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Preface

Aims

When I (Joseph) learned about evolutionary theory in seventh grade, I fell in love. I marveled at how the beauty, grandeur, and diversity of life arose from such simple, humble origins. There was something elegant—something beautiful, magnificent, even mysterious—about simplicity and unity giving rise to complexity and diversity.

As I reflected, however, my optimism and awe toward evolution diminished. The horror and brutality of the evolutionary process pierced my mind and heart. For hundreds of millions of years, untold numbers of animals experienced profound languishing, suffering, death, predation, and parasitism. Evolution is a cruel, grueling process in which the weak, sick, and dying are unforgivingly discarded. To make matters worse, this was the *means* or *mechanism* by which biological diversity (in general) and humans (in particular) were created. The very engine of creation was suffering and death. How could such a process be the providential working, I wondered, of a perfectly good God?

Confronting these facts and others led me into greater depths of inquiry. Answering my questions required investigating the nature of evil, suffering, and consciousness. And answering *these* questions required investigating metaphysics, the nature and existence of God, and the foundations of reality. Beginning with evolution, I ended with *philosophy*. And once I encountered philosophy, there was no going back from there.

In this philosophical journey, I stumbled upon a view that captivated me just as much (and for the same reason) as evolutionary theory. On this view, reality as a whole mirrored the grandeur of evolution—or, perhaps more accurately, the grandeur of evolution was a reflection of reality as a whole. According to the view, unity begets multiplicity, simplicity begets complexity, and oneness begets plurality. The view ignited the same awe I experienced toward evolutionary theory in seventh grade.

That view is *classical theism*. According to classical theism, reality's foundation or ultimate ground is an absolutely simple divine being upon which all else depends.

All complexity, multiplicity, and plurality derive from a being of pure, undifferentiated actuality. Just as biological diversity pours forth from simple origins, diversity in *being* pours forth from an absolutely simple being.

To many, classical theism seems counterintuitive and extravagant. But many philosophers have sought to *demonstrate* or *prove* its truth. One of our aims in this book is to show that prominent proofs of this sort fail. In particular, we target seven proofs or arguments for the existence of the God of classical theism:

(1) Aquinas's First Way, which reasons from change to a purely actual, unmoved mover (Chap. 2)
(2) The Aristotelian proof, which reasons from change and the existence of changeable substances to a purely actual, unactualized actualizer (Chaps. 3, 4 and 8)
(3) The Neo-Platonic proof, which reasons from composite beings to an absolutely simple being (Chap. 9)
(4) The Augustinian proof, which reasons from abstracta to an infinite, necessarily existent, purely actual intellect (Chap. 10)
(5) The Thomistic proof, which reasons from essence-existence composites to a being in which essence and existence are identical (Chap. 11)
(6) The Rationalist proof, which reasons from contingent beings to a necessarily existent, purely actual being (Chap. 11)
(7) Aquinas's *De Ente* argument, which reasons from creaturely composition of essence and existence (*esse*) to an absolutely simple being of pure *esse* (Sect. 7.3.8)

Surprisingly little critical attention has been paid to (2)–(6) in the literature, and the criticisms directed toward (1) and (7) have left many dialectical paths unexplored. Our first aim, then, is to redress that neglect and explore those paths.

Our second aim is to provide the first systematic, book-length treatment of the thesis of *existential inertia*. Roughly, this thesis holds that temporal concrete objects (or some subset thereof) persist in existence in the absence of both external sustenance and sufficiently destructive factors. While existential inertia has received a flurry of scholarly attention within the last few years, articulations and developments of the thesis are surprisingly varied, differing in terms of their modal register, domain of quantification, and much more. Our book provides much-needed clarity and precision in this young and blossoming debate. We also address nearly all extant arguments in the literature against existential inertia and defend novel arguments in its favor.

Our third aim is to probe ultimate reality with the tool of new arguments against classical theism. The purpose of such arguments is to further debates concerning God's nature, existence, and relation to the world. Such arguments will be of interest not only to non-theists but also to non-classical theists seeking to advance non-classical models of God. In fact, one important takeaway of the book is that—at least as far as the classical theistic proofs considered here are concerned—both non-theistic and non-classical theistic models of ultimate reality remain viable, intellectually respectable options.

Structure

In the first chapter, we articulate some essential background on change, classical theism, and neo-classical theism. We distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic change, after which we articulate both classical and neo-classical theism. Of particular importance is the articulation of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS) and the classical theistic understanding of parthood. This doctrine will come up time and again in other chapters of the book. Also in Chap. 1 are several important notes about the dialectical context of classical theistic proofs.

Arguments from change for the existence of an unchangeable source or cause of change have been quite influential in the classical theistic tradition. Chapter 2, therefore, appraises the most prominent argument of this kind: Aquinas's First Way. More precisely, we evaluate a contemporary formulation thereof and uncover a variety of new problems for the argument.

The First Way sets a historical precedent for the argument evaluated in Chap. 3, the Aristotelian proof. This argument reasons from the existence of changeable things to a unique, unchangeable being that creates and sustains them. The argument consists of two stages. The first stage begins with the reality of change and concludes to a purely actual, unchangeable, unactualized actualizer. The second stage concludes that such a being enjoys an appropriate array of divine attributes. Chapter 3 is only concerned with the first stage of the proof. Therein, we argue that the proof fails on a wide variety of fronts.

In Chaps. 4, 5, 6 and 7, we delve into the existential inertia thesis. Starting in Chap. 4, we discuss the relationship between existential inertia and the Aristotelian proof. Then, in Chap. 5, we articulate a series of taxonomic questions that any inertial thesis (and anyone engaged in the existential inertia debate) should answer. In Chap. 6, we articulate a variety of novel *metaphysical accounts* of existential inertia—i.e., explanations of persistence that make no reference to external sustaining causes. Finally, in Chap. 7, we explore a panoply of arguments for and against existential inertia. These chapters will be of deep interest to philosophers working on the ultimate explanation of persistence, including metaphysicians, philosophers of time, philosophers of physics, and philosophers of religion.

Recall that the Aristotelian proof consists in two stages. We argue in Chap. 8 that the proof's second stage fails, and we also develop a challenge therein for the second stage of cosmological arguments more generally. We then turn our attention in Chap. 9 to the Neo-Platonic proof, which reasons from the existence of composite beings to an absolutely simple being that explains why such composite beings exist. We argue, first, that the proof's central premise—that anything composite requires a cause—is both unjustified and dialectically ill-situated. We then argue that the proof fails to deliver the mindedness of the absolutely simple being and instead militates against its mindedness. Finally, we uncover tensions between Trinitarianism and the Neo-Platonic proof.

Arguments from abstracta or eternal truths for classical theism trace their intellectual heritage back to Augustine (and perhaps further). One such argument—the

aptly-named Augustinian proof—is the concern of Chap. 10. Therein, we argue that the proof not only fails but is also *incompatible* with classical theism. This provides the basis for new arguments against classical theism from abstract objects. We also explore the debate over theistic conceptualism and other arguments for God from abstracta, such as that defended by James Anderson and Greg Welty.

We then consider in Chap. 11 the Thomistic and Rationalist proofs. The former argues that anything in which essence and existence are distinct ultimately depends on that in which essence and existence are identical. The latter argues that anything contingent ultimately depends on a necessarily existent, purely actual being. We argue that both proofs fail. We conclude in Chap. 12 with a summary of the book's findings.

The book represents a renewed and invigorated inquiry into classical theistic proofs, the ultimate explanation of why things persist in existence, and the existence and nature of God.

Previous Work

A substantial portion of Chap. 3 was first published in Joseph's "Stage One of the Aristotelian Proof: A Critical Appraisal," *Sophia*, 60: 781–796. A portion of Chap. 7 was first published in Joseph's "Existential inertia and the Aristotelian proof," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 89: 201–220. Finally, a substantial portion of Chap. 9 was first published in Joseph's "Simply Unsuccessful: The Neo-Platonic Proof of God's Existence," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 13: 129–156. Despite the overlap of these chapters with previously published material, there are significant and new elements of our case against classical theistic proofs contained therein.

Hope

Our central hope is that this book serves you in your pursuit of truth. We also hope to equip you with the tools to think critically about the ultimate nature of reality. Finally, we hope to sharpen your understanding of God, the ultimate explanation of persistence, and beyond.

Style and Format

Asterisks. A select few sections are quite technical. To mark these sections, an asterisk (*) is added to the end of the section title. The asterisks are meant to alert readers to the technicalities in the section. The reader should not fret if the asterisked

sections are too technical to grasp—a complete understanding of the sections is not make-or-break for understanding our case against classical theistic proofs (and in favor of existential inertia). For such readers, we *do* suggest at least perusing the relevant sections to understand their gist.

Chapter organization. The chapters are ordered (more or less) in a dependency series. Each chapter has sections and subsections demarcated topically.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter lays the groundwork for the chapters to come. We begin by defining and demarcating different kinds of change, after which we explain classical and neo-classical theism. We then explain two components of classical theism—namely, the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS) and the related understanding of parthood prominent in the classical theistic tradition. We conclude by explaining the notions of intrinsicality and extrinsicality and exploring the dialectical context of classical theistic proofs.

1.2 Change, Classical Theism, and Neo-classical Theism

1.2.1 Change

The first concept integral to our investigation is *change*. Roughly—and most generally—change at least involves successive "difference or nonidentity in the features of things" (Mortensen 2020). Change therefore minimally involves something going *from* being one way *to* being another way.[1] There are many different kinds of change. For instance, there's intrinsic and extrinsic change. Intrinsic change involves the gain or loss of intrinsic features, whereas extrinsic change involves the gain or

[1] For a helpful recent discussion of the definition of change, see Saudek (2020, pp. 90–95).

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loss of extrinsic features.[2] (Intrinsicality and extrinsicality will be considered in Sect. 1.2.3.)

There's also accidental and substantial change. An entity undergoes accidental change when the entity gains or loses something but nevertheless persists in existence through such a gain or loss. For instance, unless your hairdresser is particularly violent, when you get a haircut you do not (thereby) cease to exist. You remain or continue in existence despite the fact that the length of your hair changed. The haircut did not *kill* you (or even replace you with a distinct but highly similar person with shorter hair). By contrast, substantial change involves a substance or concrete object coming into or going out of existence. When little Fido dies, Fido ceases to exist altogether and gives way to a corpse. Fido does not persist through this change.[3,4]

Though neither exhaustive nor representative, this brief survey of different kinds of change suffices for the purposes of our investigation. A more fundamental question now arises: what even *is* change?

Aristotle offered an influential answer: change is the *actualization of potential*. Change, in other words, is the reduction of potency to act, the transition from potential being to actual being.[5] Take, for instance, a pomegranate. For Aristotle, there are two ways that a pomegranate can be with respect to ripeness: it can be *potentially* ripe or *actually* ripe. A pomegranate that has not yet ripened has a potential to be ripe. When the pomegranate ripens, the pomegranate's previously unrealized or unactualized potential for being ripe becomes actual.

[2] Extrinsic changes are sometimes called "Cambridge changes." Brian Leftow, in contrasting extrinsic or Cambridge change with *real* change, says that "[e]xtrinsic changes aren't 'real' in the sense above," that is, in the sense of changes that "take place wholly within" something—ones that are "not 'logically parasitic' on change in other things" (2014). In accord with Leftow, Marshall and Weatherson contrast real and Cambridge change, stating that "an object undergoes real change in an event iff there is some *intrinsic* property it satisfied before the event but not afterwards" (2018). Thus, Cambridge change, under this understanding, would be *any* change that is not intrinsic change. Others have used "Cambridge change" to refer to changes in the truth value of linguistic predications or descriptions borne by something S without *any* actual gain or loss of *any* properties—whether intrinsic or extrinsic—on the part of S. Given these different usages—and given that we take extrinsic change to be just as *real* as intrinsic change—we will avoid talk of "Cambridge change" altogether except when absolutely necessary. We prefer to use instead "extrinsic change" and "intrinsic change." In rare cases wherein we use "Cambridge change," we'll explicitly define the notion to avoid ambiguity.

[3] Things get tricky under different metaphysical accounts of persistence like endurantism and perdurantism (and the variants thereof). We need not concern ourselves with these views in this section. Instead, we'll handle them as they arise in later chapters.

[4] To be sure, in cases of coming into and passing out of being, there is no substance that undergoes a change; rather, such cases involve the very production or cessation of the entire substance. One might think, then, that the word "change" is misleading here. We can set this aside for now, since what matters is simply that we understand the relevant notions.

[5] For an explication of act, potency, and this analysis of change, see Feser (2014, pp. 34–39, 2017, ch. 1, 2019, pp. 15–22) and Cohen and Reeve (2020).

The pomegranate example helps illustrate the abstract concepts of *potential being* and *actual being*. Potential being (potency, potentiality) is determinable, incomplete, indefinite, unrealized, and unfulfilled existence. Potential being is that which *can* be but is actually *not*. By contrast, actual being (act, actuality) is determinate, complete, occurrent, definite, realized, and fulfilled existence. Actual being is the realization of that which *can* be (or the fulfillment of that which is *capable* of being). According to James Dolezal, "potency in a thing accounts for its ability to exist, become, and change while act is that by which the existence or change is brought about…. [Potency] is the ability or capacity for a thing to become either substantially or accidentally different than it is. An entity is in potency to whatever perfections [or properties] it can acquire but presently does not possess in actuality" (2011, p. 35).

To be sure, there are many other metaphysical accounts of change. Such accounts, however, are not our principal concern. What concerns us here is the account that typically undergirds the classical theistic tradition—or, at the very least, the account that undergirds both (i) the classical theistic tradition with which our book engages and (ii) many of the classical theistic proofs to be evaluated in later chapters. And this account is—by and large, more or less—the Aristotelian account we've articulated. Thus, we need not concern ourselves with other accounts of change—at least not yet.

Let's next consider classical and neo-classical theism.

1.2.2 *Classical and Neo-classical Theism*

Classical and neo-classical theism are models of God. A model of God is a way of conceiving or understanding God's nature and relation to the world. According to Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher, a *model* in this context

> denotes the broad genus of accounts of the nature of ultimate reality in the literature—from specific metaphysical proposals (such as 'that thing than which nothing greater can be conceived') to sustained metaphors … to 'schematic prototypes … that explain, and in some degree condition, the characteristic theses of the theologians who rely on [them]' … to what Robert C. Neville calls … 'indexical signs' to an indeterminate Ultimate. (Diller and Kasher 2013, p. 4)

Of course, atheists can also propose models of ultimate reality. For that reason, a model of God should say that ultimate reality is appropriately called "God." Mullins and Sani (2021) define *models of God* in a way that respects this constraint: "A model of God is a set of unique claims about the nature of God and the God-world relation" (p. 592).

Both classical and neo-classical theistic models affirm that God is omnipotent, omniscient, essentially morally perfect, independent, wholly good and loving, perfectly rational and free, metaphysically necessary, and the creator and sustainer (*ex nihilo*) of every concrete entity apart from God. Classical theism, though—in contrast to neo-classical theism and other models of God—affirms four core theses

about the divine nature: timelessness, simplicity, immutability, and impassibility. We'll call these the "Big Four," as they uniquely demarcate classical theism from other models of God. R.T. Mullins offers a pithy articulation of the Big Four as follows:

> To say that God is timeless is to say that He exists without beginning, without end, without succession or moments in His life, and without temporal extension or location. Divine simplicity is the thesis that God lacks all physical and metaphysical composition. God has no parts or diversity in His essence. A strong doctrine of immutability states that God does not undergo any kind of change…. This is closely connected with a strong doctrine of impassibility whereby God cannot suffer, nor be affected by anything outside of Himself. God is perfect joy, and nothing outside of Himself can diminish that joy, nor affect Him in any way, shape, or form. (Mullins 2016b, pp. 10–11)

By contrast, neo-classical theism denies one or more of the Big Four (Mullins 2016a, pp. 331–332, 2020). According to the version of neo-classical theism with which we're concerned in our book, (i) God is temporal; (ii) God is not absolutely simple (in the sense classical theists understand simplicity and parthood)—God has distinct properties, for instance; (iii) God is changeable—i.e., God is not purely actual but has potentials for accidental change; and (iv) God is passible—i.e., God can be influenced or affected by things outside of God.

The distinction between classical and neo-classical theism is important because the proofs evaluated in this book are not merely arguments for the existence of God; they're arguments for the existence of the God of *classical theism*. Their express purpose is to demonstrate classical theism. If such arguments turn out to be entirely compatible with neo-classical theism (and thus the falsity of classical theism), then such arguments simply fail.

Below we turn to a more careful articulation of divine simplicity and its attendant conception of parthood.

1.2.3 Simplicity and Parthood

The Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS) affirms that God is completely devoid of physical, metaphysical, and logical parts. Traditionally, DDS is taken to entail that God is identical to God's essence, existence, attributes, action, power, and so on.[6]

[6] There is some controversy over how to define classical theism and DDS. It's going to be difficult to find unanimous support for certain theses across *all* traditions properly regarded as classical theistic (e.g., certain Eastern traditions (such as strands of Hinduism), certain Eastern Orthodox traditions, certain Islamic and Jewish traditions, certain Western Christian traditions, etc.). The definitions of classical theism and DDS we'll use (which follow contemporary scholars like Rogers, Brower, Grant, Dolezal, Stump, etc.) is broadly situated in the tradition following Augustine, Boethius, Lombard, Maimonides, Avicenna, Anselm, Aquinas, etc. and on through the aforementioned contemporary scholars. We focus less on variations of classical theism found in (e.g.) Scotus, Palamas, and the like. (Many of our arguments, though, will apply *mutatis mutandis* to such variations.)

God "necessarily lacks any and all metaphysical complexity or diversity" (Mullins 2016a, p. 327). According to this traditional DDS, each of the following—when distinct in something—are component parts: essence and existence, subject and accidents, individual and associated essence, individual and associated properties, act and potency, and agent and the agent's actions (Hughes 2018, p. 2; Bergmann and Brower 2006, pp. 359–360; Rogers 1996, p. 166; Dolezal 2017, pp. 41–42; Duby 2016, p. 2; Mullins 2021).

These examples of component parts involve the following understanding of parthood: x is part of S if and only if x is some positive ontological item intrinsic to but distinct from S, where a *positive ontological item* is anything that exists. More simply (and applied to God), "[a]nything intrinsic to God is identical to God" (Fakhri 2021, p. 10). This understanding of parts accords with how DDS is traditionally articulated. As Augustine famously articulated DDS, God *is* what God *has* (Augustine 1958, XI, 10). Similarly with Anselm: addressing God, Anselm writes in his *Proslogion* that "you are whatever you are … you are the very life by which you live, the wisdom by which you are wise, the very goodness by which you are good" (2001, ch. 12). Also later in the *Proslogion*: "[Y]ou are what you are, since whatever you are in any way or at any time, you are wholly and always that" (*ibid*, ch. 22). Vallicella (2019) follows suit: "God is ontologically simple … there is nothing intrinsic to God that is distinct from God." Other scholars studying models of God are similarly explicit about this conception of parthood in relation to DDS.[7]

There are also straightforward paths from other traditional classical theistic commitments to this understanding of parthood. For instance: if there were something intrinsic to God but distinct from God, then there would be something that is *not* God without which God wouldn't exist. For classical theists, God would then in some sense be *dependent* on something that is not God. This dependence, in turn, is taken to be incompatible with traditional understandings of divine aseity.[8]

Moreover, as Katherin Rogers points out, under classical theism "whatever is not God is created by Him" (1996, p. 167). Michael Bergmann and Jeffrey Brower likewise emphasize that, under classical theism, "(i) God does not depend on anything distinct from himself for his existing and (ii) everything distinct from God depends on God's creative activity for its existing" (2006, p. 361).[9] This commitment, together with other classical theistic commitments, entails that there cannot be anything intrinsic to but distinct from God. For if there *were* a positive ontological item

[7] The formula "whatever is *in* God *is* God" is found either explicitly or implicitly in each of the following in connection to classical theism (or, in a few cases, in connection to central figures in the classical theistic tradition): Schmid and Mullins (2022), Spencer (2017, p. 123), Brower (2009, p. 105), Stump (2013, p. 33), Stump and Kretzmann (1985, p. 354), Grant (2012, p. 254), Grant and Spencer (2015, pp. 5–6), Dolezal (2011, p. xvii), O'Connor (1999, p. 410), Kerr (2019, p. 54), Leftow (2015, p. 48), Leftow (2009, p. 21), Sijuwade (Forthcoming), and Schmid (2022). See also the references in each.

[8] See Vallicella (2019) and Williams (2013, p. 96) for more on this point. We will say more about the link between divine aseity and DDS in Chap. 9.

[9] See also Grant (2019, ch. 1) and the references therein.

E intrinsic to but distinct from God, then E would either be essential to God or not essential to God. Suppose that E is essential to God. In that case, since E is distinct from God and anything distinct from God is created by God under classical theism, God must have created E. But, given that E is essential to God, the view that God created E is absurd; no entity, not even God, can create something essential to itself, for the entity would "already" have to exist (and hence have its essence) in order to create anything in the first place.[10] Having rejected the possibility that E is essential to God, we turn to the alternative that E is not essential to God. If E is not essential to God, then there is some potency in God. For if E is not essential to God, then God could exist without having E. But then God can vary intrinsically across worlds, in some worlds having E intrinsically while in other worlds lacking E altogether. In that case, God has the inherent potential to be different than he is, which contradicts God's pure actuality. Hence, E cannot be non-essential to God. Thus, under classical theism, E can be neither essential nor non-essential to God. And since if there *were* a positive ontological item E intrinsic to but distinct from God, E would either be essential to God or not essential to God, it follows that there can be no positive ontological item E intrinsic to but distinct from God. So, under classical theism, anything intrinsic to God is identical to God.

In light of this talk of intrinsicality, we should ask: what is *intrinsicality*, and how does it relate to the correlative notion *extrinsicality*?

Defining "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" is a matter of controversy (cf. Marshall and Weatherson (2018) and the references therein). Nevertheless, we'll make do with a classic statement from David Lewis: "We distinguish intrinsic properties, which things have in virtue of the way they themselves are, from extrinsic properties, which they have in virtue of their relations or lack of relations to other things" (1986, p. 61). Elsewhere Lewis articulates the distinction like so:

> A sentence or statement or proposition that ascribes intrinsic properties to something is entirely about that thing; whereas an ascription of extrinsic properties to something is not entirely about that thing, though it may well be about some larger whole which includes that thing as part.… If something has an intrinsic property, then so does any perfect duplicate of that thing; whereas duplicates situated in different surroundings will differ in their extrinsic properties. (Lewis 1983, p. 197)

Because not all predicates correspond to properties in extramental, extralinguistic reality, we can likewise distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic *predications* (on the one hand) and intrinsic and extrinsic (ontological) *items*, *features*, or *properties* (on the other hand). Intrinsic predications of S are true solely in virtue of S as it is *in itself*, without reference to things "wholly other" or "outside of" or "external to" S. Intrinsic predications are *not* true in virtue of the relations S bears or fails to bear to things outside S. By contrast, extrinsic predications of S are *not* true solely in virtue of S as it is in itself; they reference things "wholly other" or "outside of" or

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[10] "Already" here expresses ontological, explanatory, or logical priority rather than temporal priority. Also, here's another reason to think E couldn't be essential to God: under classical theism, God could have refrained from creating. But then God could have existed without E, which contradicts our assumption that E was essential to God.

"disjoint from" or "external to" S (even if they merely *deny* some connection or relation between S and such disjoint things). Many extrinsic predications are true in virtue of the relations S bears (or fails to bear) to things distinct from S.[11]

In the context of models of God, Christopher Hughes nicely explicates intrinsic and extrinsic properties along similar lines. He writes:

> [I]ntrinsic properties are typically characterized in one of two ways—either as those properties that a thing has, independently of which relations (if any) it bears to other things 'outside of' or 'disjoint from' it, or as those properties that could never vary between (actual or possible) perfect duplicates (that is, between two (actual or possible) individuals that were exactly alike). On either characterization, a property such as being named 'Domitilla' is extrinsic. (Hughes 2018, p. 3)

While notoriously recalcitrant to analysis, we can make do with an intuitive understanding of the distinction, buttressed by the abovementioned explanations. Nothing in our book hangs on a fully precise and rigorously worked out account of in/extrinsicality.

1.3 Classical Theistic Proofs

Thus far, we've spoken very broadly about classical theistic proofs. We should get clear, however, on the specific families of classical theistic proofs that will be center stage in our investigation. One family is what we'll call *persistence arguments*. Persistence arguments begin by focusing on entities of a particular type. The type varies depending on the persistence argument in question. Some focus on *temporal* entities; others *contingent* entities; still others *changeable* entities; others still *composite* entities; and so on. Thus, the first step of persistence arguments can be put like so:

(1) There are entities of type T—temporal entities, contingent entities, changeable entities, composite entities, or what have you.

Persistence arguments then claim that entities of type T require a *sustaining efficient cause* at each moment at which they exist. In other words, for an entity of type T to persist in existence, that entity requires a sustaining efficient cause that conserves it in being at each moment of its life. Thus:

(2) Any entity of type T requires an efficient sustaining cause at any moment at which that entity exists.

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[11] Though not necessarily *all* extrinsic predications. Some true predications are plausibly *extrinsic* without corresponding to any properties whatsoever—consider, for instance, the predicate "being such that 1 + 1 = 2 and the moon is not made of green cheese." (Note that in future chapters, we'll be construing change in *realist* rather than *nominalist* terms, since classical theistic proofs are almost universally cast within realist metaphysical frameworks. The nominalist, however, can recast all our talk of features, properties, relations, and the like in terms of their favorite re-parsing.)

Together, (1) and (2) imply that any entity of type T is situated within a chain of sustaining efficient causes.[12] But according to persistence arguments, chains of sustaining efficient causes cannot descend infinitely (without a first or primary cause), and neither can they form a causal loop wherein something (directly or indirectly) causes itself.[13] From this, we get:

(3) Chains of sustaining efficient causes must have a first or primary member.[14]

Step (3) implies that any chain of sustaining efficient causes must terminate in at least one thing, S, *without* a sustaining efficient cause. Since any entity of type T requires a sustaining efficient cause, it follows that S is not an entity of type T. Thus, depending on what T is, persistence arguments deliver the existence of at least one entity which is timeless, necessary, unchangeable, non-composite, or what have you. In a second stage of reasoning, this entity is identified with the God of classical theism.

As we'll see in later chapters, persistence arguments abound. Feser's Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic, Thomistic, and Rationalist proofs broadly fit the above schema, and the same is (approximately) true of Aquinas's *De Ente* argument. Persistence arguments also highlight the importance of existential inertia, since the latter clearly challenges step (2) of persistence arguments.

Another family of classical theistic proofs we'll examine concerns the nature and existence of abstract objects like numbers, propositions, universals, and the like. According to this kind of argument, classical theism offers the best (or only viable) account of the existence and character of abstract objects. The conclusion is that abstract objects are ideas in the mind of God. Feser's Augustinian proof is the representative member of this family we'll consider, but we'll also consider *theistic* (though not necessarily *classical* theistic) arguments from abstracta like those of Anderson and Welty, Menzel, and Goldschmidt.

A final family of classical theistic proofs—a representative member of which we'll consider in the next chapter—are *arguments from change*. Like persistence arguments, arguments from change generally enjoy a tripartite structure: (i) there is change; (ii) any change requires a cause; and (iii) chains of causes of change—when ordered in a certain way—cannot descend infinitely or form a loop. The conclusion is that an unchanged changer or unactualized actualizer—perhaps an *unchangeable* changer or *purely actual* actualizer—exists. Unlike persistence arguments, however, arguments from change do not seek to explain the sheer *existence* of entities; instead, they seek to explain the *changes* they undergo.

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[12] The chain might, of course, be one member long—i.e., the chain might include only *one* sustaining efficient cause. Still, a chain is a chain no matter how long!

[13] A causal loop takes the form: x_1 causes x_2, which causes x_3, which causes x_4, … which causes x_1. In such a case, x_1 indirectly causes itself, since x_1 causes something which causes something which… causes x_1.

[14] This "first" member is first in the sense of being the foundational, primary member that efficiently causally sustains the other members in the chain without *itself* being efficiently causally sustained. It need not be first in a *temporal* sense.

1.4 Dialectical Context

Having covered the families of classical theistic proofs we'll examine, let's turn to the *dialectical context* of such proofs. A dialectical context is the conversational environment or circumstances surrounding an argument, claim, or issue. Importantly, the dialectical context functions to set the burden(s) of proof for the various parties engaged in the conversation. What, then, is the dialectical context of our investigation?

In most chapters, the context is one wherein the classical theist is aiming to give a *positive demonstration* of the classical theistic God's existence. As such, the burden is on the classical theist to provide those who do not already accept their premises with *reasons* or *justification* for accepting those premises.

In light of this, several notes about the success conditions of arguments are in order. Suppose that the success of the classical theist's argument requires ruling out some thesis T. There are several reasons why classical theists might not succeed in ruling out T. For example, the classical theists might assume ~T without providing adequate justification; or the classical theist's proffered justification for ~T might rest on the truth of the conclusion of the classical theist's argument; or ~T might conflict with other premises in the classical theist's argument; or what have you. If the classical theist does not succeed in ruling out T for one or more of these reasons, then the classical theist's argument will not be successful in convincing those who accept (or are agnostic about) the truth of T.[15]

Similarly, if the success of the classical theist's argument (or the truth or proposed justification of one of the argument's premises) assumes the truth of some thesis T, but the classical theist does not provide adequate justification for T, then the argument *itself* rests on an inadequately justified assumption. In that case, for those who don't already accept T, the argument will rightly be viewed as unsuccessful. Argumentation is dialectical, and so in order to succeed, an argument for classical theism should provide those who do not already accept the argument's premises some reason or justification to accept those premises—justification that does not rest on further assumptions or presuppositions which are left inadequately justified but which the classical theist's dialectical opponents do not accept.[16] These dialectical points bridge nicely into two kinds of criticism one can level toward an argument: undercutting defeaters and rebutting defeaters.

As we'll understand it in our investigation, an *undercutting defeater* does not attempt to show a premise or assumption of an argument to be false. Instead, an undercutting defeater merely shows that a premise or assumption lacks adequate justification. Note that the justification here refers to the justification that the argument (and what's said on its behalf) offers to those who don't already accept the

[15] Of course, we're not presently claiming that classical theists are guilty of the dialectical sins adumbrated here. Instead, the sins are used to illustrate the broader point about the dialectical efficacy of arguments.

[16] For more on the nature, purpose, and success conditions of arguments, see Oppy (2015, 2021).

premise or assumption in question. To be sure, the *proponent* of the argument may be perfectly justified in accepting the premise or assumption. For example, a proponent of an argument for God's existence might reason as follows:

(1) If God exists, then God exists.
(2) God exists.
(3) So, God exists.

The *proponent* of this argument may very well be justified in accepting its premises and hence its conclusion. The argument clearly fails, however, since it gives those who do not already accept God's existence no reason to abandon their position and come to believe in God. The question, then, is whether an argument—or, more accurately, an argument's premises and what is said on their behalf—provides those who *do not already accept the argument* (i.e., those who don't accept one or more of its premises or assumptions) sufficient reason or justification to change their mind and accept the argument. The purpose of an undercutting defeater, then, is to show that nothing within an argument (including what's said on behalf of the argument's premises) provides those who do not already accept one or more of the argument's premises or assumptions sufficient reason to change their minds.

By contrast, *rebutting defeaters* aim to show the actual or probable falsity of a premise or assumption. Our appraisal of classical theistic proofs will employ both rebutting and undercutting defeaters. Thus, there will be several occasions wherein we uncover an underlying assumption of a premise (or of the justification leveled on its behalf) and—instead of showing the premise to be false—argue that the premise is simply inadequately justified in the dialectical context at hand.

This is all worth emphasizing because the role of dialectical contexts in discussing arguments is misunderstood time and again. In the dialectical context of classical theistic proofs, the onus is *not* on *detractors* of the classical theist's premises to pinpoint some common ground between themselves and the classical theist that should convince the classical theist to give up one or more of the classical theist's premises. The *classical theist* is the one providing a *positive argument* for the God of classical theism. Thus, the *classical theist* needs to convince those who do not already accept one or more of the argument's premises to accept those premises. We are therefore well within our dialectical and epistemic rights to argue—in response to a classical theistic proof—that nothing the proponent says on behalf of some premise provides those who reject or are agnostic on the premise sufficient reason to abandon their position. Whether this point should convince the classical theist to think their view is false is irrelevant. The onus is not on the *detractor* of an argument to convince the *proponent* of the argument to give up their position, or to convince the proponent that the premise is false, or to appeal to common ground between the proponent and the detractor. All the detractor needs to do is to point out that nothing in the proponent's argument, and nothing said on behalf of the argument's premises, provides the detractor sufficient reason to *abandon* their position and *accept* the proponent's. Doing so *does not require* an appeal to common ground or showing

that the premise in question is false or even that the premise is unsupported by the *proponent's* lights. Perhaps we sound repetitive here, but we've learned from experience how often these points are missed. Making these points clear from the outset will, we hope, prevent both confusion and the sheer agony we experience when dialectical contexts are misunderstood and abused.

In summary, when a proponent presents an argument and justifications on behalf of its premises, the onus is *not* on the opponent to *positively justify* why one of the premises in the argument is false. Rather, the opponent need only point out that the argument and what is said on behalf of its premise(s) does not provide the opponent sufficient reason to accept the relevant premise(s). To be sure, the opponent *can* provide positive justification for the falsity of one or more premises. Doing so would constitute a *rebutting* defeater. But the opponent *need not* do so to mount a successful critique. At minimum, the opponent need only offer an *undercutting* defeater.

One final note about the dialectical context of classical theistic arguments is in order. Several classical theistic arguments—especially ones focused on explaining persistence—operate within a pre-relativistic conception of time. But there are several lessons that many metaphysicians and philosophers of religion have not yet taken from relativity.

Many philosophers, regardless of whether they personally endorse a tensed or tenseless theory of time, think of B-theory as the thesis that there's a plurality of three dimensional spaces that exist (tenselessly) at successive points of time. For example, in his introductory metaphysics textbook, Michael Loux describes B-theory as the view that "time is a dimension along with the three spatial dimensions; [time] is just another dimension in which things are spread out" (Loux 1998, p. 213). On the version of B-theory that Loux describes, time has an absolute existence apart from space, so that we might think of each instant of time, or each point laid out along the temporal dimension, as corresponding to an arrangement of objects in space. In that case, any two numerically distinct states of affairs are absolutely simultaneous just in case the two states of affairs exist together in one and the same three dimensional space. While B-theory is often thought to be supported by an orthodox (or Minkowskian) interpretation of relativity, the view described by Loux, or in a variety of other introductory metaphysics textbooks, is not compatible with orthodox relativity for at least two reasons.[17]

First, as Hermann Minkowski (1952, p. 75) wrote, in his interpretation of relativity, both space and time disappear as independent existences, so that we are left with a union of the two that is neither spatial nor temporal. Although the orthodox interpretation of relativity includes four dimensions, there is no temporal axis along which successive three dimensional spaces are located. Instead, the four dimensions

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[17] The fact that the metaphysician's four-dimensionalism and the physicist's four-dimensionalism are distinct has sometimes led to philosophical errors. For example, while David Lewis's (1976) conception of time travel is explicitly described in four-dimensional terms, Lewis's view cannot be adapted to relativistic physics without heavy modifications (Daniels 2014).

are neutral between space and time and can only be interpreted as spatial or temporal from a given reference frame; moreover, the choice of a set of four axes is likewise determined by the adoption of a given reference frame. Since there are no three dimensional spaces located at distinct, successive times, orthodox relativity strictly forbids absolute simultaneity.

Second, to the extent that a time parameter appears in relativity, time should be understood as marked out along trajectories through spacetime (i.e., the so-called proper time). Again, any two states of affairs can be simultaneous only relative to a specific reference frame, since different states of relative motion will select different sets of states of affairs as simultaneous. Thus, while B-theory and the orthodox interpretation of relativity in some manner deflate the distinction between space and time, they do so for quite different reasons, and the formal structure and associated formal relations in terms of which relativistic spacetimes are expressed markedly differ from the formal structure and relations that many metaphysicians utilize to describe time or spacetime. To be sure, there are metaphysicians who try to identify various bits of the formal structure found in relativistic spacetimes with the formal structures mandated by the accounts of space or time dreamt up by metaphysicians. But whether any such identification is successful or even worthwhile remains controversial (Gilmore et al. 2016). Moreover, while B-theory includes an irreducible and absolute direction of time—as described by before/after relations—orthodox relativity does not itself include a direction of time. To the extent that a direction of time might appear in a metaphysical interpretation of relativity, the direction needs to be added by the metaphysician from without. To be sure, there are sophisticated versions of B-theory that *are* compatible with relativity, and some metaphysicians and philosophers of religion *have* learned the aforementioned lessons; however, misconceptions about relativity continue to abound outside of philosophy of physics. The literature on classical theistic arguments is no exception—something to which we'll return in later chapters.

With all this in mind, note that some of our *responses* to classical theistic arguments will employ the pre-relativistic notion of time operative in said arguments. The reader shouldn't take such responses as an *endorsement* of metaphysical views that deny relativity or interpret relativity in a non-orthodox fashion. Instead, the reader should understand our responses in the context of the following dilemma: either we assume a pre-relativistic understanding of time, or we don't. If we *do*, then our responses that are couched within a pre-relativistic framework apply to the classical theistic arguments. If we *don't*, then the classical theistic arguments that *assume* a pre-relativistic framework fail (or at least lack adequate justification). Again, we'll have much more to say in later chapters about how relativity intersects with debates about persistence and arguments therefrom for classical theism. For now, we include this note to clarify and situate our ensuing critical appraisal of classical theistic proofs.

1.5 Conclusion

To set the stage for our investigation into classical theistic proofs, we explored key background concepts like change, classical theism, neo-classical theism, intrinsicality, and extrinsicality. Finally, we covered the dialectical context of classical theistic proofs. The first classical theistic proof we'll consider, Aquinas's First Way, is the subject of the next chapter. Will its potential to demonstrate the classical theistic God's existence be actualized?

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Chapter 2
Aquinas's First Way

2.1 Introduction

Cosmological arguments reason from some very general feature of reality—e.g., contingency, causal dependence, or change—to the existence of some ultimate explanation, cause, or ground of that feature of reality. This explanation, cause, or ground is then identified with God.

Some of the most influential cosmological arguments for the God of classical theism focus in particular on *change*. Such arguments trace their intellectual heritage at least back to Aristotle, whose classic statement of the argument from change is found in book 8 of his *Physics* and book 12 of his *Metaphysics*. The basic form of reasoning—from the reality of change to the existence of an unmoved mover—has been reformulated, refined, and expanded by many philosophers within the Aristotelian tradition. For example, Maimonides (1995) articulates and defends a version of the argument in *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Bk. 2, ch. 1). Arguments from change, moreover, are not mere historical artifacts; they've enjoyed something of a revival of interest among philosophers of religion as of late.[1]

Most notable for our purposes is medieval philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas's treatment of the argument from change in his famous First Way, found in both the *Summa Theologiae* (I, q2 a3) and *Summa Contra Gentiles* (I, ch. 13). We will focus in particular on one contemporary formulation of Aquinas's First Way from McNabb and DeVito (2020). We begin our investigation into classical theistic proofs with the First Way in part because it is a historical precedent to the Aristotelian proof, which we take up in Chap. 3. Defenders of both arguments aim to demonstrate the existence of an unactualized actualizer that is the purely actual source of

[1] See especially Feser (2011, 2017, 2020, 2021), Oppy (2006), Oberle (2022), McNabb and DeVito (2020), Davies (2016), Smart and Haldane (2003), Oderberg (2010), and Martin (1997) for some recent treatments. The wide-ranging atheological works of Oppy (2006) and Sobel (2003) also provide treatments, with various aspects of the debate blossoming in later years.

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all change. By understanding the problems afflicting the First Way, we can set the stage for parallel problems that will afflict the Aristotelian proof.

For this chapter, we begin by examining just one of Oppy's (2006) criticisms of the First Way and, more importantly, McNabb and DeVito's (2020) response thereto. Oppy's criticism and McNabb and DeVito's response thereto lay the groundwork for new criticisms of our own. Before examining Oppy's criticism, though, we need a clear understanding of the First Way itself as originally formulated by Aquinas.

Aquinas famously offered five arguments or ways to establish God's existence. Here's how Aquinas (2022) begins his First Way:

> It is certain, and obvious to the senses, that in this world some things are moved. But everything that is moved is moved by another. For nothing is moved except insofar as it is in potentiality with respect to that actuality toward which it is moved, whereas something effects movement insofar as it is in actuality in a relevant respect. After all, to effect movement (*movere*) is just to lead something from potentiality into actuality. But a thing cannot be led from potentiality into actuality except through some being that is in actuality in a relevant respect; for example, something that is hot in actuality—say, a fire—makes a piece of wood, which is hot in potentiality, to be hot in actuality, and it thereby moves and alters the piece of wood. But it is impossible for something to be simultaneously in potentiality and in actuality with respect to [the] same thing; rather, it can be in potentiality and in actuality only with respect to different things. For what is hot in actuality cannot simultaneously be hot in potentiality; rather, it is cold in potentiality. (*Summa Theologiae* I, q2 a3)

For Aquinas, as with Aristotle, the word translated as "movement" refers not just to *spatial* motion but to *change* more generally, that is, the actualization of a potential. For that reason, an object that (for example) changes color while remaining at absolute rest would—according to Aristotle and Aquinas—be undergoing movement. In any case, from the nature of movement or change, Aquinas concludes that nothing changes itself; instead, all things that change must be changed by another:

> Therefore, it is impossible that something should be both mover and moved in the same way and with respect to the same thing, or, in other words, that something should move itself. Therefore, everything that is moved must be moved by another. (*Summa Theologiae* I, q2 a3)

For Aquinas, the resultant series of changers (and things changed) cannot involve infinitely many members:

> If, then, that by which something is moved is itself moved, then it, too, must be moved by another, and that other by still another. But this does not go on to infinity. For if it did, then there would not be any first mover and, as a result, none of the others would effect movement, either. For secondary mover effect movement only because they are being moved by a first mover, just as a stick does not effect movement except because it is being moved by a hand. (*Summa Theologiae* I, q2 a3)

Aquinas thereby concludes to a First Mover (or First Changer), that is, some entity that produces change without itself undergoing change:

> Therefore, one has to arrive at some first mover that is not being moved by anything. And this is what everyone takes to be a God. (*Summa Theologiae* I, q2 a3)

Readers today will likely object that a "first a mover that is not moved by anything" is decidedly *not* "what everyone takes to be a God." In context, however, Aquinas