' leg of the case for D still stands.

### **If God is temporal**

If God is temporal and time had no first instant, one can seek to falsify D by a time-indexing strategy. Thus we might say that for all *t*, G at *t* helps explain DE at *t* + Δ*t*, DE at *t* + Δ*t* in turn accounts for G at *t* + Δ*t*, which in turn helps

account for DE in a still later period, etc. In light of this, we might hazard the claim G at all times both explains and is explained by DE at all times – given that we can parse this via the ‘staggered’ scheme just outlined. But this scenario defeats D only if it is *deity’s* existence that depends at least partly on God’s – otherwise it is not DE that G helps explain. And this is doubtful.

We are canvassing ways to avoid the conclusion that *deity* is a Platonic object. Those who object to D want it to turn out that *deity’s* existence depends on God’s, that *deity* is either an Aristotelian or some nominalist sort of property. So objectors to D want it to be the case that if God is temporal, *deity* is too, existing only in its temporal instance. If God and *deity* are temporal, to account for *deity’s* existing is to account for the fact that there are times at which *deity* exists, i.e. that ‘the set of times at which *deity* exists’ picks out a non-empty set. It is to perform an act, have a property or what-have-you such that, had God not done that act or had that property or (etc.), there would have been no time at which *deity* ever existed – that phrase (S) would have picked out the empty set – and *deity* would not have existed timelessly either. If God is temporal, He does whatever He does at some time. So, if God is temporal and accounts for *deity’s* existing, there is some time at which He does an act, has a property or (etc.) which accounts for there ever being times at which *deity* exists, i.e. for S ever picking out a non-empty set. I now argue that there can be no such time.

God either does or does not have a first instant of existence. If He does, He either does or does not have *deity* then. If He has it, He either has or has not given it existence then. If He has, God at  $t$  accounts for *deity’s* existence at  $t$ . But if this is so, the time-index strategy becomes irrelevant: it’s just as if He were timeless, as far as concerns us. And so the ‘timeless’ leg of our argument will apply, with appropriate modifications. (This disposes of the option of holding that at *any* time, God accounts for *deity’s* existence at that time.) Suppose now that God has *deity* at His first instant of existence but has not given it to Himself. This instant is also *deity’s* first instant of existence, if *deity* is temporal and Aristotelian or nominalist. So as of this instant, S picks out a non-empty set. And if God has not given *deity* existence then, He has not accounted for S’s doing so. Ever after, it will be too late to account for this – S already has done so. So if God begins to exist with *deity* but does not give it to Himself, *deity’s* existence does not depend on Him. At most, its continuing to exist does.

The last thing to consider is the claim that God begins to exist at  $t$  but does not then have *deity*. Then God accounts for *deity’s* existence only if an individual who is not yet divine (since *deity* does not yet exist) has the power to bring *deity* into existence, and so at least contributes to making Himself divine. No Western theist will allow that anything non-divine can contribute to making itself divine. Thus, if God is temporal and begins to exist, there is no viable scenario on which He accounts for *deity’s* existence. And thus, if God is temporal, there can only be viable scenarios for this if God is always God and has no first instant of existence.

Suppose these things. We've already seen that God at  $t$  can't act to account for *deity's* existence at  $t$ . It also seems to me that if God acts (etc.) to account for *deity's* existence at times after He acts, no act (etc.) of God at any time can account for there being times at which *deity* exists.

Suppose that God acts at  $t$  to bring it about that *deity* exists later. Then this act may account for S picking out a non-empty set after  $t$ . But if God is *God* at  $t$ , when He acts, then He has *deity* at  $t$ , and so *deity* exists at  $t$ . So at  $t$ , S already picks one out. So whatever earlier act of God accounts for  $t$ 's membership in the set S picks out has already sufficed ipso facto to account for the fact that S picks out a non-empty set. Thus God's act at  $t$  cannot do so. Suppose then that God's action at  $t-2$  was what accounted for *deity's* existing at  $t$ . If God is *God* at  $t-2$ , when He acts, then He has *deity* at  $t-2$ . So if God acts at  $t-2$ ,  $t-2$  is itself a member of the set S picks out, and so whatever prior act of God accounts for  $t-2$ 's membership in this set has already accounted for the fact that S picks one out (henceforth: that the S-set has members), and so on. As God exists beginninglessly, then, no act of His at any instant can account for the fact that the S-set has members, i.e. that *deity* exists at all. It's not germane to say, with William Lane Craig, that at any  $t$ , God's act accounts for the S-set's having members, because it suffices for the set's having members at a later time.<sup>15</sup> God's act does not make the difference between the set's having members and its having none, if the set already has members. If the set already has members, it's not the case that had God not so acted at  $t$ , the S-set would never have had members – unless His failure to act at  $t$  to continue *deity's* existence makes it the case retroactively that the S-set never had members. But surely whether something was God at  $t$  is a paradigmatic 'hard' fact about the past, something no later event can alter. *Contra* Craig, what's true here is, at most, that God's act would have sufficed to make the difference between an empty and a non-empty S-set had the S-set not had any members prior to that later time. And even this is so only if the individual who would be God once the set had members had even without divine status the power to make Himself God.

God's actions at  $t$  cannot account for *deity's* existence either at or after  $t$ . Nor can they account for *deity's* existence before  $t$  without backward causation, which most find dubious, or allowing that something can not only make itself God at  $t$  but also by so doing make it the case acausally that it was God at some past time as well.<sup>16</sup> Some might bring in time-travel at this point, as this is in a certain respect separable from the backward-causation issue: it's possible to believe in time travel without *locally* backward causation or backward causal 'action at a temporal distance', for in certain sorts of space-times, events whose internal causal connections are locally future-directed causally connect to events in the past.<sup>17</sup> But if God time-travels, the direction of events in time overall differs from the order of events in God's own life. At least, on the most appealing models of a temporal God's relation to time and of what's involved in divine conservation, it isn't easy to see how this might work.

Some theists – the process sort – are content to have time flow along independent of God, with God simply subject to its constraints as to something external and alien. But this is not compatible with a robust sense of divine ultimacy; on this picture, the overall character and direction of the world-process determines the way things go independent of God, and He is subject to it and works only within it. So many other theists prefer to see God, even if in time, as somehow determining time's nature and large-scale traits, including its direction, and as conserving the existence of slices of time itself as it goes along.

Now for God to set things up so that He would time-travel pastward, He would have to bring it about that (say) the order of overall time-slices of the universe is 123 but He lives them in the order 132. For this to be so, God must conserve the time-slices as 123. But when and how does He do this? The most appealing way would appeal to a basic divine power of persisting, forward immanent causation. God just does have the ability to *last*, and His lasting is what brings new slices of time to be. First God is in 1, then He lasts through to 2, and that is why 2 is there. But if God lives through each by His power of forward immanent causation, conserving it as His life goes along, then as He lives in the order 132, time's slices come out in the order 132. In this case, God doesn't travel against the grain of time. If God's presence and activity in a segment accounts for its existence, then the order in which segments exist is the order in which God is present in them. If God is first present in 1, then present in 3, then first 1 and then 3 exists. So for God to time-travel, it can't be the case that God's presence in a time-segment is what creates that time-slice, conserves it in existence and places it in the overall temporal order. This most appealing model of a temporal God's conservation of time doesn't allow God to time-travel.

Instead, to time-travel, God must conserve and order some of these segments from outside them, then live through them in a different order. If God lives through 1 first, that is the obvious choice for when He conserves 23 – it avoids backward causation. But how could God arrange from 1 for the order 132 to be followed, or conserve 32 from 1? It would cut no ice to suppose that God sets up some intermediary in 1 to carry His influence forward to 2 and then to 3. For He must conserve the intermediary itself, and so must either do it as His life goes along or from a different segment. The first would again yield the order 132, not 123, and the second just reinstates the problem of how God in one segment makes things the case in another.

The best answer, I think, would be that when one segment of God's life ends, God brings it about that the next-in-the-public-order segment comes to be (causation not at a temporal distance, as it were). So God as 1 ends brings it about that 2 begins, God as 2 ends brings it about that 3 begins, and so on. Perhaps God in 1 brings all this about – e.g. brings it about that God is in 2, and in 2 brings it about that 3 begins, and also brings it about that He is next (in His own life's order) in 3. Then what makes it the case that 3 follows 2 publicly is God's action in

1 assuring God's action in 2. What makes it the case that 2 follows 3 for God is whatever lets God time-travel. But then we have to say that God in 1 makes it the case that something happens not then, but later – that God has a purely futureward *transient* conserving influence, one outside His own being. Note that a temporalist can account for the coming-to-be of new segments of time without positing any such power; divine forward immanent causation is enough. And if God's conservation works forward instead of *while* God exists, an uncomfortable consequence follows.

Suppose that God commits suicide. Given forward conserving power, it would be possible for Him to set the world up to continue in being before He left. So the world could outlive God. This doesn't seem to befit the way the world depends on a creator and sustainer. Now it may very well be that it's not possible that God not exist, or at least cease to exist, or at least voluntarily cease to exist. Then the supposition I've just made is impossible. On the standard approach, all conditionals with impossible antecedents are true, and so both

(9) Were God to commit suicide, the world could outlive Him,

and

(10) Were God to commit suicide, the world could not outlive Him.

But even if all conditionals with impossible antecedents are true, not all equally reflect the way things are. Some reflect deep metaphysical truths (e.g. 'Were it impossible that there be thoughts, it would be impossible that there be minds'). Others are just paradoxes of counter-possible semantics. The theist with standard beliefs about creation and conservation must surely think that (10) reflects the way things are and (9) is paradoxical. But if conservation works forward, it is (9) which reflects the way things are, and (10) which is merely paradoxical. Again, if God's conservation works forward, then for all we know, He did all His conserving work at time's beginning, and is now uninvolved (on the seventh day, He rested). Perhaps deism is true even if the world is currently being conserved and guided by God. This too seems an uncomfortable consequence. Theists, then, might want to pause before conceding a divine power to conserve things later in time.

The only other available scenario would have God in 1 directly causing the existence of 3, by a sort of action at a temporal distance. But this is as hard to understand as spatial action at a distance. Now perhaps the problems I've raised are not insuperable, and perhaps God *can* have a purely futureward transient causal influence. I don't think my arguments get near showing that this is impossible. But it is (I think) an uncomfortable thesis to maintain. The standard powers we ascribe a temporal God seem really all powers of simultaneous causal influence – He now creates what exists now, now conserves what exists now, now guides and intervenes in what goes on now – save perhaps for His immanent-causal power to persist. Nothing elsewhere in the concept of God sets us up for a

purely futureward conserving influence, and some oddities follow if God can so act. So while I can't claim to have shown that God *can't* time-travel, it does seem fair to say that it isn't easy to see how this might work, and this does cast some doubt on the idea.

Now if God at *t* cannot account for deity's existing at all at, before, or after *t*, God at *t* cannot account for this at all. I've ruled out His doing so at or before *t*. For God to account for deity's existing from *after t*, the entirety of His life would have to be lived by backward time-travel. For every *t*, God would have to have accounted for deity's existence at *t* from after *t*, and since the only way deity gets somewhere is by God's carrying it (it's an Aristotelian or nominalist property, we're now supposing), for every *t*, God must account for His own existence at *t* from after *t*. Now universal divine time-travel would certainly be a neat explanation of how God manages to foreknow our future free acts, but it is, all the same, a deeply unappealing idea, even assuming that divine time-travel is something possible. So, though the 'staggered' way to account for deity's continuing to exist may be coherent, it does not in fact manage to rule out D with anything like plausibility. D stands. So then does my argument that PSR<sub>2</sub> gives us a Platonic deity. If *anything* explains God's existence, even His own nature, that explainer must have some sort of priority in reality to God's existence, and so to God. If God is the ultimate reality, then, not even His own nature accounts for His existence.

### The identity reading

Not everyone who talks about existing by nature means to give an explanation by doing so. Aquinas suggests that he sees God as existing by nature when he writes that God's

... existence is His essence, so that to the question 'what is He?' and to the question 'does He exist', the answer is one and the same ... . Thus in the proposition 'God exists', the predicate is consequently either identical with the subject or at least included in the definition of the subject. Hence that God exists is self-evident ... to those seeing the divine essence in itself ... because His essence is His existence.<sup>18</sup>

But this does not, I now argue, commit Thomas to God's nature's *explaining* His existence.

The reasoning rests on Aquinas's doctrine of divine simplicity, i.e. his claim that there are no distinct parts within God.<sup>19</sup> If this is so, every part of God is identical with every other part of God and with God Himself: every part of God is an improper part of God. Aquinas treats a thing's nature and its existence as in some way among its parts.<sup>20</sup> This bears discussing, but just now, let's let Thomas speak so for the sake of following his thinking. If God's nature and His existence are among His parts, and every part of God is an improper part of God and so identical with God, then God's nature = God's existence. Now God's nature is the

truth-maker for the answer to 'what is God?'. God's existence is the truth-maker for the answer to 'does God exist?'. Thus, as Aquinas notes in the text above, the absence of parts in God entails that God's nature, the truth-maker for the answer to the question 'what is God?', and God's existence, the truth-maker for the answer to the question 'does God exist?', are identical.<sup>21</sup>

God's simplicity does not let us say that the nature of Thomas's God explains His existence. States of affairs are identical if, in them, the same item has the same property. So if God = God and God's nature = God's existence, God's having His nature = God's having His existence. No state of affairs explains itself. So God's having His nature cannot explain God's existing. Nor can the existing of God's nature help explain the existing of God. For Thomas, God's simplicity entails that God = God's nature.<sup>22</sup> So the existing of God = the existing of God's nature, and so the one cannot help explain the other.

One might wonder whether the contents of God's nature might explain God's existing. That is, one might wonder whether some substitution-instance of 'God's nature contains attribute  $\Phi$ ' might explain 'God exists'. But Thomas rejects this sort of explanation as well. For Thomas, God's nature's having its contents is its consisting of a certain set of parts (attributes). If God = God's nature and God has no proper parts, God's nature has no proper parts. So every part of God's nature is an improper part of it and is identical with God. So God's nature's containing an attribute  $\Phi$  = God's containing God, which of course is just God's being identical with God. Now for Thomas, as we have noted, God's simplicity entails that God = God's nature. As God's nature = God's existence, it follows, for Thomas, that God = God's existence. God has His existence by being identical with it: any fact identical with the fact that God = God's existence is identical with God's having His existence. So God's nature's containing an attribute  $\Phi$  = God's being identical with God = God's being identical with God's existence = God's having His existence. For Thomas, then, God's nature's containing  $\Phi$  = God's having His existence. Again, no fact explains itself. So God's nature's having its contents cannot explain God's existing.

There is one more wrinkle to consider. Sometimes when a state of affairs  $S_1$  = a state of affairs  $S_2$ ,  $S_1$  can figure importantly in explaining  $S_2$ . Consider a scientific example.<sup>23</sup> Physics has it that temperature = mean molecular kinetic energy, i.e. that the attribute of having a temperature  $t$  = the attribute of being composed of molecules with mean *mke*  $m$ . Now states of affairs are identical if they consist of the same particular(s) having the same attribute(s). So for a volume of gas  $V$ ,  $V$ 's having temperature  $t$  =  $V$ 's having *mmke*  $m$ . Nonetheless, scientists claim that  $V$ 's having *mmke*  $m$  explains  $V$ 's having  $t$ . Is this a case in which a state of affairs explains itself? Not really.  $V$  is made up (let us say) of particles  $abcd$ . Let us suppose that  $abcd$  have kinetic energies  $efgh$ . The mean of  $efgh$  is  $m$ . Having the mean of  $abcd$ 's kinetic energy is a property not of  $a$ , or  $b$ , or  $c$ , or  $d$ , but of  $V$ . But this mean is a property of  $V$  which the kinetic energies of  $abcd$  determine. It is the

kinetic energies of *abcd* which explain *V*'s having *t*. They do so by explaining *V*'s having *mmke m*. So the real explanation of *V*'s having *t* comes not from *V* but from *abcd* considered as a plurality, not as composing *V*. The identity of *V*'s temperature and *V*'s *mmke* just transmits this explanation from *abcd* to *V*'s having *t*. In short, what explains *V*'s having *t* are facts about *abcd* and about *V*'s relation to *abcd*. The identity-statement '*V*'s having *t*=*V*'s having *m*' does not give an explanation. It helps pass one on.

If God's having His nature = God's existing, the one does not explain the other. But the *mmke* example might suggest that their identity could transmit some explanation to God's existing. Still, not so for Aquinas. On his account, God's relations to other things cannot explain His nature's being what it is, or His having His nature. God is the creator of all that is distinct from Him.<sup>24</sup> So the existence of anything else presupposes His nature's existing and His having His nature. The identity of God's nature and His existence cannot transmit an explanation to God's existence. It cannot even *contribute* to an explanation of God's existence.

Thus, it seems that Thomas does not hold that God's existing by nature provides an explanation of His existence. For Thomas, God's having His nature makes His having His existence self-evident (*per se notum*) to those who grasp God's nature, i.e. 'see' the divine essence. But it is not self-evident to these lucky souls *why* God exists. What is self-evident is just *that* He exists. For Thomas, 'God exists by nature' is just a way to say that God's nature = God's existence.

We have seen no way to make sense of the claim that 'the necessity of its nature' really explains something's existence. So if God exists, then given that He cannot be wholly caused to exist by other things, PSR<sub>2</sub> is false, at least as so far read. If God's existence implies that PSR<sub>2</sub> is false, PSR<sub>2</sub> can't serve as a premise in a sound argument for His existence. And theists had best steer clear of it if it implies (given the impossibility of 'the necessity of His nature' explaining His existence) that God must have been caused by other things. Finally, if Aquinas does not in fact hold either that something else causes God to exist or that God's nature really explains His own existence, Aquinas does not in fact hold PSR<sub>2</sub>.

### **Weakening PSR<sub>2</sub>**

All this has taken 'a reason for existence', in PSR<sub>2</sub> to be something which objectively accounts for existence. One could give this phrase a weaker, purely epistemic reading, as 'a set of premises not including its own existence from which its existence follows with either natural or absolute necessity'. Then the sense of PSR<sub>2</sub> would be

PSR<sub>2</sub>\* For every existing thing, there is a set of true premises not including its own existence from which its existence follows with either natural or absolute necessity, and these premises consist



at least partly of claims about the content of its nature, and may in some cases include claims about the causal efficacy of other beings.

God does not falsify PSR<sub>2</sub>\* only if there is a sound ontological argument for His existence. Aquinas, in fact, believes that there is one, though He thinks we are not able to know its key premise.<sup>25</sup> If Aquinas (or Kretzmann) appeals to PSR<sub>2</sub>\*, he can pursue cosmological arguments – but they are sound only if some ontological argument is also sound. And so, in this sense, Kant will turn out to be right that the cosmological argument depends on the ontological. But this leads directly to a further sort of worry. PSR<sub>2</sub>\* is true only if there is a sound ontological argument for God's existence. It is on its own, then, a premise conceding which constitutes conceding God's existence. One can wonder then, whether a theist can use PSR<sub>2</sub>\* in an argument for God's existence without begging the question. Can a theist persuade an atheist or agnostic to concede PSR<sub>2</sub>\*? If not, a cosmological argument invoking PSR<sub>2</sub>\* will be dialectically ineffective, even if sound.

## Notes

1. Norman Kretzmann *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), and *idem The Metaphysics of Creation: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) [hereafter *TMOC*].
2. *TMOC*, 65, 66.
3. One can read Hegel as holding this – but, by the same token, it's hard to see whether to call him a theist.
4. I here take no stand on whether one can give this intuition some sway without going to full classical-theist aseity; the matter needs more argument than I can provide here.
5. *TMOC*, 68, 69.
6. *TMOC*, 65.
7. John Leslie *Value and Existence* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), Hugh Rice, *God and Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
8. *Ibid.*, 51.
9. See Timothy O'Connor 'Simplicity and creation', *Faith and Philosophy*, 16 (1999), 408.
10. So Plotinus *Ennead*, VI, 7.
11. Leslie waffles on this instructively. When speaking of the way goodness might account for existence quite generally, he is happy to speak of it as having 'creative ability' and 'creative power'; John Leslie *Infinite Minds* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 175. But when he turns to the claim that God's goodness might account for God's existence, he insists that his view doesn't make 'God's existence depend on something outside God ... . There is only a verbal difference between declaring that God owes his existence to an ethical requirement that he exist and declaring instead that he owes his existence to his own ethical requiredness' (*ibid.*, 183). But His own ethical requiredness has 'creative power' over God only if it is prior to Him as cause to effect. And what is causally prior to something counts as 'outside' it. Leslie's general view is that goodness is rather like an efficient cause, but he draws back from this ad hoc in God's case.
12. See *ibid.*, 182–183.
13. *Ibid.*, 182–184.
14. This has been denied; see Thomas Morris and Christopher Menzel 'Absolute creation', in Thomas Morris *Anselmian Explorations* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 161–178. For criticism of their view see my 'God and abstract entities', *Faith and Philosophy*, 7 (1990), 193–217.
15. So William Lane Craig 'Timelessness and creation', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 74 (1996), 645–656 in reply to a slightly different argument.

16. But again, surely whether an individual was God is a 'hard' fact.
17. See John Earman 'Recent work on time travel', in Steven Savitt (ed.) *Time's Arrows Today* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 268–310.
18. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles* [hereafter SCG], I, ch. 10 (4) and ch. 11 (5).
19. See e.g. *ibid.*, I, ch. 22.
20. For discussion of this, see Nicholas Wolterstorff 'Divine simplicity', in James Tomberlin (ed.) *Philosophical Perspectives V: Philosophy of Religion* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Press, 1991), 531–552; and Christopher Hughes *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 33–41.
21. It's also true, for Thomas, that God's existence is just existence *simpliciter* (so e.g. SCG, I, ch. 38). This doesn't affect the reasoning above.
22. SCG, I, ch. 21.
23. The example stems from Peter Achinstein *The Nature of Explanation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), 233–237.
24. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, 44, 1.
25. So e.g. *ibid.*, Ia, 2, 1.