

.) Describe the main strengths and weaknesses of the cosmological argument for the existence of God (14)

The term cosmological comes from the Greek cosmos, 'world' or 'universe'. The cosmological argument is based on facts about the world. Cosmology refers to the study of the universe.

Unlike the Ontological Argument, the Cosmological Argument proceeds a posteriori. It begins with a very general claim about the physical universe that is meant to be supported by observation - e.g., the claim that some events have causes - and then proceeds to the conclusion that there must be a supernatural agent that somehow causes or explains this fact of experience. [2]

Aquinas' argument arrives at 'That which is necessary to explain the universe' or that which is necessary to explain causation or contingency. We do not know what God is, but whatever God is, God is whatever is necessary to explain the universe's existence. It is important to recognise that God is de re necessary (factually necessary) - necessary in and out of himself and cause of himself. [3] An example of de re necessary being... 'All bears are brown' - this is a synthetic statement, statements that are true because of the evidence. They may or may not be true. [4] St Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, formulated the famous 'five ways' by which God's existence can be demonstrated philosophically, I will be examining ways two and three.

2.) The argument from the universal fact of cause and effect. For example, a carpenter, who is caused by his parents, brings a table into being. Again, we cannot go into infinity, so there must be a first cause, which is God.

3.) The argument from potentiality. All physical things, even mountains, boulders, and rivers, come into being and go out of existence, no matter how long they last. Therefore, since time is infinite, there must be some time in which none of these things existed. But if there were nothing at that point in time, how could there be anything at all now, since nothing cannot cause anything? Thus, there must always have been at least one necessary thing that is eternal, which is God. [5]

The Cosmological Argument has one tremendous advantage. It starts from an invulnerable first premise, which we all accept, the existence of the universe. It is a posteriori argument, an argument that starts from something we experience, in this case, the universe. The steps in the cosmological argument may be challenged, but its starting point is undoubted. [6]

Another advantage is that the cosmological argument is that it is based on the ordinary experiences with which anyone can identify. Why is this ball moving? And what made the racquet hit it? And what brought the tennis player into existence? And so on. Anyone demanding a ~~for~~ explanation of anything, can, pursue the question further and further back, and has to arrive at an ultimate answer. [7]

The Third Way of Aquinas argues logically for the existence of a god, but doesn't necessitate the Judeo-Christian God of his own tradition. [8] Aquinas tried to fill this gap by claiming that a being of self-explaining, necessary existence would by nature possess the attributes, which are suggested in nature to the point of perfection. [9] Thus, since human beings are imperfect personalities who reason, emote, act, communicate, etc., God also possesses analogous qualities in perfection. Also, Aquinas argued, that which is found in the ultimate cause must also be found in the offspring, a line of reasoning that led to the Fifth Way. [10]

The Cosmological argument is developed around a distinction between that which has necessary existence and that, which is contingent. ▲ thing that has necessary existence must exist in all possible worlds, whereas a thing that is contingent may go out of existence. [11]

The method ▲quinas uses is to set up the contrary position, then prove it to be wrong. Therefore, the cosmological argument begins by accepting the premise that all things are contingent. If all things are contingent, i.e., if all things can go out of existence and do not necessarily exist, then there must be a time where all things go out of existence. [12]

▲quinas appeals to the *Principle of Plenitude* at this juncture, which states that if something is a real possibility, then given an infinite amount of time, it should happen. Real possibilities show up. [13] It is a real possibility that if everything is contingent, everything could go out of existence at once, given that time is infinite at any point, such as now.

If this were the case, then there would be nothing now - but such an idea is absurd since we have the evidence of existent things, which we can perceive. [14] Yet, that could be because everything comes out of existence, then back into existence.

▲quinas answers this from the principle of *ex nihilo, nihil fit* [15] - if something comes out of existence, it cannot come back into existence. Once something ceases to exist, it cannot suddenly exist again. Our sense perceptions and experience tell us that something exists, something is there, and therefore everything has not ever gone out of existence. Therefore, all things cannot be contingent. Corollary to this is the conclusion that there must then be such a thing as a necessary existence. [16]

▲quinas furthers his premise by supposing that there is a hierarchy of being with necessary existence, each lower being dependent upon the higher to infinity. The hierarchy of necessary existence itself would need an explanation for its existence. Here, ▲quinas appeals to the *principle of sufficient reason*, which states that everything that happens has to have a sufficient explanation for occurrences. [17] Since the hierarchy of necessary existences would therefore need to be explained, because of the principle of sufficient reason, it would need a self-explaining necessary being, standing outside the series, to explain the order of the hierarchy. [18]

Deductively, that self-explaining necessary being would be that which humans understand to be God. Hence, the definition of "God" that ▲quinas arrives at is this: The self-explaining necessary existence upon which all things are contingent in all possible worlds. [19]

David Hume provided a rational path out of the cosmological argument for the existence of God according to ▲quinas. Writing during the Scottish enlightenment of the 1700s, Hume claimed that the principle of "ex nihilo, nihil fit" is untrue; if something can pop into existence and pop out of existence, then it cannot also pop back into existence again. [20] Thus, according to Hume, all things may be contingent, without any need for necessary existence. [21]

Here the arguments are ordered so we can examine specific premises.

The second way: the argument from efficient causes

- 1) There is an order of efficient causes; that is, some things cause other things to exist.
- 2) Nothing can cause itself to exist.
- 3) There can't have been an infinite series of things causing other things to exist.
- 4) There was a first cause, itself uncaused (God).

Here the second premise is plausible. It is surely true that nothing can cause itself to exist, since the cause must always come before the effect, so the thing would have to exist before it existed, which is absurd. Although a troublesome third premise is here, which we will discuss later. [22]

The third way: the contingency argument

- 1) Some things are contingent (they might not have existed).
- 2) Anything which might not have existed at one time did not exist (no contingent thing is eternal).
- 3) If everything were contingent, there would have been a time when there was nothing.
- 4) If there ever was a time when there was nothing, there would be nothing now.
- 5) There is not nothing now (something now exists).
- 6) Not everything is contingent (something is necessary).
- 7) Every necessary thing gets its necessity either from itself or from something else.
- 8) There can't be an infinite chain of necessary things giving necessity to other necessary things.
- 9) There must be a necessary thing, which gets its necessity from itself (God). [23]

This argument has a premise like the infinity premises of the first two ways, premise eight. It also contains a serious logical error, which makes premise three false. Aquinas is arguing from "For everything there is a time when it does not exist" (which is what would be true if everything were contingent) to "There is a time for everything when it doesn't exist." This is not good reasoning. In general, you cannot argue from a sentence that begins "For all F's there is a G..." to another sentence beginning "There is a G for all F's...." To see why this is bad reasoning, see the difference between "Everybody loves somebody" and "There is somebody that everybody loves." The first could be true if the whole human population was divided into loving couples, but the second could only be true if there was one person receiving everybody's adoration. [24] It has been said that even if something is corruptible, it does not follow that it will actually be corrupted. My cat is kickable, but does that mean that I have to kick it? It has been urged that even if we agree that everything corrupts at some time, there is no reason to think that there is some one time when everything has corrupted. In the same way, it might be that everything has a time when it doesn't exist, but it is a different time for each thing. The objects in the world might have overlapping "lives" so that there never is a time when nothing exists, even though none of the objects are eternal. So premise three is false. [25]

Both of these arguments appeal to a premise in which some kind of infinite series is claimed to be impossible. Why should we accept that? It cannot be that the idea of infinity is itself incoherent, so that infinite sets of any kind are possible.

Mathematicians assure us that the notion of infinity is consistently definable. Some have thought that completed infinities, or infinite collections of actual things ("completed" in the sense that all the members of the collection are present at once) are impossible. The story of Hilbert's Hotel shows that there is no logical problem with an infinite collection of actual objects. [26] The only possible remaining worry is that there may be some problem with the notion of an infinite past. It seems that if there were no first moment, and then an infinite amount of time would have to have passed before now. But it seems that an infinite amount of time can never have gone past, so there must have been a first moment. This would be good reason to think the past could not be infinite, except that it is false to think that an infinite amount of time could not have passed. It only seems impossible if you think of an infinite amount of time passing from the beginning until now. [27] But if the past is infinite, there is no beginning to start from. All in all, we are left without reason to think that the infinity premises of these arguments are true. We also have no reason to think they are false, so for all we know the second way is a good argument after all. [28]

The cosmological argument seems to be saying that there cannot be an infinite series of causes; that the buck, so to speak, stops somewhere. Aquinas, for example, says that there cannot be an infinite series of causes. [29] They have also asked how can the cosmological argument avoid contradicting itself. If, for example, nothing causes itself how can there be a first cause which does not itself require a cause other than itself? [30]

William of Ockham raised at least three problems with the Cosmological Argument.

1.) Ockham challenges Aquinas' view that an infinite series was impossible. He maintained that causes could be originating causes and not conserving causes. One could bring something else into existence but then not have to conserve its existence. A mother is responsible for bringing a baby into the world but not for retaining the baby in existence once it's grown. Aquinas wishes to establish that the world depends on God now, God did not just create the universe and then leave. [31]

If you are not convinced by Aquinas' view that the existence of the universe is caused by God then any argument consequent on that on the nature of the conservancy of the world, by God, is irrelevant to you.

2.) Ockham queried whether there was any necessary link between cause and effect - the cosmological argument depends on there being a necessary link between cause and effect. Some scientists today believe there are uncaused causes - certain fundamental particles come into existence without any apparent explanation.

3.) Ockham did not think it possible to prove that there was only one God nor that the most perfect being possibly existed. Either God is: -

The most perfect being that actually exists, in this case there is clearly such a being but this does not mean it is the Christian God

Or

The most perfect possible being that could exist. However, there is no way of showing that this possible being is also an actual being. [32]

Ockham's claim is that the most that the cosmological argument can establish is the most perfect being that actually exists and there is no way of moving from this to showing that God is the most perfect possible being. [33]

Another form of the cosmological argument is the Kalam Cosmological argument, which was first put forward by Islamic theologians and philosophers. Kalam means 'discourse' or 'argument'. [34] Instead of arguing that the universe depends on God now, this argument sets out to show that God is the originating cause. It can be summarized as follows:

1.) Everything that has a beginning of existence must have a cause

2) The universe began to exist

3.) The universe has a cause

4.) The cause is God [35]

1 is regarded as being intuitively obvious, although it was a position rejected by David Hume who maintained that there is no necessary cause and a supposed effect, the two may just occur together. A ship going through the water may not cause the wake; the wake may occur at the same time as the movement of the ship but without the two being connected. Also, developments in our understanding of particle physics indicate that some particles come into existence without a cause, thus implying that there may be random or uncaused events. [36] However, the claim that some events can occur without any cause cannot be established, as it is possible that present unknown causes may be found in the future.

2 is held to be supported by the big bang theory. This provides a scientific explanation and description of the beginning of the universe. Both supporters of the

cosmological argument, and those who deny it use the big bang theory as a proof for or against the existence of God. Scientific observation has confirmed that there was a beginning to the universe, and has provided further evidence that the universe developed a structure very early in its history. The debate rests on whether or not the cause of the Big Bang was natural or divine. Did God cause by a spontaneous random event, or by a deliberate action the Big Bang? [37]

3 is held to follow from 1 and 2 whilst 4 is held to be the most plausible cause given 3 - particularly if God can be held to be in some sense personal and to be pure mind rather than matter. Mind may be held to be the best ultimate explanation for matter - although if God is wholly simple and timeless there are obvious problems with the idea of God being 'personal' or being described as 'pure mind' and one would have to resort to analogical language.[38]

Hume, David (1711-1776) was an empiricist. He argues it is impossible to conceive of an effect without conceiving of the cause of that effect, and he concludes that given any supposed effect E which is normally said to be caused by C, we can yet affirm E without implying that C ever existed at all. 'When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other.' [39]

For example, you throw a switch the current flows. The throwing of the switch is the cause, the flowing of the current, the effect.

Nevertheless, if this view of causation is offered in defence of the view that there is no cause of the existence of things, it is open to a rejoinder. For we normally do agree that we have to ask what brings it about that particular things exist. ▲And this point is important in considering the cosmological argument. [40]

Is Hume's argument such to make it reasonable to disbelieve in the intuitive correctness of the view that if X exists then X is caused to exist by something else? [41]

Hume writes:

"...As all distinct ideas are separable from each other, and as the ideas of cause and effect are evidently distinct, 'twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle. The separation, therefore, of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning of existence, is plainly possible for the imagination; and consequently the actual separation of these objects is so far possible, that it implies no contradiction or absurdity; and is therefore incapable of being refuted by any reasoning from mere idea; without which 'tis impossible to demonstrate the necessity of a course."

But this argument only asserts that because we can imagine something coming into existence without a cause it is possible that something really can come into existence without a cause. [42] Though why say that the cause of existing things does not require a cause of its existence? If it is reasonable to assert that there is a cause of the existence of thing, is it not reasonable to ask 'What causes the existence of the cause of the existing things?' For must not the cause of existing things exist? We find ourselves faced with the possibility of an infinite regress. If it is true of A that it is caused to exist by B, why may not B be caused to exist by C, D, and E and so on ~~CE~~ ~~infinite~~? If there actually is a cause of all existing things, but if that cause requires a cause and that cause another and so on ~~CE in infinite~~, then nothing will exist at all. If it is true that the mere existence of things requires a cause, but if there is no first

cause of which this cannot be said, then all the things which exist will only be caused by what shares with them the need to be accounted for with reference to a cause.[43]

The cosmological argument seems to be saying that there cannot be an infinite series of causes; that the buck, so to speak, stops somewhere. Aquinas, for example, says that there cannot be an infinite series of causes. [44] They have also asked how can the cosmological argument avoid contradicting itself. If, for example, nothing causes itself how can there be a first cause, which does not itself, require a cause other than itself?[45]

Though this could be debated. If we are talking about God, and if we regard God as the source of existing things, then we could say that God is not a being. Another way of making this point is to deny that the cause of existing things is in a genus or is a genus. It could therefore be said that the cosmological argument can work on the assumption that the cause of existing things is not a thing, in which case the above contradiction would disappear. [46]

The Kalam argument depends on assumptions that can be rejected, for instance:

- That every event has a cause;
- That the universe needs an explanation outside the universe;
- That the question 'what caused God' is illegitimate; and the kalam argument may be held to point to an originating rather than a conserving cause, and thus to a deist view of God. [47]

Nevertheless, it does point to the fact that we do not know what caused the Big Bang. Such a question may be beyond reach of science and shows the point at which philosophy must take over. Effectively it labels the explanation for the existence of the Big Bang as 'God'. [48]

Conclusion:

Like the teleological argument, the cosmological argument suffers from our uncertainty of whether or not the past, like the future, is infinite. [49] If the past stretches back infinitely, then there never was a Prime Cause. If there have been an infinite number of causes in the past then logically there cannot have been a first cause.

The argument, by itself, only seems to show the existence of a necessary being which is the cause of the universe. While this does include some key elements of the theistic conception of God, it obviously leaves out quite a few important ones. The conclusion is compatible with many views of God. So, even if it is successful, the cosmological argument hardly constitutes more than an entering wedge into the knowledge of God. If someone accepts the conclusion, the proper attitude for him to adopt is surely a desire to learn more about God.

Brian Davies takes the position that the cosmological argument cannot stand alone as proof for the existence of God, and would have to be supported by other evidence.