

Cosmological Argument

If anything exists then it must exist either contingently or necessarily. Something is contingent if it owes its existence to some state of affairs outside itself: “The point here is that everyone can see that certain things owe their existence to other things.”¹ Nothing can owe its existence to itself, for then its existence would have to precede its existence, which is contradictory. Patterson Brown describes the causal relation of ‘transitivity’ where A is caused by B, but only as B is caused by C: “Every physical object we know of possesses this sort of contingency: it exists and functions only as it is caused by other objects in the chain. . .”² Now, this causal chain cannot be infinite in extension. Consider a train boxcar, why is it moving? Because it is being pulled by the boxcar in front of it. And how come *that* boxcar is moving? It is pulled by another boxcar, and so on:

“It is tempting to settle the problem of ultimate causal explanation by noting that each boxcar is being pulled by the one in front of it. But this is where transitivity becomes crucial. It may well be true that boxcar A is pulled by Boxcar B. But B can pull A only because B is, in turn, pulled by C. . . and so on. . . But now something important becomes obvious. An infinity of boxcars will still leave unsolved the problem of explaining why the first boxcar is moving and hence why any are. The problem is not with the arrangement of boxcars, nor is it a matter of the number of boxcars. The problem is that no boxcar in the chain [however long] has the capacity to generate or initiate its own motion. It can pass on the pulling, but it does not initiate it.”³

To imagine the boxcars linked up in a circle (whether finite or infinite) does nothing to explain why they are moving. As with boxcars, so with contingent things. Contingent things can receive existence and they can pass on existence, but they cannot generate existence, thus they require the existence of something that *can* generate existence. The problem with explaining the existence of contingent things (like the problem of explaining the movement of boxcars) is not solved by positing different arrangements or numbers of such things. Whether finite or infinite in number, and in whatever causal connection with each other, contingent things require the existence of something that is not contingent. But if something is not contingent, then it must be necessary. In the terms of our analogy with the boxcars, there must be a train engine to account for the movement of the cars. There must, therefore, be a necessary thing; something that has existence without receiving it, but which can pass on existence to contingent things. As Dallas Willard argues,

“However concrete physical reality is sectioned, the result will be a state of affairs which owes its being to something other than itself. . . the dependent character of physical states, together with the completeness of the series of dependencies underlying the existence of any given physical state, logically implies at least one self-existent, and therefore nonphysical, state of being.”⁴

1 W. David Beck, ‘God’s Existence’, *op cit*.

2 *ibid*.

3 *ibid*.

4 Dallas Willard, ‘The Three Stage Argument for the Existence of God’ in R. Douglas Geivett & Brendan Sweetman ed’s., *Contemporary Perspectives in Religious Epistemology*, (Oxford, 1992), p213-214.

When one additionally considers the diverse range of contingent facts that together make up a universe of such anthropic fruitfulness and beauty as ours, I think one has ample grounds for concluding that the postulation of God – an objective, necessary, intelligent and purposeful fact – constitutes the best explanation of the world around us.

Thomas Aquinas gave a cosmological argument from efficient causality (his ‘second way’) that can be put like this:

1. There are efficient causes in the world.
2. Nothing can be the efficient cause of itself (for it would have to be prior to itself in order to cause itself).
3. There cannot be an infinite regress of essentially related efficient causes, for unless there is a first cause of the series there would be no causality in the series.
4. Therefore, there must be a first, uncaused efficient Cause of efficient causality.
5. Everyone gives this the name of God.

To simplify things a bit we might argue thus:

1. Some things are caused to be (e.g. this letter).
2. It is impossible for *everything* to be caused (because there is nothing beyond everything to cause anything).
3. Therefore there must exist an uncaused cause of being.

This argument is logically valid and the first premise seems to be beyond dispute, so the only question is whether or not it is possible for everything that exists (every thing that exists) to be caused to exist.

Catholic philosophers Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli frame Aquinas’ argument as a *reductio absurdum*:

“Are all things caused to exist by other things right now? Suppose they are. That is, suppose there is no Uncaused Being. . . Then nothing could exist right now. For remember, on the [no Uncaused Being] hypothesis, all things need a present cause outside of themselves in order to exist. So right now, all things, including all those things which are causing other things to be, need a cause. They can give being only so long as they are given being. Everything that exists, therefore, on this hypothesis, stands in need of being caused to exist.

But caused by what? Beyond everything that is, there can only be nothing. But that is absurd: all of reality dependent – but dependent on nothing! The hypothesis that all being is caused, that there is no Uncaused Being, is absurd. So there must be something uncaused, something on which all things that need an efficient cause of being are dependent.”⁵

The weakest step in this argument is obviously the identification of the first Cause with God. This is because while God, if He exists, must clearly be the first cause, it is less immediately obvious that a first cause, if it exists, must be God.

⁵ Peter Kreeft & Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, (IVP, 1994), p51.

Nevertheless, as W. David Beck points out, the concept of “first cause” has two implications:

“To say that it is the *first* cause is to say that it neither requires nor has a cause itself. . . . Thus it is fundamentally different from every other cause *inside* the system: it is not contingent. It depends on, is limited by or exists because of absolutely nothing else. . . . To say of the conclusion that it is the first *cause* is to define its relation to everything else in the sequence, namely, that it is their cause. It is the cause of all things in the sequence in that it initiates all of the causal activity in the sequence, without forbidding that each cause is, in fact, the cause of the next one in the sequence. . . . This seems to [include the notion of] eternal (all-there-is) power. And so the concept of a first cause is richer than it might at first appear. It is the actual cause of the existence of everything in the universe, and it itself exists without any cause or dependency whatsoever.”⁶

It also follows that, as the First Cause, this Being is the ultimate cause of our moral values. We cannot morally criticize the First Cause in any objective sense without assuming that it is itself, as the ultimate cause of our moral intuitions, objectively good. After all, if the first cause is not objectively good, why trust the moral values that we derive or inherit from it? If the First Cause is not good, where is the standard of goodness by which we judge it? If the First Cause is morally good, then it must be personal. The identification of the First Cause with the all-good being of the moral argument is also enjoined upon us by Occam’s razor.

The “first cause” is thus the uncaused, independent, necessarily existent (eternal), all-powerful, good personal Cause of all caused, dependent and contingent existence.

Let’s put the argument one last way.

- 1) If something exists, then it either relies upon something else for its existence or it doesn’t.
- 2) But *everything* can’t rely upon something else, because there isn’t anything outside of ‘everything’ to rely upon!
- 3) Therefore, if anything exists, there must be at least one thing that doesn’t rely upon anything for its existence; something ‘independent’.
- 4) But, clearly, something does exist (I know I exist!),
- 5) so there must be an independent thing; and God fits the bill nicely.

Couldn’t the independent thing be the universe? I don’t think so, because the universe seems to be made up of a lot of things that rely upon other things for their existence. The naturalist might suggest that the laws of physics are independent. But against this, would there be any laws of physics if the universe didn’t exist? It would seem not; unless the laws are ideas in some sort of Mind behind the universe, which leads us to God again; unless you think of the laws as Platonic Forms. But then you might well ask with Stephen Hawking “what breathes fire into the equations?” Plato had to call on the existence of a god to create the universe according to the Forms – but early Christian philosophers like Augustine identified the Forms with ideas in

⁶ ‘God’s Existence’ in *In Defence of Miracles*, (Apollos), p153.

God's Mind, which is surely a simpler explanation. Besides, what sort of existence are these Forms meant to have if they are neither material nor mental? I therefore conclude that the existence of dependent being points to the existence of an independent being.

Suggested Reading

W. David Beck, 'God's Existence', in R. Douglas Geivett & Gary R. Habermas ed.'s, *In Defence of Miracles*, (Apollos, 1997).

Stephen T. Davies, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs*, (Edinburgh, 1997).

Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, (Ignatius).

Peter Kreeft & Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, (IVP/Monarch, 1994/1995).

Bruce Reichenbach, *The Cosmological Argument: A Reassessment*, (Charles C. Thomas).

Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 3rd edition, (Prentice Hall).

Dallas Willard, 'The Three Stage Argument for the Existence of God' in R. Douglas Geivett & Brendan Sweetman ed's., *Contemporary Perspectives in Religious Epistemology*, (Oxford, 1992).

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