



# yusu essaybank

09/03/92

What is the basis of the Cosmological Argument?

Is it

plausible?

The cosmological argument is basically an argument about causation. Its major exponent was Thomas Aquinas though Gotfried Leibniz also put forward a simplified version of Aquinas's cosmological argument. The major critics of the argument have included David Hume and Bertrand Russell who question the basic premise that the argument works from.

Aquinas in his Summa Theologicae puts forward five ways to know of the existence of God. The first three of these now famous ways are the basis of the cosmological argument. The first way involves the notion of change. According to Aquinas, some things are changing, and things cannot change themselves, they depend on something operative to change them. In other words, everything must have a cause to make it what it is. However, there cannot be an infinite series of causes as for things to undergo change, there must be a first cause which is itself not caused by anything. That first-mover according to Aquinas is what we mean when we talk of God.

Important in Aquinas's argument is the idea that this chain of causes is not occurring over a period of time, but at the same time. If things are caused in the present, it is because of a first-cause that is existing at the same time. This is important to the argument as it goes against the idea put by Hume that although God might have existed once, he could easily be dead and we would not know about it, just as the creator of a machine could be dead but the machine is still in operation.

The second way says that the fact that something exists requires it to have a cause. This is because if there wasn't a cause, nothing could exist and it would appear to be obvious that things do exist. The cause of existence cannot be itself as otherwise the existing thing would have preceeded itself and this doesn't make any sense. Essential to this argument is the idea that the cause of everything is itself not caused by anything ie. the first-mover or God. Again in this case it is important to note that the series of causes is not chronological. Because the present existence of things depends on the existence of a first cause that is itself not caused, God must on this basis exist in the present.

The third way says that some things are generated or come into existence, and some things pass out of existence or are corruptible. If all things rather than just some things were like this, then eventually everything would pass out of existence and nothing would be left. Such a time has not come which suggests that certain things are necessary beings. Something necessary cannot be caused to exist by anything.

09/03/92 This idea therefore brings up the idea of something necessary that is not caused by anything else but which causes everything else to exist. This necessary uncaused thing is what we understand by God.

These three ways then explain Aquinas's cosmological argument which it has been argued is the most convincing of the arguments for the existence of God. It is an argument that has been adhered to by many famous philosophers including Descartes and Leibniz. Leibniz put forward a very simple and understandable version of the cosmological argument which states that there must be a reason why things exist because there must be a reason why anything happens and

why one thing happens rather than another. If something exists it is that something faced with the possibility of making it exist or not making it exist chose to make it exist. Ultimately as things exist, there must be a first-mover that itself was not caused to exist. This first-mover is what we understand by God. As things exist, God must exist.

We can therefore see the basis of the cosmological argument, but how plausible is it? Various objections have been raised to the cosmological argument.

An important argument is put forward by David Hume. He says that it is not true to say that what exists must have a cause to which it owes its existence. Hume suggests that some things could exist for no reason. Hume says that the cause and effect of something are quite clearly distinct from each other, so that it is possible to think of something as existing, having not existed at the previous moment without need to explain this existence by the idea of a cause. This is a view that Russell also takes. Russell says that you can see this to be true in terms of three people that are together on a street. There can be an explanation as to why person a is there, why person b is there and why person c is there, but you cannot have one explanation as to why all three are there. It is just a fact that does not have a cause.

This argument is criticised by many people including Anscombe who says that just because we can imagine the notion of something coming into existence without a cause, it doesn't mean that it can actually happen. The idea by its very nature can only be an idea as it seems completely unconvincing in reality.

Anthony Kenny raises an objection to the notion that nothing changes or moves without a cause. This is the first way in Aquinas's argument and according to Kenny it goes against Newton's first law of motion. According to this notion, an object can move itself without need for a causer due to inertia in terms of the body's previous movement. However, this doesn't actually answer the question of how the body was moved in the first place.

09/03/92      Kenny's second objection says that for something to be made by a prior cause, it must have the potential to be made. If this is the case, then there is no reason why something should not use this potential to make itself. In other words, there is no reason why something should not cause itself to be.

A criticism that can be levelled at Aquinas's third way (that suggests that as everything is corruptible there would come a time when nothing exists and that as something exists there must be a necessary non-corruptible thing) is that even if we agree that everything is corruptible, there is no reason to believe that a time will come when everything is corrupted and even if a time will come, there is no reason to think that that time is now or should have already been.

Aquinas suggests that everything must have a prior cause and uses this to suggest the existence of God. However, in many instances we can see that things have more than one cause. For instance, the causes of a human are both the parents, not just one. On this basis, Aquinas's theory doesn't rule out the possibility of more than one God, an idea that goes against his belief in a single omnipotent God. Similar inferences from the cosmological argument can question other ideas of God such as God being eternal, omniscient and omnipotent. This doesn't invalidate the argument but generally believed notions of God if you follow the cosmological argument.

Perhaps the most important flaw in the cosmological argument is what would appear to be a contradiction in the idea of everything having a cause for its existence, while at the same time holding that at the end of the chain there is a first-mover that is itself unmoved. Is there any reason to believe this idea? Why should everything expect God have a cause? If you say that God does not need a cause for existence, that God is a necessarily existing thing, then cannot this idea be used in

favour of anything that exists not having a cause?

If however you choose to say that everything does have a prior cause, then surely this shouldn't have exceptions. On this basis there will be an infinite regress with no first-mover. To say that everything that exists must have a prior cause and that God is a first-mover, himself uncaused seems to be an inescapable contradiction. Why can't there be an infinite regress which Aquinas claims is impossible?

It is suggested by philosophers such as Russell that the existence of the universe should simply be accepted as a brute fact. We cannot hope to understand the reason for its existence so should not attempt to do so. However, I do not find this argument convincing as it is a similar sort of argument to saying that we cannot reach an understanding of God through reason and that we must rely on faith. This notion of God, like Russell's suggestion about the universe is in effect just dodging the issue.

09/03/92 Overall the most convincing attack on the cosmological argument is that which point out the contradiction contained within it of having everything caused, but at the same time having an uncaused first-mover. There appears to be no convincing reason for believing this to my mind and it appears to be simply saying that God is the first mover because God must be. This seems to be leading back to the argument that God must exist due to the very idea of God (the ontological argument). The cosmological argument does not therefore appear to be a very plausible argument for the existence of God, but at the same time it doesn't automatically follow from this that God doesn't exist, just that the cosmological argument is not an adequate way of proving God's existence.

#### Bibliography

Davies, Brian "An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion"  
(OUP 1982)

[back to the essaybank \(main page\)](#)

#### Conditions of Use

Please remember that if you have made use of the EssayBank in writing an essay, you must acknowledge this in your bibliography. This should be done by quoting the URL (internet address) of the essay or essays used. You should also quote the title of the essay. All essays contained in this EssayBank remain the property of the University of York Students' Union. The university will seriously discipline any student involved in plagiarism, your essay must be your own original work.

© YUSU, 2000. [su-web@york.ac.uk](mailto:su-web@york.ac.uk)