

*Who Designed the Designer? A Rediscovered Path to God's Existence.* By Michael Augros. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2015. 250 pages. \$17.95.

In this admirably readable work, Thomas Aquinas College philosopher Michael Augros aims to establish that there is a first cause and that this first cause must be a mind. Unlike other such books, Augros wisely develops a single theistic argument—a Thomistic-style first cause argument—instead of running roughshod over numerous lines of evidence. Like Aquinas, Augros develops the argument into a more satisfying natural theology by deducing other attributes of the first cause. That is, he tries to show that the first cause is a “god” (not necessarily the God of biblical faith, but a supernatural being consonant with the key claims of the monotheistic traditions). Because so much in natural theology hangs on the initial steps, I will focus most of my attention on the opening lines of argumentation.

The central argument begins by clarifying the meaning of “first cause.” The first cause acknowledged by most of the West’s greatest minds over the last twenty-five centuries was first regardless of whether the world is eternal. Hence we can see that the first cause is first, not necessarily in a temporal sense, but in terms of *priority*. Causes are often simultaneous with their effects, but still prior to them in a causal, logical, or explanatory way. Though both arm and hammer swing at the same time, the arm causes and explains the hammer’s motion rather than the other way around. This is important in first cause arguments, because if God is both eternal and the first efficient cause of temporal things, then he explains created things without being *temporally* prior to them.

Augros argues for a first cause as follows: The caused events that occur in our world must be caused either circularly, by an infinite series of causes, or by a first cause. (For those who doubt the existence of causes à la Hume, he includes an appendix arguing the contrary.) Circular causation raises interesting questions, but ruling out an infinite series of causes is the real burden of any such argument. Augros argues that to avoid the existence of at least one first cause one must argue (implausibly) that *all* causal chains are infinite. “Really, though, it is much worse than that,” he claims. “It is simply impossible for any series of presently cooperating causes to regress without a first cause, and so we must admit the existence of at least one first and uncaused cause” (34). He argues as follows:

- (1) If caused causes could exist without a first cause, they would constitute a middle with nothing before it.
- (2) But it is impossible for there to be a middle with nothing before it.
- (3) Therefore, caused causes cannot exist without a first cause. (218)

Much obviously hangs on the concept of being “a middle.” Augros helpfully offers examples to illustrate his point; and it is here that we see the true value of the book, for Aquinas is sorely lacking in examples. Augros asks us to

imagine a chain suspending a lamp from an I-beam in a house. “Every link in the chain hangs from something else and has something hanging from it. Every link is essentially a middle in that sense. . . . Notice that the whole chain, and not just each particular link, is also a middle” (34). The chain hangs from the beam, and is a middle in that sense. Whether the chain consists of one link, ten, or one hundred, it is still a causal middle. But what if we had an infinite number of links in the chain? He writes:

We can add as many links as we like, but we will never produce a chain that can hang all by itself and suspend our lamp. . . . If there is nothing for that whole chain to hang from, it will not hang, and nothing can be hung from it. There is nothing about those links in themselves that makes them want to hang in space. . . . Infinity does not have such magic power, then, that it can make a chain hang without the chain’s hanging from anything. (35)

The key point, I take it, is that the “middle” causes Augros has in mind are those which merely pass along the causal power of something else. Conceptually, this makes no sense if there is not at the same time something that actually has within itself causal power (and is not merely passing it along). You might be borrowing money from someone; and that person might also simply be borrowing it from another. But this sort of activity would be impossible unless there was someone possessing money to be borrowed. It can’t be borrowed by literally everyone in the chain at the same time.

In Augros’s second example—an example of motion, this time, rather than rest—boxcars are middles between engines and cabooses. They merely pass along the causal power of an engine. (Even if they move because they are on an incline, they are moved by an external force rather than by their own, internal power.) Without an engine that actually causes motion, the caboose will not move, *ceteris paribus*, no matter how many boxcars are in front of it. As Aquinas (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1.13.14), following Aristotle (*Physics*, 8.5), would put it: without a primary mover there are no secondary movers. Increasing the size of the middle is of no help; a larger middle only calls for a more powerful engine (36). Even increasing the middle to infinity doesn’t help. While the motion of each boxcar in an infinitely long moving series is caused and explained by the motion of the preceding boxcar, without an engine the motion of the entire chain is left unexplained. Infinity is a difficult and interesting concept with many counter-intuitive implications, but it cannot create causal power *ex nihilo*.

It is important to the chain and train examples that the causes act simultaneously in what is often called an “ordered” series of causes. Each link or boxcar is simultaneously caused by something else. “The general lesson is that it is impossible for things caused by something else to be self-explanatory. There must also be something by which things are caused and which is not itself caused by anything” (37). So, it appears that we have an argu-

ment for a *first* and *uncaused* cause. Augros then proceeds to argue that there can be at most one uncaused cause (chap. 2) and that it has the attributes of immutability (chap. 3), immateriality (chap. 4), and intelligence (chap. 6). However, it is unclear whether the initial argument gets off the ground.

To see this, remember that this first uncaused cause is only first *in the ordered series* and only uncaused *by the other causes in the ordered series*. In other words, this uncaused first cause could itself be a caused “middle” cause with regard to something outside the ordered series. Being human artifacts, after all, hanging I-beams and locomotives are not ultimate first causes but only causes that have priority over other causes *in a particular ordered series*. Both Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.46, a.2) and Augros (30) grant that human beings could have been, theoretically, generating each other from all eternity (30). So in Augros’s examples—as well as in Aquinas’s Aristotelian example of a stick moved by a hand (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q.2, a.3)—the uncaused first cause of that series is not uncaused or first in an ultimate sense but came from a human being with parents and so on. This argument would succeed if earth were surrounded by a series of forty-seven or fifty-five (depending on whether we follow Eudoxus or Callippus) heavenly spheres, each of which causes the motion of the sphere inside it. That would indeed be an example of an essentially ordered, linear series requiring an uncaused first cause. But short of that, it is mysterious to me how examples about lamp chains and boxcars are supposed to get us to a true uncaused first cause. Proponents of this type of argument never tell us which ordered series in the world requires a first cause but is not also a middle in some other series.

Some have construed Aquinas’s five ways as treating the world as a single, colossal object requiring, for example, an explanation for its motion as a whole (see G. E. M. Anscombe and Peter Geach, *Three Philosophers* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961)). Exegetically, this doesn’t seem to withstand scrutiny. But at least such an interpretation avoids the problem I have suggested. Similarly, many have read Thomas more existentially, inferring a currently operating (sustaining or conserving) cause of the being of creatures in a series (Etienne Gilson, *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002); Edward Feser, *Aquinas* (London: Oneworld, 2009)). With this tack, one might avoid the aforementioned problem by construing Aquinas’s second way along the lines of argumentation in his *De Ente et Essentia*. Augros seems to follow neither path.

These arguments are complex, however, and this reader may have missed some subtle moves. But that very possibility leads to two pressing concerns. *First*, the value of the book’s project lies in giving a nontechnical version of Thomistic arguments for a general audience. Yet by dropping technical terms and details the argument lacks the precision necessary to

fully evaluate its success. Balancing seriousness and readability is understandably difficult. But one wonders whether both precision and readability are even possible here. This is incredibly unfortunate for those of us who would like to see Thomistic arguments made more accessible. A corollary of this is that Thomists (like Feser and others), who often write as though the only good apologetic arguments are Thomistic ones, should face the fact that, even if the arguments are logically sound, they are likely unsuitable for persuading a broad audience. These arguments typically require a new, technical vocabulary and the settling of difficult metaphysical issues debated in the professional literature.

This leads to my *second* and more important critique: The very real possibility that a person (like me) with relevant training, interest, and great sympathy toward the conclusion might think the chief argument unsuccessful reveals the difficulty of traditional metaphysics. For this reason, my chief complaint with the work is not its lack of success (again, I may be mistaken about that) but the certainty of the conclusions which Augros over-promises and under-delivers. (NB, Thomists often employ a metaphysical notion of certainty, but Augros appears to use the concept in its usual epistemic sense.) Augros repeatedly praises his Thomistic-style argument for achieving a certainty far surpassing that of theistic conclusions reached on the basis of scientific, inductive, or probabilistic argumentation (11–18, 194–6, 208–11). For all the boasting about the strength of deduction and the certainty of the premises and conclusions that one can see for oneself rather than through expert testimony, this argument is vulnerable in that (as Aquinas learned from Aristotle) a small error at the beginning undermines everything. Newer forms of argumentation (like inference to the best explanation) are so epistemically powerful precisely because their aim is more modest. Small errors do not affect large cumulative case arguments such as Swinburne's natural theology.

All in all, the project is noble, and the book could be used for introducing undergraduates to Thomistic natural theology. Few people realize the deductions one can make about the first cause, if only we have a successful Thomistic first cause argument. As indicated above, I have concerns about Augros's opening argument. But often philosophy is better taught as a living discipline in which we reason through arguments together rather than memorize textbook answers. I think it is especially important for Christian undergraduates to see that they need not accept every argument simply because it ends with a desirable theistic conclusion. And so even with my qualms, I think the book might be used to good effect in undergraduate metaphysics and philosophy of religion courses.

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