At the basis of Kant's well known critique of the cosmological argument is the principle that the phenomenal world, sole object of human cognition, can provide no reliable information about what by definition transcends it. This principle has not remained unchallenged. According to a number of post-Kantian philosophers, starting with Fichte, human knowledge reaches beyond the phenomenal. Yet even if it does attain an ultimate foundation of the phenomenal, are we justified in equating its content with the religious idea of God? A survey of recent attempts to meet Kant's challenge leads us to the conclusion that, while individual points in Kant's argument may have been refuted, the main objection stands.

A proper evaluation of those attempts requires a restatement of the original two arguments, causality and contingency, that enter into what Kant refers to as the cosmological proof, as well as the discussion of a third argument based on the degrees of perfection, which some moderns have used to support the other two and to escape Kant's objection. Before entering upon the discussion we may do well to remember that few of the original authors to whom we commonly ascribe the arguments ever considered them independent "proofs." Their arguments appear to have been conceived rather as rational reflections upon a pre-existing faith. Thus Anselm presents his famous argument as a meditation of the believer – fides quaerens intellectum. The same perhaps may still be said about Aquinas who even in his apologetic work, the Summa Contra Gentiles, presupposed a religious experience common to Christians and non-Christians. Thomas' purpose was primarily theological: to show his fellow theologians that although the existence of God is not a primary, self-evident truth, man is able to attain some knowledge of it by sheer reasoning. There is no question that he considered his arguments conclusive in proving the existence of a first cause, a necessary being and an ultimate end. But this was only a first station on the road and one which it would be utterly useless to reach.
if religious revelation would not meet the traveler and take him further to what alone provides a positive content to this cause, end, and necessary being. Not until Scotus' *De Primo Principio* do we find a sustained effort to "prove" the existence of God by sheer power of logic. Even then the idea of God is not detached from the religious experience. Only in Descartes do we witness an attempt to attain a philosophical absolute by philosophical means and for the sake of a philosophical purpose. In the following remarks we shall treat the arguments the way Kant treated them: as independent, philosophical proofs, for that is how they have universally come to be regarded.

1. Causality

Let us then start with what is the most obvious element in the cosmological argument: the requirement of an ultimate cause.¹ According to the traditional argument the fact that none of the causes which we observe in the world is the cause of its own being or acting forces the mind to look for a first cause on which all others depend. The objection that an infinite series of conditional causes is not logically contradictory, is met by the assertion that the term *first cause* refers to an ontological rather than a chronological primacy. Even an infinite series of secondary causes requires an unconditioned principle to make the being as well as the action of each unit of the series intelligible.²

The basic difficulty here is: How could a notion conceived to describe phenomena within the physical world ever be used to explain the coming into being of that world itself? Modern scholastics have carefully distinguished a metaphysical or "vertical" causality from the purely descriptive, physical one.³ But the question is precisely whether vertical causality is a viable concept. No doubt, questions may be asked about the universe which purely empirical descriptions do not answer. But is that a sufficient justification for stretching the notion of causality beyond its descriptive usage? Does it not cease to be meaningful altogether outside

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¹ The proof of causality often contains elements of Aristotle's argument about a first mover. I shall not consider this argument separately because it uses concepts that are too intimately connected with an outdated cosmology.


³ Frederick Copleston, Lionell Mascall, Auguste Grégoire all make this distinction explicitly.