PH1102E/GEK1067

Week 7

The Cosmological Argument

Not every theist believes that it is possible to prove that God exists. In fact, some theists think that it is not possible to prove that God exists. Some theists think that we can be justified in believing that God exists without any proof; some theists go so far as to suggest that having a proof of God's existence would actually be a bad thing, by undermining the value of faith in God's existence.

But many theists over the millenia have thought that we can prove that God exists. One of the most influential (but by no means the only) attempt to prove God's existence is known as the **cosmological argument**.

Actually, the cosmological argument is not, strictly speaking, an attempt to prove the existence of God, if by "God" we mean a being that is supremely powerful and knowledgeable and concerned with our welfare. What the cosmological argument tries to prove is the existence of a transcendent creator: an entity that is somehow responsible for the existence of the entire Universe. The cosmological argument doesn't try to prove that this creator is omniscient or concerned with our welfare. Still, if we could prove that there is a transcendent creator of the world, that would take us a long step in the direction of theism; certainly it would give us a reason to think twice before rejecting theism.

The cosmological argument is one of the oldest arguments in philosophy. Probably the first person to write down a version of the argument was Aristotle, but it is almost certain that the argument predates Aristotle. Here we consider a version of the argument widely associated with Leibniz. Here it is:

1. Something explains why the Cosmos exists.
2. If something explains why the Cosmos exists, it is either (a) the Cosmos itself, (b) some part of the Cosmos, or, (c) something else.
3. So, the existence of the Cosmos is explained by either (a) the Cosmos itself, (b) some part of the Cosmos, or, (c) something else. (follows from 1 and 2)
4. The Cosmos does not explain its own existence.
5. No part of the Cosmos explains why the Cosmos exists.
6. So, something that is neither the Cosmos itself nor any part of the Cosmos explains why the Cosmos exists. (follows from 3, 4, and 5)
7. But something that is neither the Cosmos itself nor any part of the Cosmos is a transcendent being: a force, power, or phenomenon that exists "outside" of time and space.
8. So, there exists some transcendent force, power, or phenomenon that explains why the Cosmos exists. (follows from 6 and 7)

This argument contains five underived premises: 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7. If you accept all five of these statements, you must also accept the conclusion of the argument. Let's look at each of these premises now.

Premise 1: Something explains why the Cosmos exists.

By the "Cosmos," I just mean the total contents of time and space. The Cosmos includes everything that exists or happens anywhere, past, present, or future.

Why should we think that the existence of the Cosmos has some explanation? Well, why should we think that *anything* has an explanation? Suppose you are walking down the street with a friend, when you encounter a Galapagos tortoise in the middle of the sidewalk. You exclaim:

> "Why is there a Galapagos tortoise here?!"

Your exclamation is a request for an explanation. You want to know why there is a Galapagos tortoise on the sidewalk.

Suppose your friend answers:

> "That's just the way things are."

This would be a strange thing for your friend to say. It would be different if you had asked: "Why is it that 1+1=2?" Then it would have been entirely appropriate for you friend to answer that that's just the way things are. After all, what's the alternative? For 1 plus 1 to equal 89? 1 plus 1 *has* to equal 2. We can't even imagine a situation in which it's false that 1 plus 1 equals 2.

Not so for the tortoise. It's easy to imagine a situation in which there is no Galapagos tortoise on the sidewalk. "There's a tortoise on the sidewalk" is not like "1+1=2." It's the sort of thing that seems to *demand an explanation*.

Many philosophers maintain that the Cosmos is no different from the tortoise in this respect. Just as we can imagine a situation in which the sidewalk contains no tortoise, we can imagine a situation in which spacetime contains no objects or events. "The Cosmos exists" is not like "1+1=2," it's like "There's a Galapogos tortoise on the sidewalk."

Other philosophers aren't impressed by analogies like this. Even if it's reasonable to think that every individual part of the Cosmos---every individual object, event, or state of affairs---has some explanation, why should we think that the Cosmos *as a whole* has some explanation? Maybe the Cosmos as a whole, unlike its individual parts, is the sort of thing that exists "just because."

Against this, Leibniz and other philosophers insist that there must be an explanation for anything that *exists* but *didn't have to exist*. This claim---that every non-necessary being must have some explanation---is known as the **principle of sufficient reason**:

> **Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR):** for every way things are but didn't have to be, there is some explanation for why things are that way.

The PSR doesn't say that *everything* has an explanation. For example, it doesn't say that there is an explanation for the fact that 1+1=2. Why not? Because although 1+1=2 is a way things are, it is also a way things have to be. It is, as we say in philosophy, a "necessary" truth, rather than a non-necessary or (as we say in philosophy) "contingent" truth. The PSR says that every contingent truth has some explanation, but it doesn't say that every (or any) necessary truth has an explanation.

Furthermore, even though the PSR says that every contingent truth has some explanation, it doesn't say that every contingent truth has an explanation *that human beings are capable of discovering*. Proponents of the PSR allow that there could be contingent truths whose explanations are too deep or subtle for mere human minds to grasp. What the PSR really says is that every contingent truth is such that a sufficiently intelligent and insightful being could, given sufficient time and resources, come up with an explanation for that truth.

Many philosophers, including Leibniz, have considered the PSR to be a basic, *a priori* truth. Others think it is false. Instead of wading into this debate now, let's move on to Premise 2 of the Cosmological Argument.

Premise 2: If something explains why the Cosmos exists, it is either (a) the Cosmos itself, (b) some part of the Cosmos, or, (c) something else.

This is uncontroversial. It has the form: "If something blah-blah-blahs, then what blah-blah-blahs is either A, or B, or neither A nor B." The purpose of Premise 2 is just to set up the rest of the argument.

Premise 4: The Cosmos does not explain its own existence.

This seems pretty obvious. The existence of the Cosmos is not self-explanatory. Nor does it seem to make sense to say that the Cosmos brought itself into existence (how would that work?).

Premise 5: No part of the Cosmos explains why the Cosmos exists.

At first this seems pretty obvious too. How can a *part* of something explain the whole of which it is a part? Wouldn't such an explanation have to be circular?

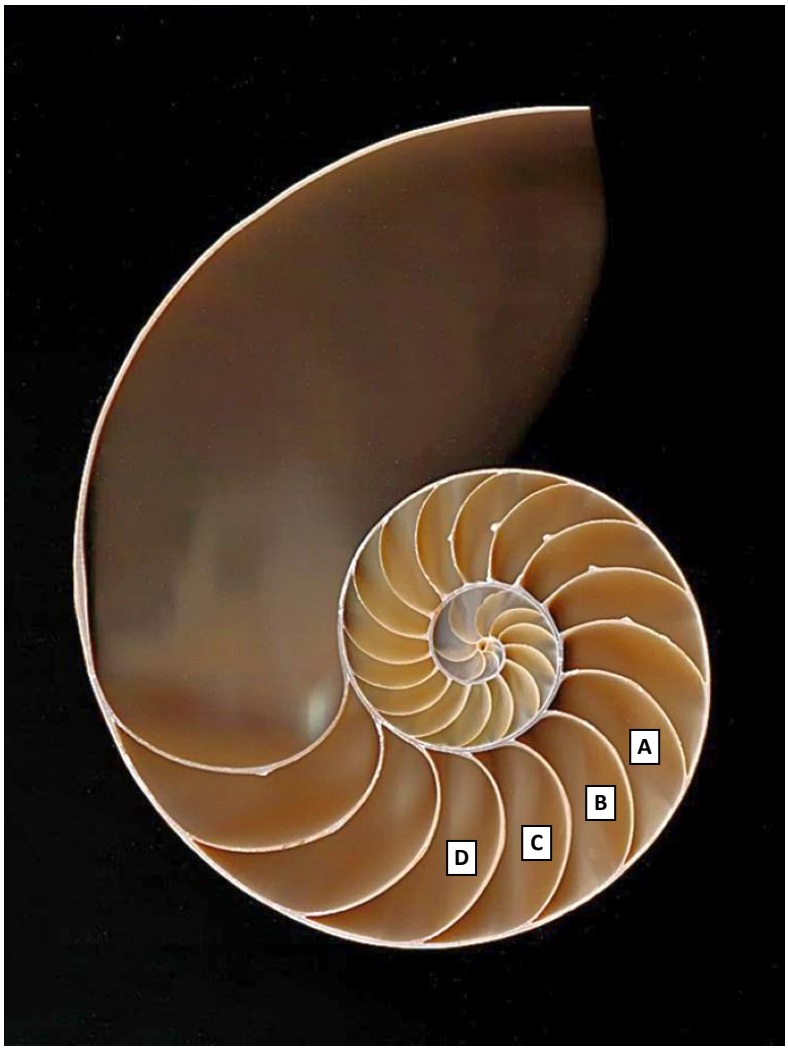
However, some philosophers, such as David Hume, suggest that there *is* a sense in which the parts of the Cosmos might explain the existence of the Cosmos as a whole. Here's Hume:

> In such a chain, too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes that which succeeds it. Where then is the difficulty? But the WHOLE, you say, wants a cause. I answer, that the uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct countries into one kingdom, or several distinct members into one body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind, and has no influence on the nature of things. 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.[1]

Hume's point here is that as long as the past is infinite, so that for every event there is an earlier event, we can explain each part of the Cosmos (each event) by reference to an earlier event that caused the later event. In that way, every part of the Cosmos gets explained by another part of the Cosmos. And according to Hume, if every part of the Cosmos has an explanation, that's as good as saying that the Cosmos as a whole has an explanation: if you've explained every part of a whole, then (reasons Hume) there's nothing left to explain!

[1] (Hume, 1779/2007, 65-66).

This last part seems to be wrong, though. In *some* cases, it's enough to explain a whole if you can explain each of its parts. Hume's example of the 20 particles establishes that much. But in other cases, merely explaining all of a whole's parts is *not* enough to explain the whole. In the lecture, I gave the example of a hypothetical chambered nautilus with an infinite number of chambers. (The chambers get smaller and smaller as the nautilus shell spirals inward.) Now, suppose that each chamber of this nautilus was created by a creature (now dead and gone) that used to inhabit the next larger chamber (i.e., the next chamber out on the spiral):



For example, the creature that used to inhabit chamber B created chamber C. Chamber B was created by a creature that used to inhabit chamber A; the creature that used to inhabit chamber C created chamber D. Etc., etc.

Now that we have explained the origins of each part of the nautilus, have we explained the existence of the nautilus as a whole? It seems we have not. We would still like to know why this whole (infinite) process of chamber-generation took place. Analogously, even if every event gets caused by an earlier event, all the way back in time to infinity, we would still like to know why this whole (infinite) process of event-causation took place.

So it seems that we should accept Premise 5 in spite of Hume's objection.

Premise 7: Something that is neither the Cosmos itself nor any part of the Cosmos is a transcendent being: a force, power, or phenomenon that exists "outside" of time and space.

Remember: the Cosmos, by definition, is just everything that ever exists or happens at any time or place. So, in order for some entity, X, not to be the Cosmos or a part of the Cosmos, X would have to exist *without existing in time or space*, and without itself being identical to time or space (or spacetime). Such an entity would have to "transcend" time and space, existing "outside" of spacetime. (Of course, "outside" here must be understood metaphorically, since spacetime does not literally have any "outside.")

Where does this leave us? We've considered the reasons that people like Leibniz have given to accept the premises of the Cosmological Argument, and we've countered some objections to those premises. So far, things are looking good for the proponents of the Cosmological Argument.

There are, however, two residual worries.

First: the truth of Premise 1 has really only been assumed, not established. Premise 1 is definitely true if the Principle of Sufficient Reason is true. But the PSR itself has merely been assumed (by Leibniz and others) as a fundamental principle; it hasn't been established by any argument.[2]

Second: even if we accept the PSR (and, on its strength, Premise 1), that seems to lead to a hollow victory for any theist who hoped to use the Cosmological Argument to shore-up his theism. How so?

Well, if the PSR is true, then every non-self-explanatory fact has some explanation. Consider then the fact (as Leibniz takes it to be) that some transcendent Being is responsible for the existence of the Cosmos. Well, the existence of such a Being is no more self-explanatory than the existence of the Cosmos itself. So, by the PSR, we need to posit a further, super-transcendent Super Being to explain the existence of the transcendent Being. But this Super Being's existence also calls for explanation. So the PSR requires us to posit a super-duper-transcendent Super Duper Being . . . etc., *ad infinitum*.

The problem for the theist is therefore this: if the Cosmological Argument proves that the Cosmos has a transcendent Creator, it also proves that the Creator has a Creator, and that the Creator's Creator has a Creator, etc., etc., etc. In other words, it appears that the Cosmological Argument cannot prove that there is a single, ultimate, and pre-eminent Creator of the sort that God is traditionally taken to be, rather than an infinite chain of ever-more-transcendent creators.

Whether there is any way around this objection is a question you can explore in more advanced modules in the philosophy of religion.

MWP

[2] According to some philosophers, the PSR is actually demonstrably false! We won't go into that here---it gets into some thorny metaphysics. Suffice it to say that it's hard to see how anything but a necessary being could account for the existence of all contingent beings, which in turn makes it hard to see how the supposedly contingent beings could really be contingent rather than necessary.