

The Argument from Sufficient Reason (Leibniz's Version & Taylor's Version)

1) The argument depends on the principle of sufficient reason (PSR):

There is a sufficient reason for everything either in itself or else beyond itself.

("Sufficient reason" is best interpreted to be an *adequate* reason rather than a *necessitating* reason.")

This is controversial: critics will ask what are the reasons for believing in this principle. They will point out that it is quite conceivable that something just exists without whatsoever any reason. This kind of state of affairs is usually called a *brute fact*. In a debate with Father Copleston, Russell replied to the cosmological argument and said *the world was a brute fact*.

Consider, however, Taylor's defense. He admits that it is *conceivable* that PSR is false but nonetheless it is a *fundamental rational principle*. We cannot *directly* prove PSR but without it we can prove hardly anything else! (The case is similar for the Principle of Non-contradiction.) Just reflect upon the consequence for our rational inquiry if PSR is flatly denied.

As to the assertion that this world is a brute fact, Brian Davies, another contemporary defender of the cosmological argument, replies that this move is *arbitrary*. The assertion is more a bald statement of naturalism than a reasoned response. Firstly, clearly in all other cases this kind of brute fact reply is rationally unacceptable. The naturalist needs to explain why in this case it is acceptable. Isn't he already assuming the truth of naturalism? Secondly, the defender will point to various features of the world that suggest its contingency: changing, parts of it are contingent, clearly conceivable to not exist ...

2) The idea of a First Cause, Self-Explanatory Being is not very clear. Some philosophers dispute its coherence or meaningfulness. Attempts to clarify:

a) a logically necessary being, a being that cannot not exist, a being that exists in all possible world.

Critics say that this concept is incoherent. Necessity belongs to propositions & not to existing things.

Defenders reply that the incoherence is usually just assumed & has not been shown. The belief that necessity belongs to propositions alone is only an empiricist dogma. Or we can just say, the proposition "God exists" is a necessary truth. There is no apparent contradiction in this proposition.

b) a being whose nature is to exist: in Thomist vocabulary, a being whose essence is identical to existence. The question "why exists?" only arises for beings whose essences are not identical to existence. Since no such gap exists for God, the question just doesn't arise.

Some empiricist philosophers query whether such an idea clearly makes sense, by relying on something like verificationism. But then debates about the credibility of verificationism ...

3) Possibility of a Weaker Version

a) The above discussion suggests that the idea of a Self-Explanatory Being is closely tied to the PSR. The latter seems to lead to the existence of the former. Philosophers who reject the possibility of the former usually reject PSR (strong form) as well. Here the choice

hinges on the acceptance of which kind of philosophy, a more metaphysical one or a more empiricist one. The issue is controversial.

b) However, we have also seen that there are problems with a flat denial of the PSR => even if the strong form of PSR is not correct, something like it must be. Hence weaker forms of PSR can be formulated:

It is rational to assume a sufficient reason for any existing thing unless there are positive reasons to think it cannot be found.

Plausible to think at least this principle or the like underlies all our rational enquiry. This principle does not involve the problems discussed above.

c) We can then reformulate the cosmological argument in this way:

Since even according to the weaker PSR, the world still needs a sufficient reason. If a finite god is postulated as the cause, similar causal questions will arise. The demand for sufficient reason, however, can be satisfied when we reach an *infinite* God. Because there can't exist any being who is more powerful or possesses higher value than God, there *cannot* be any further regress of explanation. So the infinite God is the natural stopping place. He is necessarily existentially independent: a *factually* necessary being rather than a *logically* necessary being.

4) A natural criticism is that anyhow we will have something not fully explained. It is better to stop the requirement for reasons at the world rather than at God: the fewer things postulated the better. (cf. Antony Flew's Stratonician Principle)

This has some point. But defenders also have a counter-attack. Consider the debates between idealists & realists. Since it is not absolutely necessary to postulate physical things to explain our sensory experience, why not stop at the realm of experience rather than the physical world? Similarly, the Stratonician principle will play into the hands of scientific anti-realists who deny the actual existence of theoretical entities.

The debate goes on.

Thomist Arguments

1) Critics raise the question that an infinite series of causes seems possible.

Defenders may concede that an infinite series of causes *backwards in time* is possible but an infinite series of existential causes is different. The existential causes (vertically linked) exist simultaneously.

However, to demonstrate formally such an impossibility has not been proved to be easy. Yet even Hume admits that the idea of an infinite series of existential causes is mind-boggling. I observe that except for the sake of argument, few rational people seriously entertain the belief that there are *now* an infinite number of existing things in a causal series.

Furthermore, there are intuitions which suggest that the infinite series answer is an *evasion* of the causal question rather than a proper answer to it. If a contingent being needs cause, i.e. it will not exist but for a being outside it, it is puzzling why an infinite series of contingent beings doesn't. Analogies: an infinite vertical series of rings, the upper one explaining why the lower one can hang in the air, *ad infinitum*. Or an infinitely long train with no locomotive, each cart explaining the motion of the next. Or an infinitely series of borrowed typewriter, or cheques without cash in the accounts. These considerations, though not coercive, are not implausible.

2) So the more plausible reply is that we in fact accept a First Cause- which is just the collection of the most fundamental particles.

Critics will reply that matter is hardly the suitable candidate for the First Cause for all those reasons that suggest its contingency. A further point: once the critics admit the need for a First Cause, the cosmological argument can be combined with the design argument. The material world as the First Cause simply can't explain the world's order (matter need not behave orderly). Hence such a combined argument vindicate the theistic hypothesis as the more rational one. (See Purtill here.)

Other features of the world can come in here to reinforce this conclusion, e.g. consciousness, moral law, human transcendence, religious experience. This is already moving towards a *cumulative argument*.

3) Another criticism: even if there is a supernatural First Cause, this need not be a personal God.

Defenders will reply that this is logically correct but once the naturalists concede a supernatural cause, there is no better contender for this place than the theistic God. Supporting reasons: the cause is at least as great as the effects. Since the world contains consciousness & persons, the Cause of these is at least not impersonal. If the design argument has some plausibility, it will come to help because the Designer is a rational being, & hence not impersonal. (Or if the moral argument is plausible ...)

Conclusion

1) The cosmological argument is not logically conclusive but there is also no obviously unanswerable objection to it. A logical stalemate: neither the naturalistic option nor the theistic option is *demonstrably* irrational.

2) The argument at least forces us to face this question: why is there something rather than nothing? (or: Why this universe?) This *ultimate* question is meaningful & demands an answer. In fact the alternatives are just a few:

- a) infinite series of finite causes
- b) First Cause- finite, i.e. the natural world
- c) First Cause- a finite supernatural being
- c) First Cause- infinite & logically necessary
- d) First Cause- infinite, not logically necessary but factually necessary

The theistic answer seems to be a plausible alternative among the few choices. The naturalistic option is not obvious. It may even be considered problematic if the urge towards intelligibility is taken seriously.

3) This argument, when coupled with the kalam argument or design argument, will become much more forceful. In the end, the conclusion hinges on which worldview can produce the most persuasive cumulative argument. Or in other words, which worldview can provide the best explanation of the data (or the best answer to the ultimate questions).

Additional Notes

1) For book-length treatment, see Germain Grisez, *Beyond the New Theism*; Bruce Reichenbach, *Cosmological Argument: An Reassessment*; William Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument*.

2) Another version begins from the fact that the world is intelligible, i.e. the world can be understood by us. It then argues that the best explanation is that the rational order in the world & the rational structure of the human mind come from the same source, the Rational Creator. See Hugo Meynell, *The Intelligible Universe*.

PROVING GOD'S EXISTENCE II THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Brian Davies O.P.

In the second of his series of 6 articles, Brian Davies looks at the arguments for God which surround the problem of the beginning and existence of the universe.

It has often been said that the existence of God can be known from what he has brought about. But how can we know that God *has* produced anything? Many traditional arguments for God's existence can be read as answers to these questions, but perhaps the most famous of them is the so-called 'Cosmological Argument', of which we can distinguish at least three versions (for a good account of part of the argument's history see William Lane Craig, *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz*, London 1980).

The Beginning Argument

People who believe in God often say that 'something must have started it all' or that 'things cannot have got going by themselves'. And that, in essence, is one version of the Cosmological Argument, a version which we can call the 'Beginning Argument', but which is sometimes referred to as the 'Kalām Cosmological Argument' since it is especially associated with the medieval, Islamic, Kalām tradi-

tion in philosophy (literally, kalām is Arabic for 'speech'). According to this, God exists since the universe had a beginning and since this must have been caused. Or, as one modern defender of the argument puts it: "Since everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence, and since the universe began to exist ... the universe has a cause of its existence ... Transcending the entire universe there exists a cause which brought the universe into being" (William Lane Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument*, London 1979, pp.149 ff.).

An objection to this argument would be that the universe never had a beginning. But this is by no means obviously so. As even a notable critic of theism can allow, the view that the history of the universe is finite "has in recent years received strong empirical support from the cosmology that is a branch of astronomy" (John Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford 1982, p.93; cf. Richard Swinburne, *Space and Time*, 2nd edn. London 1981, p.258). In this connection one might also appeal to a problem concerning infinity. If the universe had no beginning, then an actually infinite number

of past moments of the universe's history have elapsed and they are being added to as time goes on. But one surely cannot add to an actually infinite number of things. If there is an actually infinite number of frogs, then one cannot add to that number of frogs by introducing another frog. By the same token, if there has elapsed an actually infinite number of past moments of the universe, then this number cannot be added to either. Yet the universe certainly continues to exist. The moments of its history are added to daily. Why not therefore conclude that its history is not infinite? Why not surmise that it did have a beginning? (For detailed discussion of these and related questions see Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum*, London 1983).

Suppose we agree, then, that the universe began to exist. What follows from this? Most people would say, if asked, that the universe must have been caused. And that is a perfectly reasonable view to take since we know of no uncaused beginnings of existence and since we can recognise a genuine beginning of existence precisely because we can identify causes. As



The Horsehead Nebula: Tony Ward

G.E.M. Anscombe has argued, to know that something began to exist seems already to know that it has a cause or that it has been caused (cf. *Collected Philosophical Papers, Volume I*, Oxford 1981, pp.148 ff.). One might reply that something can just begin to exist. But we do not have reason to think that this is true. Something may indeed arise without some particular cause. The Mona Lisa might have been painted by someone other than Leonardo. But we cannot therefore conclude that it could have arisen without the activity of anyone or anything. It has been suggested that we can imagine something coming into being without a cause and that from this we may infer that something can arise without a cause (cf. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby Bigge, Oxford 1965, pp. 75 ff.). But as F.C. Copleston puts it, "... even if one can imagine first a blank, as it were, and then X existing, it by no means follows necessarily that X can begin to exist without an extrinsic cause" (*A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 5, London 1959, p.287). I can draw a picture of something and I can label it 'Something coming into existence without a cause'. In this sense I can imagine something coming into existence without any cause. But I cannot therefore conclude that something might come into existence without a cause. I should first have to know that what I have drawn is a picture of something coming into existence without a cause (cf. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Collected Philosophical Papers, Volume I*, Oxford 1981, pp.93 ff.).

The Argument from Contingency

But even if we agree that there is something to be said for the Beginning Argument, it can still be thought of as incomplete when considered as an argument for the existence of God. For theists normally say that God is responsible for more than the *beginning* of the universe. They hold that he accounts for the existence of the universe whether or not the universe had a beginning. And this brings us to the second major version of the Cosmological Argument. We call it the 'Argument from Contingency'.

Consider the fact that Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the Moon. That is a happy fact and we may all be grateful for it. But it is also something which did not have to

be. Somebody else might have taken on the job. There is nothing *necessary* about Armstrong's walking on the Moon. It is, as we might put it, 'contingent'. If someone were to say that Ronald Reagan was the first to walk on the Moon he would of course be wrong. But he would not be contradicting himself. What he asserts could have been true. It is not, for example like 'Some circles are square'.



Creation of Man
Herman Fechenbach

With this point in mind, the Argument from Contingency can now be stated like this. The things we see around us are contingent. This means that it is always possible to conceive of them not existing. They do not in themselves contain any reason why they should exist. But they do exist, and a reason for this must be sought outside of them. Clearly, it is no good postulating as a reason something which is itself contingent, for the same problem is going to recur with that. In the end, then, we must postulate something which is not contingent and which does have its reason for existing within itself. And this we can refer as the Necessary Being or God.

According to the Argument from Contingency, then, since the universe is contingent there must be something the non-existence of which is strictly impossible, just as it is strictly impossible for there to be any square circles. And that has been the view of some very famous philosophers, understandably so since it is an attractive one. We do not seem to contradict ourselves in saying that there might never have been a universe. And if there might never have been a universe, we can surely try to account for the fact that there is one. If we do that, we might easily find ourselves siding with the Argument from Contingency. We might, for example, find ourselves agreeing with Leibniz. According to him, the reasons of the

world 'lie in something extra-mundane, different from the chain of states, or series of things, whose aggregate constitutes the world. And so we must pass ... to something which is of absolute or metaphysical necessity ... Since then the ultimate root must be in something of physical necessity, and since there is no reason of any existent thing except in an existent thing, it follows that there must exist some one Being of metaphysical necessity, that is, to whose essence existence belongs' (*On the Ultimate Origination of Things*).

The problem, however, is that we may well take leave to doubt that the existence of God is a matter of logical necessity. For one thing, 'God exists' does not look logically necessary. Someone who says that God does not exist does not sound as though he is contradicting himself. His opponent might reply that he contradicts himself appearances notwithstanding. But then we might wonder how the defender of the Argument from Contingency can be sure that he does not contradict himself in saying that there might never have been a universe.

Even if he can cope with this difficulty, there is another to consider. For we may rationally hold that nothing can exist of logical necessity. If something exists of logical necessity, there is something in the definition of which entails its existence. But that is not so. To define something is not to say that it exists. You do not prove that dodos exist just by defining 'dodo'. To define something is to say *what* it is, not *that* it is. Otherwise there would be some property difference between two things definable in the same way, one of which exist and the other of which does not. Yet while I can seriously say 'I have two dogs which are different because one of them is brown and the other is black', I cannot seriously say 'I have two dogs which are different because one of them exists and the other does not'. Existence is not a property which things may have or lack (cf. C.J.F. Williams, *What is Existence?*, Oxford 1981). In that case, however, it cannot enter into their definition. It cannot be part of the meaning of any word that what is signified by the word exists. And from this it follows that the Argument from Contingency is wrong. The argument holds that it is, in the end, as absurd to deny the existence of God as it is to assert that some circles are square. But, though it is certainly absurd to say that some circles are square, it is not absurd to say that there is nothing which cannot be conceived of not to exist.

The First Cause Argument

On the other hand, however, would it be absurd to say that the existence of the universe is something for which you can seek a cause? Would it be absurd to ask 'How come the universe?'? With these questions we reach the third main version of the Cosmological Argument. It is sometimes called the 'First Cause Argument' and it occurs in the writings of Thomas Aquinas (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia,2,3; 3,4; 44,1), though it can also be found in the work of many authors both before and after him (e.g. Anselm, Scotus and Descartes).

To appreciate the nature of the argument, note, to begin with, that we presume ourselves entitled to ask how it comes to be that various things exist - how, for example, it comes to be that there are such things as trees. People in a primitive culture might suppose that trees call for no explanation. They might say that trees have always been there and that there is nothing more to be said about them. But we would not say this. We would consult the botanists and the other worthy scientists. We would seek to account for the existence of trees in terms of a world such as ours.

Now just how long can we carry on this game of seeking to account for various things? Given a particular tree we can ask how it came to be there. And we may be satisfied if told about the tree from which it came. But suppose we ask 'How come trees anyway?'? Here there is another sort of answer we might accept. For we might, for instance, be happy with an account of the conditions on our planet which favour and promote the growth of trees. But suppose we continue with our inquiries. Suppose we ask, not 'How come this or that factor in the universe favourable to and promoting the growth of trees?', but 'How come any factors?'. Suppose we ask, 'How come any universe?'?

In terms of the First Cause Argument, these are the crucial questions. Proponents of the argument ask us to take our practice of seeking to account for things, and they urge us to take it to the limit. For they ask us to consider how it comes about not that there is this or that, and not how something began to exist, but how it comes about that there is any world at all. In their view, this is a legitimate question. And, so they add, if the question is legitimate, then there must be an answer. Something must account for there being a universe.

If that is true, then it will, of course, follow that God must be incomprehensible. For if he is the reason why there is any world or universe, then he cannot himself be anything we can recognise as the inhabitant of the universe. But this cannot be taken as an objection to the First Cause Argument since many theists would say that God is indeed incomprehensible. It is a traditional claim of theism that God transcends all categories and that he cannot be thought of as something alongside anything we care to name. Such is the common view of the patristic authors (i.e. the major Christian writers between the end of the 1st century A.D. and the close of the 8th century A.D.), and it pervades the teachings of writers like St. Augustine and St. Anselm. In Aquinas's terminology, God is 'outside the order of beings' as a cause producing all beings and the features by which we are able to distinguish between them (cf. *In Peri Heremias* I.XIV, 192-197). Or as the author of the biblical book of Isaiah puts it: "To whom then will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me that we may be alike ... for I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me" (Is. 46:5 ff.)

But why should we suppose that there is anything (even something incomprehensible) on which everything depends for its existence? At this point objectors to the First Cause argument will pounce. And in their defence they can appeal to some famous objections to the argument. They might, for instance, say that we can happily suppose that the universe is a 'brute fact', that it is something 'just there', something which raises no causal questions (like the trees as viewed by our primitive culture). This was the view of Bertrand Russell (cf. 'A Debate on the Existence of God' in John Hick, ed., *The Existence of God*, London and New York, 1964). Another approach would be to suggest that the First Cause Argument cannot succeed since it is unable to account for the fact that God exists. In other words, 'Who made God?'.

Yet, as many people will rightly feel, there is something strangely arbitrary in the position of people like Russell. We should not say that trees are 'just there'. So why should we say that the universe is 'just there'? And, though we might wonder how God manages to exist, this does not remove the fact that the existence of the universe poses a question. For surely it does just that. We have no reason to think that the existence of the universe

is something necessary. It does not seem false or nonsensical to say that there might never have been a universe. In that case, however, we can ask how one comes to be there.

An objector might reply that we have no reason to think that something accounts for everything. And, so he may add, if something accounts for everything then something accounts for God, and something, in turn, accounts for this, and so on, *ad infinitum*. But we are not talking about 'everything'. We are talking about the universe. And, as Peter Geach puts it, this, if nothing else, 'shares with its parts attributes which give rise to causal questions' for 'it is a complex whole of parts in process of change' (G.E.M. Anscombe and P.T. Geach, *Three Philosophers*, Oxford 1961, p.113). And why should not we ask what brings its existence about? Why should we not ask what accounts for it continuing to exist?

It might be said that if we ask these questions we must also raise them with respect to whatever we take their answer to be. But that does not follow, for an answer to such questions may prove to be such that the questions will not sensibly apply to it. (cf. Anscombe and Geach, *op cit.*, p.113). It might be said that the universe is too big to be accounted for, but it is hard to see why size should be of relevance here. Some would object to the Cosmological Argument on the ground that if we ask what accounts for the universe we must settle for an answer which we cannot fully understand. But if the existence of the universe is caused, we would hardly expect the cause of the universe to be easy to fathom. We would, in fact, expect it to be as mysterious as theists have thought God to be.

Yet this is not to say that the Cosmological Argument is demonstrably successful. Questions like those just raised are difficult ones, and it is not to be supposed that justice can be done to them quickly. They are, however, a fruitful legacy of the Cosmological Argument, and, if nothing else about it is certain, it seems fair to say that the argument shows few signs of going away. In one form or other it emerges in the history of philosophy again and again. And it looks like being around for a good while to come. If they can respect it for no other reason, philosophers might reasonably respect it for that one.

Brian Davies O.P. teaches Theology at Blackfriars College, Oxford.