

Comment on some weaknesses of the cosmological argument

The cosmological argument goes back to Plato and Aristotle. It was later developed by Arab philosophers such as Avicenna and Averroes, before its classic formulation in the first three of the Five Ways of Aquinas. It is based on the notion that an infinite regress (going backwards forever) is impossible, and that the existence of everything must be traced back logically to a first cause, God. The cosmological argument is based on the cosmos – the world – and so is a posteriori. The argument comes in three forms; motion or change, cause and contingency.

The cosmological argument is so-called because it is based on the evidence of the cosmos, or world. From an examination of the world, it is claimed; we can prove the existence of a being who must have created it. This is called a posteriori reasoning; that is, reasoning that follows experience, or reasoning based on experiential data.

However, it has been objected that the argument also relies on a priori reasoning; that is, reasoning that precedes experience. For instance, the claim that every event must have a cause is not the same as saying that every event in our experience has a cause. As David Hume said, perhaps the world has no cause, since we have no experience of universes being caused. The belief that every event must have a cause cannot either be proved from experience or proved as logically necessary. It is simply a basic assumption, without which no reasoning could take place at all. It is a matter of empirical observation that every event does have a cause, a fact that seems to more than justify the inductive belief that every event must have a cause.

The second form of the cosmological argument is from causality, and proceeds to the conclusion that there must have been a first cause of everything, which is called God. The argument has attracted a number of criticisms. Bertrand Russell's ridicule that '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.'

Another criticism, is the idea that an infinite regress, is possible, a notion central to the 'Steady State' theory of Fred Hoyle. The theory put forward that energy cannot be created and that the universe will always weigh the same energy and will simply be redistributed. The acceptance of the uniformity of the universe led to the theory that it should look much the same not only from the same place but also at any point in time. It teaches that there is no beginning or end to the universe, and that the universe has always been there and that its appearance does not change with time. So although the universe is expanding, new galaxies have to be created to fill in the gaps left by the old galaxies. The continuous creation of new particles of matter is at a rate that is automatically adjusted by the cosmological expansion. This is at a steady rate and is always the same.

Another objection to the argument is contained in the question 'Could the universe be eternal?' This question is really a variation of the notion of an infinite regress. In a famous radio debate with Frederick Copleston in the 1940s, Bertrand Russell defended this possibility by saying that the universe was just there, and that's all there is to it. Science, however, does not support an eternal universe.

Gottfried Leibniz produced a variation of the cosmological argument with the idea that everything in the world must have a sufficient reason for its existence. Since nothing in the world is the sufficient reason for its own existence, because everything requires a material cause, it is necessary to go outside the world, to a being, who is sufficient reason of its own existence, called God. We can see that Leibniz is treading much the same ground as Aquinas, but using different terminology. Both are clearly driven by an awareness that the world cannot explain itself.

The Enlightenment critiques of David Hume and Immanuel Kant dealt a serious blow to the cosmological argument. They rejected all metaphysical speculation on the grounds that we could never know what lies outside the range of human experience. Kant called causality a necessary (a priori) perception, without which experience could not be possible at all. This restricted the notion of causality to the world of space and time. There could be no such thing as a cause that operated outside experience.

Another blow to the argument came with rise of science, with its emphasis on causal empirical explanations. The notion of ultimate causality was overtaken with more down – to – earth scientific concerns about how the world is, and how it works – not where it came from.

Further, the fact that the God it reaches is a ‘philosophical God’ is a religious criticism of the limited knowledge that it provides of the God that the argument establishes.

To conclude, although it is perfectly reasonable 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 offer God as a possible explanation, and if we are not satisfied with the idea of God as a being who himself requires no explanation, the argument will fail.