

Topic 2

Arguments for the existence of God

A The Cosmological Argument

1 The need for an explanation

The Cosmological Argument in all its forms responds to the instinctive human awareness that the existence of the universe is not explicable without reference to causes and factors outside itself. It cannot be self-causing since it is contingent and only the existence of a first, necessary cause and mover explains the origin of an otherwise 'brute fact'. The argument assumes that the universe has not always been in existence, and for it to come into being, an external agent is necessary. That agent is given the name God. The Cosmological Argument, therefore, and its partner, the Teleological Argument, are concerned with finding an explanation for the universe. Both arguments look to the universe and find that it is not self-explanatory, and it demands that we ask questions about its origin, nature and purpose. Such questions might include:

- ✦ Why is there something rather than nothing?
- ✦ Why does the universe possess the form it does, and not some other form?
- ✦ How can the series of events which culminate in the universe be explained?
- ✦ Must a chain of movers have a first cause, or is an infinite regress of causes a sufficient explanation?
- ✦ What kind of cause or agency is necessary for the universe to come into being?
- ✦ How can the features (i.e. regularity and purpose) of the universe be explained?

The success of the Cosmological Argument will depend entirely on our willingness to ask these questions and to seek an answer to them, and we should not take for granted that everyone is inclined to do so. It was this question that F. C. Coplestone and Bertrand Russell famously debated in 1948, Russell doubting whether it was even meaningful, let alone important, to argue the case for a cause of the universe, and having established that for him it was 'a question that has no meaning', declared to Coplestone, 'What do you say — shall we pass on to some other issue?' For Coplestone this was an unsatisfactory response, and he later wrote:

If one does not wish to embark on the path which leads to the affirmation of a transcendent being, however the latter may be described...one has to deny the reality of the problem, assert

that things 'just are'; and that the existential problem is a pseudo-problem. And if one refuses even to sit down at the chessboard and make a move, one cannot, of course, be checkmated...

(Coplestone 1961)

The Cosmological Argument is not satisfied with finding partial explanations for the universe either, but seeks a complete explanation, or what Leibniz called a 'sufficient reason'. It is over this need for a complete explanation that supporters and opponents of the argument are crucially divided:

Russell: But when is an explanation adequate? Suppose I am about to make a flame with a match. You may say that the adequate explanation of that is that I rub it on the box.

Coplestone: Well, for practical purposes — but theoretically, that is only a partial explanation. An adequate explanation must ultimately be a total explanation, to which nothing further can be added.

(Cited in Hick (ed.) 1964)

The Cosmological Argument reaches the conclusion that God is the ultimate, complete and adequate explanation for the universe, and possesses in himself all the necessary characteristics to be that complete explanation. In this way, although the argument is essentially a posteriori, it depends on the Ontological Argument having proven that God is analytically a **necessary being**. But more of that later.

Richard Swinburne is a great contemporary supporter of the quest for explanation reflected in the Cosmological Argument. He writes:

The human quest for explanation inevitably and rightly seeks for the ultimate explanation of everything observable — that object or objects on which everything else depends for its existence and properties... A may be explained by B, and B by C, but in the end there will be some one object on whom all other objects depend. We will have to acknowledge something as ultimate — the great metaphysical issue is what that is.

(Swinburne 1996)

For Swinburne, as for Aquinas before him, God is the simplest explanation:

Theism claims that every other object which exists is caused to exist and kept in existence by just one substance, God... There could in this respect be no simpler explanation than one which postulated only one cause. Theism is simpler than polytheism. And theism postulates for its one cause, a person, infinite degrees of those properties which are essential to persons...infinite power...infinite knowledge...and infinite freedom...

(ibid.)

(Note: The principle that the simplest explanation is the most satisfactory, and the most likely, is known as Ockham's Razor, sometimes expressed by the recommendation 'Do not multiply entities unnecessarily'. If a simple, single, self-sufficient explanation can be found, there is nothing to be gained philosophically or intellectually in pursuing other explanations.)

The Cosmological Argument is not just a Christian attempt to prove the existence of the classical theistic deity. Plato and Aristotle postulated the need for a craftsman and a cause of all things, and the Islamic form of the argument, known as the Kalam Argument, which goes back to al-Kindi (c. 870) and al-Ghazali (1058–1111), proposes a

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Cosmological Argument as follows:

P1: Whatever comes into being must have a cause.

P2: The universe came into being.

C: The universe must have a cause.

The difficulty inherent in the argument is that it postulates a cause which comes into existence without having a cause itself. Arguably, there is no reason why there may not be such a cause, only that science has not yet discovered it. The principle is that if something does not contain its own reason for existing, then it must have been caused by something else, and that by something else again. Only when we arrive at a self-causing, necessary being can we say we have reached the end of the chain of causes and effects.

Remember that the Cosmological Argument is a posteriori, synthetic and inductive. (The terms are explained on pp. 22–23.) This has important implications for the success or failure of the argument since the conclusion it reaches is not contained within the premises, so we need to establish overwhelming reasons to argue that God is a better conclusion than any other to which the evidence may point.

2 Aquinas and the Five Ways

The most famous Christian application of the argument was offered by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) in the *Summa Theologica*. He proposed ‘Five Ways’ which proved the existence of God, of which the first three are Cosmological Arguments, while the fourth is a form of an Ontological Argument, and the fifth, a Teleological Argument.

The First Way: from motion

It is certain, and evident to our senses, that in the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is moved is moved by another... It is therefore impossible that in the same respect and in the same way a thing should be both mover and moved... If that by which it is moved be itself moved, then this also must needs be moved by another... But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and, subsequently, no other mover... Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, moved by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.

(Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Third Article, ‘Whether God exists’, cited in Hick (ed.) 1964)

We can set this argument out in the form of premises and a conclusion:

P1: Nothing can move itself, since nothing can be both mover and moved, yet things are evidently in motion.

P2: An infinite chain of movers that has no beginning can have no successive or ultimate movers.

C: There must therefore be a first mover that causes motion in all things, and this we call God.

Aquinas called motion ‘the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality’. For example, fire, which is actually hot, changes wood, which is potentially hot, to a state of being actually hot. Motion, therefore, is a change of state, and not just movement in



time and space from one place to another. However, that motion requires an explanation since we know that nothing can be in both potentiality and actuality in the same respect — nothing can be simultaneously hot and cold. Something is required to bring about the change from hot to cold and vice versa and it must be something upon which that which is changed is dependent. Aquinas argues that God is the initiator of change and motion in all things.

The Second Way: from cause

The Second Way is from the nature of efficient cause. In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known (neither is it, indeed, possible) in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible... Therefore it is necessary to admit to a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.

(ibid.)

This follows the same lines of reasoning as the First Way:

- ✦ All things are caused and since nothing can be its own cause (a logical impossibility)...
- ✦ ...there must be a first cause (God) on which all other causes depend.
- ✦ An infinite chain of causes is rejected since in an infinite chain there can be no first cause.
- ✦ God is therefore the first cause of all that exists.

In the First Way, Aquinas observes that there is something different about God. While all other beings are caused, God is not. Furthermore, God is not just the first cause in a chain of causes which are otherwise just like him, he is one on whom all subsequent causes and effects are dependent. In the Second Way, as with the first, Aquinas rejects an infinite chain of causes but insists that without a first cause there could be no subsequent causes and so in effect, without a first cause, there would be nothing at all.

We could set out Aquinas's arguments so far as follows:

- P1: The universe exists and is in a constant state of flux.
- P2: Everything in existence has a cause and that which is in a state of motion must be moved.
- P3: Causes come before their effects; that which is moved cannot move itself.
- P4: A chain of causes and effects, movers and moved cannot regress to infinity.
- P5: There must therefore be a first cause and first mover which is not in itself an effect.
- P6: This first cause/mover is dependent on nothing else to come into existence.
- P7: This first, self-causing cause, self-moving mover, is God.
- C: God exists.

The Third Way: from necessity and contingency

The Third Way is taken from possibility and necessity... We find in nature things that are possible to be and not to be, since they are found to be generated, and to be corrupted, and consequently, it is possible for them to be and not to be... Therefore if everything can not-be then

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at one time there was nothing in existence... [and] it would have been impossible for anything to have begun to exist and thus even now nothing would be in existence, which is absurd... Therefore we cannot but admit the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.

(ibid.)

Hence:

- ❖ Everything we can point to is dependent upon factors beyond itself and thus is contingent.
- ❖ The presence of each thing can only be explained by reference to those factors which themselves depend on other factors.
- ❖ These factors demand an ultimate explanation in the form of a necessary being (God), dependent on nothing outside himself.
- ❖ God's necessary existence is established *de re*. The very nature of things in the universe demands that God exists necessarily and not contingently. Coplestone defines such a being as one that must and cannot *not* exist.

The third is perhaps the most interesting of the ways. Since beings and items in the universe are capable of existing or not existing (i.e. are contingent), it is impossible that *all* beings should be capable of existing or not existing, or else where would the impetus for the existence of anything come from? Coplestone (1961) maintained that if we do not postulate the existence of a necessary being, '*we do not explain the presence here and now of beings capable of existing or not existing. Therefore we must affirm the existence of a being which is absolutely necessary and completely independent.*'

3 Other approaches to the argument

In *Theodicy*, Gottfried Leibniz explained the Cosmological Argument in the form of the principle of sufficient reason:

Suppose the book of the elements of geometry to have been eternal, one copy having been written down from an earlier one. It is evident that even though a reason can be given for the present book out of a past one, we should never come to a full reason. What is true of the books is also true of the states of the world. If you suppose the world eternal, you will suppose nothing but a succession of states, and will not find in any of them a sufficient reason.

Leibniz's argument is that even if the universe had always been in existence, it would still require an explanation, or a sufficient reason for its existence, since we need to establish why there is something rather than nothing. By going backwards in time forever we will never arrive at such a complete explanation. Leibniz identified that even if we are sure that the universe has always existed, there is nothing within the universe to show *why* it exists — it is not self-explanatory, so the reason for its existence must lie outside it. At the heart of the argument is the premise that there must be a cause for the whole which explains the whole, and unless this is accepted as a meaningful and purposeful exercise, the argument will fail.

Another key feature of Aquinas's form of the Cosmological Argument is the rejection of infinite regress. After all, if we were satisfied with the explanation that all effects



and causes, movements and mover, could be traced back infinitely in time without ever needing, factually or logically, to arrive at a first cause, then there is no purpose to the argument. J. L. Mackie illustrates Aquinas's rejection of infinite regress with a modern analogy: we would not expect a railway train consisting of an infinite number of carriages, the last pulled along by the second last, the second last by the third last, and so on, to move anywhere without an engine. This analogy demonstrates the principle of dependency in the argument; in an infinite series of causes and effects there is nothing to support them. God is like an engine — not just another truck, but a machine that has the power to move without requiring something else to act upon it.

Coplestone supported Aquinas's rejection of infinite regress on the grounds that an infinite chain of **contingent beings** could only ever consist of contingent beings, which would never be able to bring itself into existence. The most an eternal series of contingent beings can do is maintain an eternal presence of contingent beings; it cannot explain how they came into being in the first place:

You see, I don't believe that the infinity of the series of the events — I mean a horizontal series, so to speak — if such an infinity could be proved, would be in the slightest degree relevant to the situation. If you add up chocolates, you get chocolates after all and not a sheep. If you add up chocolates to infinity, you presumably get an infinite number of chocolates. So if you add up contingent beings to infinity, you still get contingent beings, not a necessary being. An infinite series of contingent beings will be, to my way of thinking, as unable to cause itself as one contingent being.

(Cited in Hick (ed.) 1964)

Richard Swinburne (1996) argues that the real need for an explanation lies in the fact that it is more likely that there be nothing rather than something:

It is extraordinary that there should exist anything at all. Surely the most natural state of affairs is simply nothing: no universe, no God, nothing. But there is something. And so many things. Maybe chance could have thrown up the odd electron. But so many particles! Not everything will have an explanation. But...the whole progress of science and all other intellectual enquiry demands that we postulate the smallest number of brute facts. If we can explain the many bits of the universe by one simple being which keeps them in existence, we should do so — even if inevitably we cannot explain the existence of that simple being.

The supposition that the universe had a beginning, which is the cornerstone of the Cosmological Argument, is surprisingly supported in many ways by the findings of modern science (see pp. 109–19). The Big Bang theory, although typically seen as offering a challenge to religious interpretations of the universe, proposes a finite history of the universe — a beginning point, not an infinite regress of events. Furthermore, if the universe has an infinite history, then an infinite number of years must have already passed to arrive at the present, which is nonsense.

4 Criticisms of the argument

David Hume proposed the classic criticisms of the Cosmological Argument in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. More recent scholars have taken up his criticisms, and they essentially revolve around three issues:

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- 1 Why presume the need for a cause?
- 2 Why look for an explanation for the whole?
- 3 Is the concept of a necessary being meaningful?

Hume, like Russell after him, argued that the notion of a necessary being is an inconsistent one since there is no being the non-existence of which is inconceivable. Even if there was such a being, why should it be God? He stated:

Any particle of matter, it is said, may be conceived to be annihilated, and any form may be conceived to be altered. Such an annihilation or alteration is not therefore impossible. But it seems a great partiality not to perceive that the same argument extends equally to the Deity, so far as we have any conception of him...

(Cited in Hick (ed.) 1964)

Even if it were reasonable to postulate a first mover/cause, why should it be the God of classical theism? Aquinas is guilty of an inductive leap of logic in moving from the need for a first mover to identifying it as God when nothing in the premises of the argument leads logically to that conclusion. Obviously, proponents of the argument believe that they have overwhelmingly good reasons why it should be God rather than anything else, but Hume argued:

Why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent being, according to this pretended explication of necessity? We dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities which, were they known, would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five.

(ibid.)

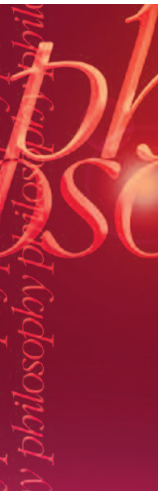
Hume is playing Devil's advocate here — he knows that the nature of the universe is such that it would be virtually impossible to claim that it possessed some essential necessity, but his point is this: why should we be able to say that God — unknowable and inconceivable — possesses qualities which make his non-existence logically impossible? Furthermore, any perceived truth of the claim that there is a God cannot be assumed in order to establish the verisimilitude of an argument which is supposed to prove his existence.

Hume observes that the argument begins with a concept familiar to us — the universe — but claims to be able to reach conclusions about things that are outside our experience. This criticism applies to all arguments from natural theology or which attempt to argue from some facet of human experience to God, and yet proponents of the argument claim that there is sufficient evidence in the natural world to point irrefutably to the existence of God. To the question of why, if we can explain each item in the chain, we need to find a cause for the whole chain, Hume wrote:

Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable should you afterwards ask me what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.

(ibid.)

Hume's criticism is effectively arguing that partial explanations should be sufficient and that it is somehow gratuitous to seek an explanation for the whole if we are able



to explain the parts. The linking together of individual causes and effects into a whole is merely arbitrary, Hume maintained, and makes no difference to the nature of things.

Even if specific instances of things in the universe require an explanation, why should this be the case for the universe as a whole? It does not work to move from the specific to the general. This is a well-worn criticism that Russell famously exploited in his dialogue with F. C. Coplestone using a *reductio ad absurdum*:

Every man who exists has a mother, and it seems to me your argument is that therefore the human race must have a mother, but obviously the human race hasn't a mother — that's a different logical sphere.

(ibid.)

In the dialogue, Russell claimed that some things are 'just there' and require no explanation, and that the universe was such a case. It is a 'brute fact'. Interestingly, Russell did not dismiss the quest for an explanation per se. He maintained that it was a fallacy to assume that it was possible to arrive at one: '*A man may look for gold without assuming that there's gold everywhere; if he finds gold, good luck, if he doesn't, he's had bad luck*' (ibid.)

Finally, the Cosmological Argument could be criticised for presuming a principle of shared essences. We say whatever is moved is moved by something already moving, and what is caused is caused by that which is already caused, but is this necessarily the case? After all, as has been variously suggested, a king does not need to be crowned by a monarch, dead men don't commit murders, a surgeon who amputates limbs need not be limbless, and a farmer who fattens his livestock need not himself be fat!

5 The perennial value of the argument

Despite the many criticisms that have been raised against the argument, its strength as an a posteriori argument, which draws on evidence that is universally available and which in itself cannot be challenged, gives lasting appeal.

While John Hick maintained that '*The atheistic option that the universe is "just there" is the more economical option*', Richard Swinburne disagrees, arguing that '*God is simpler than anything we can imagine and gives a simple explanation for the system*'. According to Herbert McCabe (1980): '*The question is: is there an unanswered question about the existence of the world? Can we be puzzled by the existence of the world instead of nothing? I can be and am; and this is to be puzzled about God.*'

However, although it is perfectly reasonable and legitimate to propose as a hypothesis that there is a God who created the universe, the argument will only work if it reduces the number of unanswered questions. Ultimately, the argument cannot explain God, only postulate God as an explanation, and if we are not satisfied with the idea of God as a being who himself requires no explanation, the argument will fail.

Summary



■ **The Cosmological Argument** — seeks to satisfy the need to find an explanation for the universe and to answer questions about origins and existence. It stands

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or falls on whether those questions are perceived to be meaningful and necessary, and whether a complete, sufficient explanation is somehow better than partial explanations. Swinburne argues that since it is more reasonable that there is nothing rather than something, then the existence of something needs to be explained.

- **The Islamic Kalam Argument** — pre-dates Aquinas's model, arguing that nothing comes into being without being caused. Three of Aquinas's Five Ways — motion, causation, and necessity and contingency (possibility) — point out that there cannot be an infinite chain of movers, causes or necessary beings, and all need a first, ultimate and complete explanation. A relationship of dependency exists between causes and effects, movements and movers.
- **Leibniz** — sought not just to show that something exists but why it does. Infinite regress will provide no answers because it does not offer the possibility of something possessing a different agency which can bring a chain into being. Mackie used the analogy of an infinite chain of railway carriages going nowhere without an engine; Coplestone argued that an infinity of chocolates cannot lead to a sheep.
- **David Hume** — argued that necessary existence is an incoherent concept, and that the Design Argument does not prove the God of classical theism — rather, it moves from what we know to what we don't know. He asked: why seek a cause for the whole? Why does anything need an explanation at all?
- However, **a posteriori** arguments have **perennial value**. God is the simplest explanation. We will always be asking questions about the nature and origin of the universe.

Key terms



Aseity — a necessary being possesses the quality of aseity.

Contingent beings — beings that are dependent upon other beings or events. A contingent being may also be called a possible being.

Necessary being — a being that is not dependent on other beings, but is self-causing and self-sustaining.

Exam watch

The same words of warning are applicable to all the arguments for the existence of God. First, it is vital that you have grasped the material on proof and probability before you look at the Cosmological Argument. The questions asked at A2 will demand that candidates can look at arguments in the context of the philosophical concept of proof and you will cut yourself off from valuable marks if you can only offer an outline and basic critique of the argument. In many cases, a ceiling mark will be set for students who offer a competent, even good, summary of the argument, but who then fail to address the question set. Even at AS you should be able to use the appropriate terminology and go beyond a narrative of the argument. To this end, try to avoid thinking of the argument simply in terms of Aquinas, Hume, the Kalam Argument, or any other formulation of the argument or its criticisms, but think of it in terms of what it is seeking to *do*. This means understanding pp. 36–38, which are about the need to find explanations for the universe and items within it. Only then will you be in a position to understand the implications of the argument and its weaknesses.



Review questions



- 1 (a) Examine the key features of the Cosmological Argument for the existence of God.
(b) For what reasons have some thinkers rejected the Cosmological Argument? How far is it possible to regard the Cosmological Argument as strong?
- 2 How far does the Cosmological Argument serve to provide a coherent explanation of the universe?
- 3 *'It is possible for there to be a consistently religious and a consistently atheistic interpretation of the universe.'* How far does the Cosmological Argument serve to support a consistently religious interpretation of the universe?

B The Teleological (Design) Argument

1 Explaining order and purpose

In our study of the Cosmological Argument we saw how its proponents place considerable emphasis on the need to find an explanation for why the universe exists when it could so easily not exist. The universe itself is neither factually nor logically necessary, so its very existence is something which demands an explanation. The Teleological Argument (from the Greek, *telos*, meaning end or purpose) is in effect a special application of the Cosmological Argument in that it too, through an a posteriori, inductive, synthetic argument, attempts to propose an explanation for a particular feature of the universe.

In short, the Teleological (or Design) Argument claims that certain phenomena within the universe appear to display features of design, in so far as they are perfectly adapted to fulfil their function. Such design cannot come about by chance and can only be explained with reference to an intelligent, personal designer. It is possible to draw an analogy between the works of human design and the works of nature, and to conclude that there are sufficient similarities to infer design of a similar nature. Since the works of nature are far greater than the works of man, an infinitely greater designer must be postulated, which points towards the existence of God as the one who possesses the necessary attributes.

Like the Cosmological Argument, the Design Argument is an ancient one, significantly pre-dating Christianity. The raw material on which the argument is based is again the universe — immediately and universally accessible to humans — and the notions arising from a close examination of that universe are not exclusively Christian, or even theistic. Order, or at least the appearance of it, is hard, though not impossible, to deny. The question therefore is how we explain the order evident in the universe. There are certainly explanations which do not lead to the God of classical theism, or indeed to any personal explanation at all — in that a personal explanation involves a being (or beings) who operates on something at least approaching the principles of intelligence, involved in the planning and ordering of the human race. However, proponents of the Design Argument maintain that a non-theistic explanation for the orderliness of the universe is not a complete explanation. Theists need not be