Topic: “God is the uncaused cause”. Analyse this statement.

“God is the uncaused cause”. This is one of the conclusions that St. Aquinas hopes to achieve through his cosmological argument. But what does it mean to be an uncaused cause. Moreover what does it mean to say that “God is the uncaused cause”. In analysing this statement I will try and focus on issues such as the meaning of the above statement; the idea of a “supremely perfect” uncaused cause versus the idea of a “sufficiently perfect” uncaused cause; the idea of many uncaused causes; the implications of such a statement as concerned with free will and finally the concepts of cause, effect and time. I shall endeavour to show that there is nothing very meaningful said about the *traditional* concept of God in saying that “God is the uncaused cause”.

What is an uncaused cause?

To say that X is an uncaused cause is saying that X is a self-sufficient entity that was not caused by any other entity. If we also acknowledge that nothing can come into existence form the void[1], then we must say that X has *always existed.* By saying that X was self-sufficient it was meant that X contained its own necessity of having to exist, rather than receiving it from another. Moreover X was not only uncaused but is also a cause, so X is the father of a chain of events that succeed it. Let us focus on briefly whether there is sufficient reason for X to exist at all. St. Aquinas rightly states that if X were not the “sufficient reason” for its own existence, then its existence depended upon some other cause. Hence if everything depended on something else then the existence of everything is contingent. But if the existence of everything is contingent then at one time there was nothing in existence; and if this were true there would be nothing in existence now, because as St. Aquinas claims that which does not exist can come into existence *only* through something already in existence. So if X was not its own “sufficient reason” for existence then there would be nothing in existence now, but something surely exists now (as can be shown empirically), hence X must have been an uncaused cause.

Is God and uncaused cause?

By the very definition of God, God must be self-sufficient and not the effect of another cause, hence it is perfectly intelligible to say that God is an uncaused cause. But what does this tell us about Gods existence? As a concept the above statement makes sense, but in saying God must necessarily exist because he is the *first cause* (of which we are subsequent causes and effects), we make an assumption that an infinite regress of causes unintelligible[2]. St. Aquinas claims “... if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate, cause.”[3] In effect St. Aquinas is saying that unless we have a *first cause* the system as a *whole* will lack a direction and aim. Hume states “But the WHOLE, you say, wants a cause. I answer that in uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct countries into one kingdom, or several distinct members into a body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind...”[4]. In his arguments Hume claims that giving the whole system an “aim” is just an arbitrary act of mind, but St. Aquinas regards this as “plainly false”. Furthermore if by God we simply mean an entity that is an uncaused cause then, why can we not assume that the universe itself is *the* uncaused cause. We could of course name this entity (ie. the universe) “God”, but that would not achieve much, as such proofs only try to show the existence of “something” as “self sufficient” because they tell us nothing about the attributes/characteristics we generally associate with God such as God’s infinite love and mercy etc. However we might thing that if God is the uncaused cause that caused us all then he is omnipotent and omniscient, but even such claims can be disputed as will be shown later.

Does being an “uncaused cause” make God “Supremely perfect”?

Admittedly, God is an uncaused cause, that is he is self sufficient. Let us also assume that God is only just "sufficiently perfect" (ie. he does not exist in "all possible worlds" but only in "this world"). If God is also the *first cause* then we are simply effects of a chain of causes that started from God. In essence, God created us! In fact we were created by God in such a manner so that we cannot even have a concept of a being *greater* that God. The above statements seem to go hand in hand with God being the first uncaused cause (as St. Aquinas would insist!). However what do such statements do to our traditional idea of God as omnipotent and omniscient. Obviously God is not omniscient, God has the attribute of self-sufficiency but he can lack the knowledge of another being who is not only self sufficient but also contains the attribute of timelessness (ie. is perfect in more worlds than our God!). Similarly we could climb the ladder and reach to a being who is "supremely perfect" (if our God had been able to give us the faculties of comprehending such a being!!!). So, basically we cannot know if our God is only "sufficiently perfect", or "supremely perfect" as all the traditional theists claim!

Is it possible that there are many God's?

Since for this essay, we are concerning with the idea of God as in "uncaused cause", if we agree with St. Aquinas article on this matter, then we can easily come to the conclusion that there are many Gods. As St. Aquinas takes that if **X** is an uncaused cause that is also the first cause then **X** is God! But say there were two uncaused causes to start of with. That is, say both **X** and **Y** have existed since time immemorial and both are self-sufficient (ie. "the causes of their own existence") then both **X** and **Y** are "sufficiently perfect" in the realms of existence and self-sufficiency and hence we have two distinct Gods. I'm sure this is not something a person like St. Aquinas (a traditional theist) would like to have shown, but I cannot see how he would contest that his cosmological argument cannot lead to this conclusion being drawn.

If God is the only uncaused cause then what about free-will?

If God is the *only* uncaused cause, then one could argue that every action they take has its cause, which further has its cause ... and so on until we get to God. Furthermore, St. Aquinas claims "... whatever is done voluntarily must be traced back to some higher cause other than human reason and will, since these can change and fail; for all things that are changeable and capable of defect must be traced back to an immovable and self-necessary first principle, as has been shown"[5]. Here too, St. Aquinas seems to be saying that the causes of our reason and will can be traced back to God. Could there be a force other than God that enables us to have free will? If so, then has God the power to stop it? Once again the "traditional" question of omnipotence is raised.

Cause, Effect and the Concept of Time

Let us assume that event **B** occurred just after event **A**. Let us also assume that through empirical observation we can see that event **A** caused event **B** (eg. event **A** is my hand pushing a pen that was near the edge of a table, and event **B** is the pen falling off the table). But what really does it mean to say **A** caused **B** is absolutely true? We noticed event **A** and then event **B** took place but was **A** really the cause of **B**. Our mind could only "observe" the events which as events were completely distinct from each other, so could it just be that our mind, in order to *relate* to the events put an order in them. Now we can see that since our mind places the events in a *sequential order*, we must have a *concept* of time. But as many philosophers would argue, mere concepts cannot show that existence is a property of that concept. Similarly is time only a concept in our mind, and hence the order we put things in is not "real". As can be seen, if we proceed on this path then the true causes for events cannot be known, we can only conceptually put events in a specific order and assume that the previous event was the cause of this event! This would question one of St. Aquinas' theory as it looks like his theory depends upon God being the uncaused cause, ie. not only uncaused itself but causing other events to take place *after* it; and if time is a mere concept in our minds then saying that "God caused something" means nothing in the realms of existence and hence it cannot be shown that God exists.

As can been seen, it is not too hard to comprehend the notion of something being an uncaused cause, however to say that God is the uncaused cause (in a traditional theistic sense) does not convey anything meaningful, because such a statement tells us nothing about the "traditional" aspects/characteristics of God such as omnipotence and omniscient. Furthermore, if St Aquinas' proof was to be adapted, then there would be no invalidity in claiming that the existence of many Gods is just as likely (if not more likely) as the existence of one God; this again would be a threat to traditional theism. Also, if God/Gods are the only beings that are uncaused causes then it can be concluded that we almost certainly have no free will (I'm not sure if this is in line or against traditional theism !). Finally if one were to being questioning the concepts of time itself then statements like God is the uncaused cause would hold no meaning!

<u>References</u>

[1] Klemke, E. D. To Believe or Not to Believe (Orlando, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p.27.
[2] Klemke, E. D. To Believe or Not to Believe (Orlando, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p.15.
[3] Klemke, E. D. To Believe or Not to Believe (Orlando, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p.26.
[4] Klemke, E. D. To Believe or Not to Believe (Orlando, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p.89.
[5] Klemke, E. D. To Believe or Not to Believe (Orlando, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), p.27.