Phil Religion: Aquinas’s First Cause Argument

I answer that it can be proved in five ways that God exists. ...

The second proof is from the nature of the efficient cause. We find in our experience that there is a chain of causes: nor is it found possible for anything to be the efficient cause of itself, since it would have to exist before itself, which is impossible. Nor in the case of efficient causes can the chain go back indefinitely, because in all chains of efficient causes, the first is the cause of the middle, and these of the last, whether they be one or many. If the cause is removed, the effect is removed. Hence if there is not a first cause, there will not be a last, nor a middle. But if the chain were to go back infinitely, there would be no first cause, and thus no ultimate effect, nor middle causes, which is admittedly false. Hence we must presuppose some first efficient cause—which all call God.

(Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Part 1a, Question 2, Article III.)

Argument Analysis

1. There is a chain of efficient causes.
2. Nothing is the efficient cause of itself.
3. No chain of efficient causes goes back indefinitely.
4. Therefore, there is a first efficient cause.
5. Therefore, the first efficient cause is God.

Subargument for Premise 2

1. If anything is the efficient cause of itself, it exists before itself.
2. Nothing exists before itself.
3. So nothing is the efficient cause of itself.

Subargument for Premise 3

1. In any chain of efficient causes, the first is the cause of the cause of the cause ... of the ultimate effect.
2. If X is the cause of Y, then if X were removed Y would be removed.
3. Therefore, if a chain of efficient causes had no first cause, there would be no ultimate effect.
4. If there were a chain of efficient causes that went back indefinitely, it would have no first cause.
5. There is an ultimate effect.
6. Therefore, there is no chain of efficient causes that goes back indefinitely.