

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Related exam questions:

- Could there be a reason why there is something rather than nothing? Could that reason be God? (2000/7)
- Is it unreasonable to ask for an explanation of the existence of the universe as a whole? (2004/7)
- "All explanation must stop somewhere." Does this support, or does it tell against, the argument from world to God? (2007/6)
- Would the existence of any world need an explanation? Is God the best explanation that it could have? (2008/4)
- 'If there is no God, there is no explanation of the existence of the physical universe.' Is this true? If it is, is it a reason to believe that there is a God? (2011/10)
- What is the strongest form of the cosmological argument, and what, if anything, does it show? (2013/10)
- Can any form of cosmological argument establish the existence of a religiously significant deity? (2014/6)

Cosmological arguments are typically combinations of an empirical observation (e.g. there is causation) and a metaphysical principle (e.g. there cannot be a backward-infinite series of causes) which together yield the conclusion that there is some sort of ultimate being who is responsible for the empirical phenomenon in question. (E.g. there is a First Cause.) Of course, one needs further principles to show that the being so deduced is relevantly similar to the God of theism. (E.g. without further stipulations, the First Cause could just be the Big Bang.)

The first cosmological arguments were given by Aquinas in a famous passage of the *Summa* (see *The Five Ways* below). Another historical figure who looms large in this context is Leibniz, who was one of the staunchest defenders of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), the idea that everything that exists or occurs has some explanation for its existence or occurrence. The thought is that if we take the physical world as "just happening to be there", then we violate the PSR. And since the explanation of why the physical world exist cannot appeal to some further physical entity or event (because one then could ask about the reason for its existence), and since explanations must end somewhere, we end up with an ultimate being that can create a whole cosmos.

There are at least two contemporary, live cosmological arguments. The first is William Lane Craig's "kalam" argument, purportedly derived from the Kalam school of medieval Islam theology. It is predicated on the hypothesis that backward-infinite causal chains are impossible and uncaused events are likewise impossible (see below). In contrast to this largely *a priori* argument, Richard Swinburne has defended an inductive (or abductive) version of the cosmological argument based (roughly) on the claim that God is the simplest explanation of the universe and simplicity is a guide to truth.

The Five Ways

In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas gave five “indubitable” proofs for God’s existence. They are all inspired by Book Theta of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, which purports to derive the existence of an “unmoved mover”, a being that is the source of all change in the world, but is itself changeless and eternal. For reasons that sound extremely weird today, Aristotle believed that this Unmoved Mover is a conscious being who is thinking of itself all the time and is eternally happy.

What Aquinas retains from this interesting relic of ancient thought is the idea that the changing, contingent natural world needs some secure metaphysical foundation. His First Way is pretty much the same as Aristotle’s “proof” in Book Theta, the rest are more or less distant variants.

The Fifth Way resembles what is now called the Design Argument. (There is no sharp distinction between cosmological and design arguments. The former tend to appeal to highly general metaphysical features of the cosmos while the latter are usually concerned with more specific features, such as hospitability to life.)

Way 1: Motion (change) requires something that imparts motion. This series cannot go back to infinity, so there's a First Mover, "and this everyone understands to be God."

Way 2: Efficient causation (real causal work like pushing, pulling, banging etc.) requires something from which the "efficiency" originates. In a backward-infinite series, there is no such ground or origin. So there is an ultimate efficient cause.

Way 3: Worldly things are contingent: it is possible for them not to be. "Therefore, if everything is possible not to be, then at one time there could have been nothing in existence. Now if this were true, even now there would be nothing in existence, because that which does not exist only begins to exist by something already existing." [Note that this argument, quoted verbatim from the *Summa*, is glaringly invalid.] Therefore, there is a necessary being.

Way 4: For any (natural) property F, Fs are caused to be F by something which is maximally F ("as fire, which is the maximum heat, is the cause of all hot things"). So there is a being who is absolutely powerful and virtuous.

Way 5: In the physical world, things that lack intelligence behave in a way that resembles purposeful activity ("acting...so as to obtain the best results"). "Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence." So there is an intelligent being who governs the physical world.

William Craig’s “kalam” argument

- (1) Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence (uncaused events are impossible).
- (2) The universe began to exist (because there cannot be an actual infinity of events, a series formed by addition cannot be infinite; moreover, we have scientific evidence that the universe’s history is finite).
- (3) Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.

Some relevant readings:

William Rowe: "The cosmological argument"

Explains the logic of cosmological arguments with the help of an extremely general, one-size-fits-for-all schema (roughly: if there are dependent beings, then there is an independent, necessary being).

John Mackie: "The cosmological argument"

Reconstructs and criticizes Leibniz's cosmological argument, Aquinas, and Swinburne.

Leibniz: "On the ultimate origination of things"

A short and entertaining exposition of Leibniz's PSR-based cosmological argument.

Richard Swinburne: "How the existence of God explains the world and its order" (ch.4 of his *Is There a God?*)

A nontechnical, highly readable exposition of Swinburne's inductive cosmological argument, appealing to the simplicity of the theistic explanation.

WL Craig: "The finitude of the past and the existence of God" (beware--long)

Contains a thorough exposition of Craig's "kalam" argument, along with ruminations about the nature of infinity. It includes funny thought experiments concerning the paradoxical nature of infinite histories.

Quentin Smith: "Infinity and the past"

Against Craig. Argues that Craig misrepresent the nature of infinite histories and there is nothing metaphysically suspect about uncaused physical events (e.g. the Big Bang's occurring out of its own initiative, as it were, without divine help).