

The cosmological argument

Jeff Speaks
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The cosmological argument is an attempt to argue from certain very general features of the cosmos to the existence of God. We'll talk about a few different versions of this form of argument.

1. AQUINAS' SECOND WAY

Aquinas' second way seems to depend on the following assumptions:

- Some things are caused to exist.
- Nothing can be the cause of itself.
- There can't be infinite causal chains.

He seems to be arguing from these assumptions to the following conclusion:

There is a first cause (i.e., something which causes other things to exist, but was not itself caused to exist).

Can you construct a valid argument using these premises for this conclusion?

Does the argument show that there is exactly one first cause, or that there is at least one first cause?

A problem: circular causal chains. How to modify the argument to avoid this problem.

Is Aquinas right that there cannot be infinite causal chains? How does he argue against this possibility?

A contemporary attempt to argue against the possibility of an infinite causal chain: the example of Thomson's lamp.

Aquinas says that if a first cause exists, then we would all agree that this first cause is God. Is he right about this?

2. AQUINAS' THIRD WAY

One way to respond to the problems we found with Aquinas' second way involves the notions of *necessity* and *possibility*.

Using these notions we can explain what it means to exist contingently: something exists contingently just in case it exists, and it is possible that it not exist. You and I presumably exist contingently, as do tables, chairs, and pretty much everything around us, it seems.

This raises the question: does everything exist only contingently? Aquinas tries to argue that (i) something must exist necessarily, and (ii) this something must be God. Let's look at how his argument works. One way to lay out his argument is as follows:

1. Some things now exist.
 2. If a thing exists only contingently, then there is some time at which it did not exist.
 3. If everything exists contingently, then at one time nothing existed. (2)
 4. If at one time nothing existed, nothing now exists.
 5. It is not the case at that one time nothing existed. (1,4)
 6. It is not the case that everything exists contingently. (3,5)
- C. Something exists necessarily.

Suppose that the conclusion is true. Would that give us good reason to believe that God exists? (This is analogous to the question we asked above about the existence of a first cause.)

Is the argument valid? Are the independent premises of the argument true?

3. THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

Even if Aquinas' way of arguing for the existence of a necessary being is flawed, the general strategy seems promising. It does seem like the fact that the world exists is something which we should be able to explain in some way — and this would not need explanation any less if we found that the world always existed. Even in this case we should still be able to ask: Why is there something rather than nothing? And it seems like this question should have an answer.

One way to try to improve upon Aquinas, which is discussed in the reading from Taylor, makes use of the following principle:

The principle of sufficient reason

Any contingent fact about the world must have an explanation.

The basic idea behind the principle is this: Take any feature of the world. If the world could have failed to be that way, then there must be some explanation of why the world is that way. So, for example, we might notice that although the sky is blue, it might not have been — the sky on earth could have failed to be blue. Given this, it seems like there must be some reason, or explanation, why the sky is blue: some reason why it is blue rather than some other color.

Now consider the following fact:

There are some contingent beings.

Is this fact itself necessary or contingent?

If it is contingent, then from the principle of sufficient reason, it follows that

The fact that there are some contingent beings has an explanation.

But it does not seem like we can explain the existence of contingent beings in terms of a contingent being. (Could you explain the existence of elephants in terms of some particular elephant?) But if this fact needs some explanation, and it cannot be explained in terms of contingent beings, then it must be explained in terms of a necessary being. But then we can conclude:

There exists some necessary being which explains the existence of contingent things.

Is Taylor right to conclude that, if this claim is true, then it is reasonable to infer from it that God exists?

This PSR-based cosmological argument has a lot going for it. Its premises are quite plausible, it is valid, it does not depend on any assumption about ruling out infinite causal chains, and it does seem like a necessary being which explains the existence of contingent things would be a plausible candidate to be God. But it does face at least two objections.

1. The problem posed by quantum mechanics.
2. Consider the fact that God created contingent things. Is this fact itself necessary or contingent? If it is necessary, then this undermines the above argument. If it is contingent, then it must have an explanation. But what could this explanation be?