

The Cosmological Argument

(A) Discuss the key features of the Cosmological Argument.

The Cosmological Argument has several forms, but is fundamentally a proof for the existence of the God of classical theism. It seeks to respond to the human need for answers to questions like “*who created the universe?*” It is an a posteriori argument, meaning that it is based on our experience of the world around us.

The argument has been around for many years, but it was St. Thomas Aquinas in his book ‘Summa Theologica’ who established the argument as we know it today. Aquinas had five proofs for the existence of God, of which three are cosmological; they are the First Cause Argument, the Prime Mover Argument and the Argument from Contingency.

The First Cause Argument is concerned with the fact that all things have a cause, and if we trace back the chain of causes, there must be an initial cause which began everything else. People take this uncaused cause to be God. In a similar way the Prime Mover Argument states that everything has to be moved by something, and thus a chain of movement is built up with each item's movement resting on the movement of the item before it. Since the Cosmological Argument rejects infinity, (something I discuss later) this chain of movement must have been started by something, because it is our experience that all things have a cause.

Aquinas's third way is the Argument from Contingency. This argument states that things are contingent, i.e. it is equally possible for them to exist or not exist. This means that there must have been a time when nothing existed, and, since something can't come from nothing there must be something external which created the something out of the nothingness. This external being who is external to *existence* must have caused us, and we call such a being God. F.C Coperstone made a slight adjustment to this theory, he said that contingent things may or may not exist, therefore there may or may not have been anything in the universe, but the argument continues the same way, with the principle that “*there must be a thing that must and cannot not exist.*”

The Kalam is a version of the Cosmological Argument coming from the Islamic tradition; it rejects the idea of an infinite universe, since as time is always being added on – time cannot be infinite. Although the argument is fundamentally Islamic, and dates from the 9th Century CE, it was “discovered” in the western world by William L. Craig, who revised it slightly. The argument goes that if the universe was infinite then all of time would exist simultaneously, just as on an infinitely long shelf of numbered books, there will be equally as many even numbered books as odd numbered books. From this principle the Kalam argument goes on to say that there must have therefore been a point at which the universe began, and if it did begin, it must have been caused by something external to itself because the universe could not have been naturally occurring, since before the universe there was no “natural”, and this external being must have chosen to create the world. This principle is outlined in the quote “*If the universe began to exist, and if the universe is caused, then the cause of the universe must be a personal being who freely chooses to create the world.*”

Another key version of the Cosmological Argument is Leibniz’s Principle of Sufficient Reason. Leibniz proposed this argument in his book ‘Theodicy’, in it he says that the natural state of “things” is for there to be nothing, surely it’s easier for there to be nothing than something? Leibniz then goes on to say that nothing can’t turn itself into something (since by the very nature of *nothing* it has no ability to cause itself to change), and our very existence shows that nothing *did* turn into something, there must have been some external force which caused it to do so. Leibniz points of example in our world of this principle, he says that things have causes which are external to themselves, the fact the book is there is because I put it there, and if the book moved itself then it must have had a *reason* to do so, in which case the cause of the movement is still external to the moved item.

The final key version of the Cosmological Argument is Richard Swinburne and his application of Ockham’s Razor. Richard Swinburne says that God is quite simply the easiest explanation for everything. This is an application of Ockham’s Razor, which is the principle that if a single self-sufficient explanation can be found, then there is no gain in exploring other more complex explanations; Swinburne expresses this

himself in the following quote: “*There could be no simpler explanation than one which postulates only one cause. Theism is simpler than polytheism.*”

(B) Consider the view that the strengths are more convincing than the arguments.

Both one of the key strengths and one of the key weaknesses of the Cosmological Argument is the fact that it is an a posteriori argument, meaning that it is based on our empirical knowledge of the world. As a strength being a posteriori means that it is testable, for example, when we say that all events have a cause, ultimately this is something we can test ourselves, in nature we observe that things don't usually happen without a reason.

However, other philosophers such as Hume would say that we cannot trust knowledge which is purely a posteriori cannot be trusted, since, as Hume says we can never know it to be absolutely certain, we can only deal in hopeful probabilities. The problem with the a posteriori proof, is that although we see the universe as it is now, we *didn't* see the universe at the time of creation, therefore we have no way of being *absolutely* certain that the same rules of physics applied then as do now, the chances are they did, but we can't be certain of that.

Another strength of the argument is that it answers the human desire for explanation, Swinburne was satisfied even with the partial explanation of excepting the simplest answer, and for many people the fact that the Cosmological Argument offers a complete explanation for the entirety of creation is evidence enough for believing in the argument.

Despite this many other philosophers would disagree. For example, Bertrand Russell famously refused to even debate the issue since as far as he concerned, it was something we just couldn't ever know for sure, and therefore wasn't even worth talking about, as Russell said; “*The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our imagination. Therefore, perhaps, I need not waste any more time upon the argument about the First Cause.*” A significant opposition to Ockham's Razor is that just because something is the simplest explanation, it really doesn't make it true, if we are going to accept the existence of god-like-beings, then what is

there to say there wasn't lots of them, not just one. The truth is that we just can't know

Science is another issue which is both a proponent and opponent of the Cosmological Argument. The Big Bang theory does suggest that there was a moment of creation, and it can't answer what came before the Big Bang, which is where supporters of the argument say that God made the Big Bang. However, modern science has shown that some things can be uncaused, as Theodore Schick explains; "*A particle produced by a vacuum fluctuation has no cause, since vacuum fluctuations are commonplace, God cannot be the only thing which is uncaused.*" There is also the steady state theory, which suggests that the big bang is just part of an infinite loop, which counters the Cosmological Argument which relies on a moment of creation.

The notion that infinity is impossible is at the foundation of the Cosmological Argument, since it means that there must have been a moment of creation which has to be accounted for, a "prime mover" or "prime cause" must therefore have caused the universe. The notion that infinite time is impossible comes from the idea that since we are always adding onto time and we can see its increasing, it therefore cannot be infinite.

It can be said however that the Kalem argument misinterprets infinity, as Theodore Schick explains: "*Even though an infinite casual chain has no first cause, there is no event which does not have a cause. Similarly, even though the set of real numbers has no first member, there is no member which doesn't have a predecessor. Logic doesn't demand a first cause any more than it demands a first number.*" So by this we can take the a posteriori idea of all items having a cause, and still deny the Cosmological Argument.

The other problem we see again with arguing from science, is that even if we accept that there is some kind of prime causer, who caused the big bang, we still can't prove that this was the God of classical theism, all we know is that *something* ulterior caused it. This is the same problem we see with most of the Cosmological Argument, as soon as we go from "there must be something which caused the first thing to

happen” to “the God of classical theism was the first cause”, we are making a leap of logic without any factual basis for this.

One of the remaining criticisms of the argument is that, if God caused the universe, who caused God? The answer from the proponents of the argument is that God is omnipotent and the rules which apply to our world don't apply to them, therefore God can be without cause. But, as David Hume said: “*But if we stop, and go no further, why go so far? Why not stop at the material world?*” What Hume is saying is that if we are willing to accept that God is uncaused, why can't we accept that the universe is uncaused to? In some ways this is using the idea of Oakham's Razor, usually used to support the Cosmological Argument against the proponents by saying surely the easiest way to stop looking for causes is simply to accept that the universe is uncaused.

So, do the strengths outweigh the weaknesses? Well I think we have show that they are pretty evenly matched. The mains strengths and weaknesses reply on the fact that it is an a posteriori argument, and therefore our interpretations of it will depend on how much we are prepared to trust a posteriori knowledge. The other main area for strengths and weaknesses is science, and the fact that we are only just discovering things like uncaused particles suggests that in that field we really don't know enough to say with any real certainty – we may find a cause for those uncaused particles, or we may find more things which are uncaused. At the end of the day most of our minds are already made up one way or the other, and it comes down to the old saying “*for those who believe no proof is necessary, for those who do not no proof will ever be enough.*”