
ON THE ESSENCE OF THE UNCAUSED CAUSE MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

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Abstract

The so-called cosmological argument is probably the most widely used argument for proving the existence of God. According to the argument, some uncaused being (usually identified as God) has caused to exist everything that exists in the universe. Critics claim that the argument fails because it assumes that everything, and thus also God, must have a cause. However, when the argument is examined carefully, it is easily revealed that this kind of reasoning is fallacious. This paper reveals that, contrary to what the critics suggest, the cosmological argument is not based on the premise of everything having a cause. Instead, the argument claims that there exists some being, usually identified as God, who is by definition uncaused.

Keywords: cosmological argument, uncaused cause, first cause, existence of God

1. Introduction - arguing for the existence of God

Does God exist – and if He does, can His existence be proven? Throughout history, various arguments for and against the existence of God have been suggested by theologians, philosophers and scientists across the disciplines. Nowadays, there exists a rather wide consensus that no completely conclusive proof of either the existence or the non-existence of God can be formulated. In practice, the ‘proofs’ for the existence of God can only aim at being as convincing justifications for the belief in God as possible. Indeed, many Christians regard arguments relying on formal logic as completely unconvincing; for them, that faith can only be based on personal experience of the revelation of God. Nevertheless, for others, logical arguments defending the existence of God can constitute a reliable foundation for a warranted belief in God.

The logical arguments for the existence of God are often categorised as ontological, teleological and cosmological arguments. The ontological argument asserts that the existence of a perfect being (God) can be inferred from the fact

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that such a being can be imagined to exist. Perhaps the most promising contemporary version of the argument, the so-called victorious modal ontological argument, is due to Alvin Plantinga [1]. The teleological argument, in turn, pays attention to certain features of the physical universe that are claimed not to be able to exist without a supernatural designer (God). Of late, the so-called fine-tuning argument, based on the observation that many fundamental physical constants are ‘adjusted’ exactly the right way for life to exist, has been debated widely [2].

The focus of this article is the cosmological argument, which argues that there has to exist some being that has caused the universe and everything in it to exist. During the last three millennia, the argument has taken various forms ranging from Aristotle’s unmoved mover and Thomas Aquinas’ first cause to William Lane Craig’s modern kalām argument. Few cosmological arguments deal specifically with the God of Christianity but instead aim at proving the existence of some kind of a non-contingent being that is the first cause of all contingent beings. In the context of Christian theology, though, this first cause is usually identified as God.

In addition to being the most popular argument for God, the cosmological argument is also likely the most criticised one. Some of the best-known critics of the argument include David Hume [3], Immanuel Kant [4] and Bertrand Russell [5]. Unfortunately, the essence of the argument has often been misunderstood and, consequently, much the critique has missed its mark. This is especially true of many 21st century critics of the argument. According to biologist and popular scientist Richard Dawkins, for instance, the cosmological argument claims that everything has a cause, and therefore also God must have a cause [6]. Formulated like that, the argument immediately evokes the question: Who made God? This question, however, is unnecessary and even unjustified, if the cosmological argument is understood correctly. The actual logic of the cosmological argument is decisively different from the logic alleged by the critics.

2. The alleged logic of the cosmological argument

As mentioned above, Dawkins asserts that the cosmological argument is based on the assumption of everything having a cause, from which he deduces that God, too, must have a cause. Dawkins maintains that all forms of the cosmological argument (focusing mainly on those presented by Thomas Aquinas) “involve an infinite regress” and “make the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress”. In other words, since the starting premise is that everything must have a cause, any such argument that builds on this premise and claims that something uncaused, e.g. God, exists necessarily fails [6, p. 100–102].

Dawkins’ standpoint represents well the view of many contemporary critics of the cosmological argument. For example, two other leading advocates of the New Atheist movement, philosopher Daniel Dennett and journalist

Christopher Hitchens see the cosmological argument much in the same way. Dennett holds that the cosmological argument states that “since everything must have a cause the universe must have a cause – namely, God” [7]. Hitchens, on his part, argues that at the end, in the infinite regression of causes, there always remains the question “Who created this [first] creator?”, adding that he has “never known anyone who can get past the infinite regression objection” [C. Hitchens and D. Wilson, “*Is Christianity Good For the World?*”, The King’s College, New York, October 29, 2008, transcript of the debate available online at <http://hitchensdebates.blogspot.fi/2010/07/hitchens-vs-wilson-kings-college.html>]. Even world-renowned physicist Stephen Hawking has taken a stance on the matter. He writes (together with Leonard Mlodinow): “It is reasonable to ask who or what created the universe, but if the answer is God, then the question has merely been deflected to that of who created God” [8].

This line of thinking is not confined only to the English-speaking community. In Finland, for instance, many commentators have offered similar statements. A former chairman of the Finnish Freethinkers’ Union, journalist Jussi K. Niemelä, claims the cosmological argument “leaves open the cause of the unmoved mover”, which, according to Niemelä, “must, too, have a cause” [9]. One of the leading popular scientists in Finland, cosmologist Kari Enqvist agrees and regards the persistence of the cosmological argument as unbelievable. For him, the argument is “like a rash that in spite of diligent oiling always pops up in one form or another” [10].

To sum up, in the writings of the critics, the cosmological argument is usually presented in the following form:

- Premise 1: Everything that exists has a cause.
- Premise 2: Nothing can be the cause of itself.
- Premise 3: Things exist.
- Conclusion: There exists a first cause (God) that has caused everything else to exist.

Or, put differently, and perhaps ‘more cosmologically’:

- Premise 1: Everything that exists has a cause.
- Premise 2: Nothing can be the cause of itself.
- Premise 3: The Universe exists.
- Conclusion: The universe was caused to exist (by God).

It is worth noting that it is not only the popular scientists and public atheists who have understood the cosmological argument this way, but it is also the philosophers, at least some of them. In his recent introductory work on Philosophy, Professor Steven D. Hales gives the following form of the argument:

1. Everything is caused by something prior in the causal chain.
2. It is absurd to think that the chain of causation can go back infinitely.
3. Thus there had to be some uncaused thing at the beginning that started the whole chain of causation.
4. This uncaused thing is God [11].

At first glance, these formulations may appear correct. They seem to come very close to the way that the cosmological argument is usually presented in the public discussion and probably corresponds to an ‘average layman’s view’ – even of a layman more informed than average on Philosophy – of the argument. There is, however, something fundamentally wrong with these versions of the argument. Closer inspection reveals that the problem lies in the premise 1, which the critics have turned into an easily attackable strawman. Once we acknowledge this and examine more closely the original cosmological arguments, it becomes obvious why most of the contemporary critique targeted against the argument misfires.

3. The actual logic of the cosmological argument

No ‘definite’ version of the cosmological argument exists. However, by studying the arguments put forward by three mentioned philosophers from different eras, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, William Lane Craig, it is possible to uncover the core of the argument that has remained unchanged through the millennia. (Other versions of the argument have been presented by, e.g., Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz [Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Monadologie*, 1714], Richard Swinburne [12] and John Haldane [13].) It becomes clear that actual logic of the cosmological argument is crucially different from the alleged logic proposed by the critics of the argument.

3.1. Aristotle’s unmoved mover

One of the earliest – and best known – versions of the cosmological argument is due to Aristotle, dating back to the 4th century BC. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle introduces the notion of an ‘unmoved mover’ (as it has been named afterwards), an entity which ‘moves while itself unmoved’. This entity is eternal, indivisible and unalterable. It needs not and cannot be changed or moved in any way because it already is, and always has been, perfect in its existence.

The existence of such a perfect entity should be understood against the backdrop of Aristotelian physics, where motion is a fundamental feature of all material objects. The cause of the motion of each object is always some mover outside the object itself. Since everything in the world must have a cause and since – according to Aristotle – the world is eternal, there has to exist some eternal being that has caused all the motion in the world to begin. This being has to be ‘separate from sensible things’, i.e., lie outside the material realm, since it would otherwise require a mover itself. If this ultimate cause of movement did not exist, nothing else would be able to exist, and everything else exists only because this prime mover first exists and causes everything to move. The unmoved mover itself is a necessary being whose existence does not depend on anything else [14; 14, vol. 1, p. 425–434].

Aristotle’s cosmological argument can be summarised as follows:

- Premise 1: Every material object that exists has a mover.

- Premise 2: No material object can be the mover of itself.
- Premise 3: Material objects exist.
- Conclusion: There exists a first immaterial mover that has caused material objects to move.

Of course, science has long shown us that Aristotle's general view of physics with celestial spheres and their circular motions is substantially faulty. Nevertheless, his metaphysics continues to offer useful tools for building our worldview. Even today, the notion of the unmovable mover constitutes a plausible starting point for the cosmological argument.

3.2. Thomas' first cause

Perhaps the most classical formulation of the cosmological argument has been presented by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. Actually, Thomas puts forth three different versions of the argument in his *Summa Theologiae*. These are three of his famous 'five ways' of proving the existence of God, the other two ways being the argument from perfection and the argument from design. Thomas' cosmological arguments are the argument from motion ('the first way'), the argument from causation ('the second way') and the argument from contingency and necessity ('the third way').

Thomas' first two ways of demonstrating that God exists are concerned with the first cause and are in this regard similar to Aristotle's argument. The first way is based on the fact that things in the world undergo change, i.e. are changed by some outside cause from potentiality to actuality. The cause of change is always something that is already actual. Now, there must be a first cause of change in the chain of causes which is not changed by any other cause, for else there would not be anything to cause the first change. The first unchanged cause of change is what 'everybody takes God to be'.

The second way begins with the observation that there is 'an order of efficient causes' in the world: every phenomenon in the world is caused by some other preceding phenomenon. Thomas continues to add that nothing can efficiently cause itself, for if something was its own cause, it would precede itself, which is impossible. His other perception is that the order of efficient causes has to be finite, i.e., there has to be a first cause (*prima causa*) which is itself uncaused and the ultimate cause of all other causes and all phenomena. This is because without a first cause, there cannot be subsequent causes. This first cause is 'what everyone calls 'God''.

Thomas' third way deals with the existence of contingent and necessary beings and states that there must be some being (God) which necessarily exist because otherwise nothing would exist. This argument is not a 'first cause' argument quite in the same sense as the first two ways and is not discussed further here. Concisely, Thomas' cosmological argument can be expressed as follows:

- Premise 1: Everything that exists has a cause.
- Premise 2: Nothing can be the cause of itself.

- Premise 3: Things exist.
- Conclusion: There exists a first cause (God) that has caused thing to exists [15].

3.3. *Craig's kalām cosmological argument*

The kalām cosmological argument was originally developed by Islamic philosophers (*mutakallimūn*), most notably by al-Kindi (8th century), al-Farabi (8th–9th century), Ibn Sina (9th–10th century) and al-Ghazali (11th century) [16]. Recently, the argument has risen to discussion as an updated version introduced by philosopher William Lane Craig.

The kalām cosmological argument is based on the claim that all things that have begun to exist have been brought to existence by some outside cause. According to Craig, to think otherwise would be to ‘quit doing serious metaphysics’. If things could come to exist *ex nihilo*, the principle of causation would lose its meaning. Since it is very unlikely that the Universe would have existed forever, it has begun to exist and must have a cause. This cause has had to exist before the Universe began to exist and it cannot be a part of the Universe. Traditionally, this cause is thought to be God. God is a being who has not begun to exist but has always existed and thus does not need a cause. To put it more precisely, the ‘traditional’ form of the kalām cosmological argument is:

- Premise 1: Everything that has begun to exist has a cause.
- Premise 2: Nothing can be the cause of itself.
- Premise 3: The Universe began to exist.
- Conclusion: The Universe was caused to exist (by God).

Craig has refined the kalām argument to better meet the challenges of modern science and Philosophy. This version of the argument aims to prove that it is impossible for the Universe not to have a beginning, instead of merely assuming that it does not. The reasoning is based on the idea that an actual infinite (an infinite to which nothing can be added) cannot exist. The modern form of the kalām cosmological argument can be presented follows:

- Premise 1: An actual infinite cannot exist.
- Premise 2: An infinite temporal regress of events is an actual infinite.
- Premise 3: A universe without a beginning is an infinite temporal regress of events.
- Conclusion 1: The Universe has a beginning.
- Premise 4: Nothing can be the cause of itself.
- Conclusion 2: The Universe was caused to exist (by God) [17, 18].

4. **Misunderstandings of the cosmological argument**

Each of the arguments presented in Chapter 3 makes a fundamental distinction between the qualities of the Universe and the qualities of God (or, the Uncaused Cause, if you will). The Universe (including all objects belonging to it) is material and temporal whereas God is exactly the opposite, non-material

and eternal. This, of course, is perfectly in line with traditional Christian theology, as well as the Bible, which pictures God as a spirit who exists “from everlasting to everlasting” (Psalm 90.2). The Universe, being a spatio-temporal entity, must have a cause for its existence, but God, who is outside space and time and not restricted by the laws of Physics, does not need to be explained by a cause outside of him. God is an eternal and a non-contingent entity and the only explanation of his own existence. In other words, it is the essence of God to be uncaused. Therefore, the question ‘Who made God?’ makes no sense.

The qualitative distinction between God and the material world is essential for the success of the cosmological argument. Indeed, without this assumption, the argument would reduce to the “everything that exists must have a cause” type of an argument that the critics have claimed it to be and would thus be “easily (...) exposed as vacuous”, as Dawkins puts it [6, p. 100]. There should, however, be no real danger of falling into this misunderstanding. Once we examine the argument carefully, as we did in Chapter 3, the logic of the argument becomes clear. The cosmological argument does not claim that ‘everything that exists must have a cause’, but rather that ‘all temporal and material things that exists must have a cause’ or ‘everything that has begun to exists must have a cause’. Thus, the criticism described in Chapter 2 fails to do justice to any of the original forms of the cosmological argument. In reality, the proponents of the argument never use the argument the way its critics claim.

Analysing the reasons for why the cosmological argument is so often presented in a transformed form, particularly by the contemporary critics, is beyond the scope of this article. It is possible that the critics of the argument have not put enough effort into studying the original argument and are therefore misunderstanding it. Some might be inclined to think that they are presenting the argument in an altered form in order to make it an easier target for criticism. This paper, however, does not engage in this speculation and is only concerned with highlighting the observation that many of the critics do actually misrepresent the cosmological argument.

5. Conclusions

This article has dealt with the cosmological argument for the existence of God, focusing particularly on the versions presented by three well-known proponents of the argument: Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and William Lane Craig. I have examined both the original logic of the argument and the alleged logic that many contemporary critics have suggested the argument to have. It has been revealed that critique is largely based on an oversimplified caricature of the cosmological argument. Contrary to what the critics suggest, the argument does not rest on the premise of everything having a cause. Instead, an essential feature of the cosmological argument is the claim that there exists some being, usually identified as God, who is by definition uncaused and the first cause of everything else.

Finally, it must be reminded that it is, naturally, a completely another question whether the cosmological argument is in fact valid. In recent discussion, it has, for example, been questioned if it is even reasonable to assume that everything has to have a prior cause. Perhaps no order of efficient causes exists, perhaps all the events occurring in the world only seem deterministic but are actually random. Regarding the cause of the existence of the universe, it has been suggested that the Universe might be able to ‘create itself’. The aim of this paper has not been to address these questions. However, it is obvious that in order to even be able to begin assessing the validity of the cosmological argument, the starting point has to be to take the argument in the form that it is actually presented. Without this, no fruitful discussion between the proponents and the opponents of the argument is possible.

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