

The Cosmological Arguments

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The basic questions: **Why is there anything at all?**

Science gives explanations of things **within** the universe, but can the universe **as a whole** have an explanation?

The Cosmological Argument is still important. The design argument has been influential, but – with genetics and the modern philosophy of biology – it carries less weight. **Given that** the world is here, there are reasons to believe that it can develop itself naturally. But **why** is it here? Is everything dependent on everything else? Is there nothing beyond this circle of interdependence?

This is absolutely fundamental. If you believe that there is some sort of reason, cause, first principle – then you count yourself a theist. If not, then the world is self-contained, and needs to external explanation.

In looking at the argument, keep in mind that the relevant question to ask may not be 'Does this prove that God exists?' but **'What sort of "God" does this argument present? Does this argument point to what religious experience or organised religion mean by the word "God"?'**

Ockham's razor: 'Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.'

Keep this principle in mind: **Do we need 'God' as an explanation, or is there a simpler one?** If God is an explanation (if one is needed) for why the world is, we may not be justified in giving God qualities other than those required for the purpose of creation.

The original ideas that lie behind this argument come from **Aristotle**. But the first to set it out in the form we recognise now were two Muslim philosophers al-Kindi (9th century) and al-Ghazali (1058-1111), in what is known as the **Kalam argument**.

It may be set out like this:

- Everything that begins to exist has a cause for its existence.
- The universe began to exist.
- Therefore the universe must have a cause.

Basic question: If you have a sequence of events, stretching back in time - **can that sequence be infinite?**

Although a theoretical infinity (as used in maths) may seem straightforward, actual infinities cause all sorts of problems. (e.g. Infinity plus one, equals infinity; infinities cannot grow.) Since the time of Aristotle, philosophers have argued that an **actual** infinity cannot exist, and if it did, how could we know? It is not the same as being without discernable limit.

You can therefore present the argument like this:

- an actual infinite number cannot exist
- therefore there must be a finite sequence of causes for the world
- therefore the world began to exist at some point in the past

BUT A circle provides an infinite journey. The surface of a sphere provides for infinite movement in all directions. (Hamster in a Perspex ball!)

Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 74) - probably the most important philosopher of the medieval period - sought to reconcile the Christian faith with the philosophy of Aristotle, which had been 'rediscovered' and was taught in the secular universities of Europe.

Aquinas presented **Five Ways** in which he believed the existence of God could be shown:

1. The argument from an unmoved mover.
2. The argument from an uncaused cause.
3. The argument from possibility and necessity.
4. The argument from degrees of quality.
5. The argument from design.

The first three of these are Cosmological.

The first may be presented like this:

- Everything that moves is moved by something.
- That mover is in turn moved by something else again.
- **But** this chain of movers cannot be infinite, or movement would not have started in the first place.
- **Therefore** there must be an unmoved mover, causing movement in everything, without itself actually being moved.
- This unmoved mover is what people understand by 'God'.
Aquinas was not thinking of physical movement, but change – everything changes because of something else (fire causing something potentially hot to become actually hot). But whatever does the changing must itself be changed by something else. Now, this must stop somewhere, otherwise there will be no first change, and, as a result, no subsequent changes. **This first cause of change, itself not changed by anything, is what he understands by God.**

The second argument has the same structure:

- Everything has a cause.
- Every cause itself has a cause.
- **But**, you cannot have an infinite number of causes.
- **Therefore** there must be an uncaused cause, which causes everything to happen without itself being caused by anything else.
- Such an uncaused cause is what people understand by 'God'.
Don't think of a sequence of causes going back into the past (as the Kalam argument) but a sequence moving outwards in the present – like ripples on water.

The third argument follows from the first two:

- Individual things come into existence and later cease to exist.
- Therefore at one time none of them was in existence.
- But something comes into existence only as a result of something else that already exists.
- Therefore there must be a being whose existence is necessary, and that all would understand to be 'God'.
Everything is only fully understood in terms of the whole. But how is the whole to be understood? THAT is the cosmological question.

Some challenges to the argument:

David Hume (1711-1776). All knowledge is based on observation; we generally see cause and effect following one another

But, in the case of the world as a whole, we have a unique 'effect', and cannot observe its cause. **We cannot get 'outside' the world to see both the world and its cause, and thus establish the relationship between them.**

Perhaps attempting to think about an uncaused cause beyond the world is something that our minds are not designed to do. The philosopher Kant (1724-1804) argued that the whole notion of cause and effect was one of the ways (along with the concepts of space and time) in which our minds interpret the world - we cannot help but impose causality upon our experience. **If Kant is right, then an uncaused cause is a mental impossibility.**

Bertrand Russell – the world is just there, a brute fact.

Wittgenstein – the world is all that is the case. Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.

In other words, if we can only know what we can experience, how can we talk about what causes that experience?

The argument may not be sound, but it points to the sort of reality that a religious person is thinking about when he or she uses the word 'God' - not a particular thing within (or, imaginatively, outside) the universe, but a reality that underlies and sustains everything. It guards against the idea of a limited 'God'.

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