

infinite regress?
sufficient reason
motion, cause, necessity

Cosmological **ARGUMENT**

For:

**Thomas
Aquinas**

(13th Century)

**Frederick
Copleston**

(20th Century)

Against:

**David
Hume**

(18th Century)

**Bertrand
Russell**

(20th Century)

AQUINAS' COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Aquinas put forward Five Ways for the existence of God. The Cosmological Argument was outlined in the first three of these: **motion**, **cause** and **necessity**.

MOTION:

Aquinas started with *a posteriori* evidence (knowledge gained after experience) of the universe and asked why it existed at all.

Aquinas noted that some things are in motion (i.e. subject to change, not necessarily physical movement) such as a tree which grows taller, sheds bark etc.

He stated that for something to be in motion, it must be 'moved by another'.
e.g. Fire acts upon wood to make it hot. The wood cannot cause itself to become hot. Something must also have moved to produce the fire (friction), and so on, and so on.

Could this chain of events go back forever (**infinite regress**)? Aquinas thought not, he stated that doing so would mean there was no **first mover** and therefore no **subsequent mover** as these could only be moved by a first mover.

Aquinas understood this first or prime, unmoved mover to be God (as Aristotle did).

(FIRST) CAUSE:

Nothing is its own efficient cause (Aristotle's Four Causes) i.e. nothing can cause itself as it would have to exist prior to itself which is, by definition, impossible.

As with 'motion', **infinite regress** is not possible as it does not result in a 'first cause' which would result in no subsequent 'causes' and no **present effects** (everything in the world around us).

Plainly this is not the case (i.e. we exist in a world that exists) so we must admit an **uncaused** first efficient cause.

NECESSITY (AND CONTINGENCY):

Contingent things (things that could or could not be in existence) are non-permanent, they come into being and they cease to be. As such it is impossible for them to have always existed, and if everything is like this then, at one time, nothing existed.

If we total up the 'lifespan' of all contingent things (no matter how many there are) we will never reach infinity, the total of contingent things will always be **finite**.

If there was a time when nothing existed, then nothing would exist now as contingent things can only come to exist because of things that already exist.

Therefore, there is a need for a **necessary** being, because if everything were contingent then there would be nothing today.

COPLESTON & RUSSELL 1948

This concerned different understandings of any ultimate explanation for the universe.

Copleston argued from **contingency** and relied on the argument from Leibniz's **principle of sufficient reason** - nothing is without reason or cause - an explanation for its existence.

When is sufficient reason reached?
Is *sufficient reason* the same as *cause*.

RUSSELL

COPLESTON
Cause applies to contingent things in the universe. Sufficient reason applies to the universe as a whole, not just the stuff in it. Contingent things cannot provide sufficient reason for their own existence, this must lie outside of themselves.
As a necessary (not contingent) being, God is His own sufficient cause.

Is sufficient reason necessary?
How can we go from looking at contingent causes within the universe to the need for a necessary, sufficient and external reason?
Necessary only applies to **analytic** statements e.g. a bachelor is *necessarily* an unmarried man. No grounds to talk of God as *necessary*.

R

C
Just because a sufficient reason has not been found, does not mean that it should not be looked for. The contingent cause of events cannot provide sufficient reason for the whole series, hence the need for a necessary being.

The world 'just is' is a **brute fact** (something that is but cannot be explained). Not possible to go from causes **within** the universe to a cause **of** the universe. Every human being has a mother but it does not follow that the entire race has a mother. Fallacy of Composition - assuming what is true of the parts must be true of the whole.

R

C
God as a necessary being is not a first cause or mother as that makes Him just another contingent cause. God is an **ontological necessity** (see Ontological Argument).

HUME'S CRITICISMS

- Why is **infinite regress** impossible? Seeing 'cause and effect' around us does not mean the universe itself is the effect of an uncaused cause. Why not an infinite chain of causes?
- What is 'cause and effect'? Just because event 'b' always follows event 'a', there is no evidence that it was *caused* by 'a'. Habit, not evidence. Implications for Aquinas' 'first cause'.
- Why one cause? Maybe multiple 'Gods', male and female who are born and die, are more fitting to the evidence we see if **effect resemble causes**.
- Furthermore, we are dealing with experience and evidence (*a posteriori*), how then can we reason about something 'outside' of the universe? This is something we have no experience of.
- Why group the universe together a 'whole' and explain with a single cause? This is **an arbitrary act of the mind**.

Strengths

- Aquinas' chain of causation can be said to be consistent with the 'Big Bang' Theory and the traditional expanding model of the universe which goes with it.
- Russell's assertion that the universe 'just is' as a *brute fact*, could be said to be not only un-philosophical and lazy but also unscientific. Scientific development is born out of the desire to know 'why' and not just accept things at face value.

blank for your own comments

Weaknesses

- Quantum physics suggests the existence of 'uncaused' events (effects without cause). Why therefore could the universe not be initiated in this fashion?
N.B. There are differing models of quantum physics in existence, the prevailing one currently supports such a notion, others do not and suggest there is a cause for these quantum events but it has yet to be discovered.
- Why does the cause of the universe have to still be present today as suggested by the notion of 'God'? A 'first cause' does not suggest an eternal nature.
- Copleston's argument ultimately requires a being of *ontological necessity* and thus encounters all the problems associated with the Ontological Argument.

blank for your own comments