



'A' Level Philosophy and Ethics Notes The Cosmological Argument for The Existence of God

Specification Summary:

the cosmological argument from Aquinas and Copleston,
and challenges to it from
Hume and Russell;

"The first question which should rightly be asked," wrote G.W.F. Leibniz, is "*Why is there something rather than nothing?*" According to Aristotle, philosophy begins with a sense of wonder about the world, and the most profound question a man can ask concerns the origin of the universe. In his biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Norman Malcolm reports that Wittgenstein said that he sometimes had a certain experience which could best be described by saying that "when I have it, *I wonder at the existence of the world*. I am then inclined to use such phrases as 'How extraordinary that anything should exist!'" Similarly, one contemporary philosopher remarks, ". . . My mind often seems to reel under the immense significance this question has for me. That anything exists at all does seem to me a matter for the deepest awe."

Why *does* something exist instead of nothing? Leibniz answered this question by arguing that something exists rather than nothing because a necessary being exists which carries within itself its reason for existence and is the sufficient reason for the existence of all contingent being.

Although Leibniz (followed by certain contemporary philosophers) regarded the non-existence of a necessary being as logically impossible, a more modest explication of necessity of existence in terms of what he calls "factual necessity" has been given by John Hick: a necessary being is an eternal, uncaused, indestructible, and incorruptible being. Leibniz, of course, identified the necessary being as God. His critics, however, disputed this identification, contending that the material universe could itself be assigned the status of a necessary being. "Why," queried David Hume, "may not the material universe be the necessary existent Being, according to this pretended explanation of necessity?"

Typically, this has been precisely the position of the atheist. Atheists have not felt compelled to embrace the view that the universe came into being out of nothing for no reason at all; rather they regard the universe itself as a sort of factually necessary being: the universe is eternal, uncaused, indestructible, and incorruptible. As Russell neatly put it, ". . . The universe is just there, and that's all."

The Existence of God and the Beginning of the Universe, William Lane Craig

The cosmological argument is the attempt to argue that there is a God because there is a created universe. This universe must have been created by some Divine Being. The contingent, created order is traced back to a non-contingent source. There are two main versions of the argument, proposed by Thomas Aquinas, and by the Muslim philosophers al-Kindi and al-Ghazali.

Thomas Aquinas

Aquinas proposed **five ways** through which he believed that the existence of God could be shown:-

1. An unmoved mover
2. An uncaused cause
3. Possibility and necessity
4. Degrees of quality
5. Design

1. An Unmoved Mover

Influenced by Aristotle - it is based on the premise that there is change in the world. From this change, we move to an original instigator of that change. (c.f. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction).

2. An Uncaused cause

There are causes and effects in the world. Each event is caused by something, and the event then causes something in its turn. There must be a first cause initiating the chain of causes and effects.

3. Possibility and Necessity

There are things that are impermanent (plants, animals &c), and there are things that are permanent. The permanent, ungenerated being is the source of the impermanent things.

4. Degrees of Quality

Goodness is an achieved actuality - good expresses the notion of value and perfection, and thus the notion of completeness. Goodness and completeness are things that belong to God.

5. Design

Everything operates as to a design. This design is from God.

The first three arguments are **cosmological**. They have attracted some criticism!

There are things that change of themselves (e.g. people and animals appear to have autonomy). Also, some things can be changed by other things who remain beyond the process of the event.

The Second Way is also criticised - most criticisms come from the problem associated with "infinite regress". Aquinas is arguing that there cannot be an infinite procession of causes - the buck has to stop somewhere. But why can't there be an infinite series of regressions?

Aquinas appears to be arguing that the universe has to have a cause that is ungenerated and incorruptible. Some argue that the universe is simply here, and that is that.

In a radio debate, F. W. Copleston asked Bertrand Russell if he thought that the universe was "gratuitous" (i.e. here by pure accident). Russell replied, "I should say the universe is just here, and that's all".

Hick points out that the Five Ways of Aquinas present us with two alternatives - that the universe is either a "mere unintelligible brute fact", or there is a First Cause. However, we are not compelled to choose one

over the other. The argument only holds if we can show conclusively that the universe is not unintelligible.

Thompson also criticises Aquinas. He points out that there could be a theoretically infinite number of causes for each action, and each action can produce a theoretically infinite number of results. He says, "we move within a seamless web of causality that goes forward and backward in time and outwards in space" (Thompson, *TY Philosophy of Religion*, p100).

Hume believed that all knowledge comes from our experience of the world. Something can only be called a cause if it is observed to be causing something. The linking of cause to effect depends upon them being observed as two separate things. However, we cannot get "outside" the world to observe its cause.

But also, some have rallied to help Aquinas. Peter Geach points out that the question of interdependence in nature adds to discussions about the causes of individual elements of creation. Science seeks to explain the origins and causes of things.

"If the world is an object, it seems natural to ask about it the sort of causal questions which would be legitimate about its parts. If it began to exist, what brought it into existence? In any case, what keeps it from perishing, as some of its parts perish? And what keeps its processes going?"

Anscombe, G. E. M., and Geach, P. T., *Three Philosophers* p.112

Aquinas was aware that his arguments had their limitations. He never intended to use the arguments to define God, but rather to point towards the existence of something that could be called God.

David Hume's Objections

We have not experienced the creation of a Universe. Yet we are prepared to argue that because there are causes of things within the Universe, there is a cause for the Universe as a whole.

Frederick Copleston

Copleston was a Professor in the University of London. His version of the Cosmological Argument was first proposed in a famous radio debate with Bertrand Russell broadcast in 1947. Copleston's argument comes in four steps:

1. There are some things which need not exist – they are contingent, and look beyond themselves for the reasons for their existence.

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That is, objects which might not exist had a certain event not happened.

Peter Vardy (Puzzle of God, p74) gives "you and I" as an example – without our parents' having met, we would not exist.

This means that the existence of some things can be explained by referring to something beyond themselves. They depend on something else for their existence.

2. Copleston goes on to suggest that the world is the sum total of all objects. None of these objects contain within themselves the reason for their own existence.

That is, every object in the world depends on some other object for its existence. The world is the sum total of all these things.

3. If everything within the world requires something else to exist, the cause of the entire universe must be external to the universe.
4. This explanation must be a being which exists, but which contains within itself the cause of its existence. Its existence is "self-explanatory".

Copleston refers to this as a "Necessary Being".

Compare this with the Ontological Argument and its attempt to argue that God's existence is "necessary".

Bertrand Russell's response

Russell's initial response was simply to reject the terminology that Copleston used. He argues that the Universe is neither contingent nor non-contingent.

"I should say that the Universe is just there, and that is all"

Copleston argued that this was tantamount to refusing to sit down at the chess-game in order to avoid being beaten.

Russell also suggested that the argument appeared to suggest that because everyone has a mother, then the Universe must have a parent. While this might be true for each Human Being, it does not follow for the Universe.

- Copleston argues that everything within the Universe has a cause.
- Russell argues that it does not.

However, if Russell could be persuaded to accept that everything has a cause, he would probably want to argue that the existence of "God" needs an explanation just as much as the Universe needs an explanation.