

A quick overview...

- An 'a posteriori' argument
- Everything that exists in the universe exists because it was caused by something else.
- That something was caused by something else
- It is necessary for something to have started this all off which itself need not be caused
- This is God – a self-causing and necessary being

What did Aquinas say?

Aquinas' first way:

Nothing can be both potential and actual at the same time

Whatever is moved (changed) must be moved (changed) by another

Infinite regress is impossible since there would be no first mover (changer)

There must be a first mover, moved by no other and this we understand to be God.

Aquinas' second way:

Nothing could be the efficient cause of itself since it would already have had to exist to bring itself into existence

Infinite regress is impossible since there would be no first cause

There must be a first cause, caused by no other and this we understand to be God.

Aquinas' third way;

The world consists of contingent beings

Contingent beings cannot regress infinitely as they are temporary (and dependent) by nature

As there are contingent beings existing now, there must be something non-contingent (necessary being), that we understand to be God

What did Craig say?

- Everything that begins to exist has a cause.
- The universe began to exist.
- Therefore the universe has a beginning and a cause.
- There must have been an uncaused creator.
- The uncaused creator is God.
- The cause must be personal as no physical laws can provide a causal explanation of the origin of universe.
- A universe that is beginningless is an actual infinity.
- An actual infinity cannot exist in reality.

Challenges to the Cosmological Argument

Hume;

- Because events in the universe have a cause does not mean that the universe as a whole has a cause (Fallacy of composition)
- We cannot know that every event must have a cause
- The links between cause and effect are beyond our experience and therefore unknowable
- The idea of a factually necessary being cannot be demonstrated
- We have no experience of how worlds are made so we cannot know how this world came into being
- God is not the only possible explanation. Infinite regression is also possible
- If everything has a cause then God must have a cause
- The cosmological argument is based on assumptions about God

Hawking

- The 'Big Bang' theory does not require God as a cause.
- There are limits as to what God could create.
- The 'Big Bang' may have happened spontaneously, like atomic particles in a vacuum.

For discussion:

In your opinion, which of these philosopher's views is the most convincing and which is the least convincing – why?

Key words:

Motion – the process by which an object acquires a new form

Infinite regression – a chain of events that goes backwards forever

Efficient cause – that which causes change and motion to start or stop. In many cases, this is simply the thing that brings something about

Beings – not just human beings but anything that has a property

Property – nature or character

Contingent beings – beings that depend upon something else for their existence. They have the property that they need not be, or could have been different

Necessary beings – beings which, if they exist, cannot not exist; beings which are not dependent on any other for their existence

Principle of sufficient reason – there is some sort of explanation, known or unknown, for everything

Actual infinity – a completed unity eg an actual infinity of time would be an infinite number of moments in the past and in the future.

Challenges: Is the Cosmological Argument successful?

Arguments in favour:

- The reasoning leading to the existence of God uses scientific principles of cause and effect.
- It is a centuries-old argument supported by many philosophers
- it is a posteriori and therefore based on empirical evidence
- It supports the scientific notion of the 'Big Bang'.
- God is not one more in series but something outside of sequence
- God is the explanation that requires no further explanation
- Composition is not always a fallacy
- We distinguish between cause and coincidence
- Explanation is sought in every other area of enquiry
- No physical laws can provide a causal explanation of the origin of the universe

Arguments against:

- It says everything has a cause, then says God does not have a cause
- It does not follow that the 'first cause' must be God
- The 'Big Bang' theory of the origin of the universe does not require God.
- How can God be both timeless and live in time?
- Infinite regress is possible
- Rejection of the principle of sufficient reason
- It draws a conclusion that goes beyond the empirical evidence
- Knowledge of concepts such as cause and necessary beings is not open to the empirical approach
- The identity of the necessary being need not equate to God
- An actual infinity can exist in reality

To what extent does science replace the need for a Creator God?

- Things can move themselves eg. animals and humans
- Quantum Physics says that there is random motion at the sub-atomic level and things exist without having a cause.
- The Hubble telescope has indicated a beginning of the universe,

For discussion

In your opinion, are the scientific criticisms of the Cosmological Argument convincing or not? Why?

How successful are these answers?

Nothing has been proven for certain and there is much that is assumed. It may be said that scientific viewpoints are persuasive and more and more discoveries are being made about the nature of the universe. However, the classical argument has endured the test of time and still offers a plausible answer.

Evaluation

Here are two opening paragraphs from answers to the following question written by students. “Science has replaced the need for God as the explanation for why there is a universe.” To what extent do you agree? Which one is best and why?

Student A

The Cosmological Argument is associated with the great Catholic scholar St Thomas Aquinas, who lived in the Middle Ages, which was a time of great religious unrest. Aquinas wrote the ‘Summa Theologica’, in which he explained his famous Five Ways to prove the existence of God.¹ The first three ways are forms of the cosmological argument. However, science has replaced the need for God as the explanation. The Big Bang explains everything² about how the universe came into being. Quantum theory has also shown us that atoms can come into existence without a cause, so the universe also needs no explanation. Indeed, Hume was correct when he argued that infinite regress was possible³ and we cannot know anything about causes as they are empirically unverifiable.⁴ The universe requires a necessary being⁵ to account for contingent beings but it doesn’t have to be God. So therefore science is the explanation and there is no need for God. Russell was right – “It’s just there and requires no explanation.”⁶

1. Students always find it difficult to start an answer and often either repeat the question or write irrelevant material in the first few sentences. This needs to be avoided at all costs.
2. Needs developing to make clear how it is an explanation
3. Not clear how this connects or supports the view that science explains why there is a universe.
4. Again the connection is not clear with previous sentence. Indeed it counts against the whole approach of science. The student is just stating isolated arguments which have no sense of being part of a reasoned argument.
5. This seems to be against science as an explanation
6. Again this is contradicting the view that science does offer an explanation.

Summary comment.

Apart from the irrelevant start to the answer and lack of any paragraphs, the answer consists of just a series of isolated statements. None are wrong in themselves but they do not form a coherent reasoned argument. There is no evaluating the strengths or weaknesses of the views. It is not clear that the student actually understands the arguments since some appear contradictory.

Student B

There are a number of arguments that draw the conclusion that God is the only explanation possible to account for the existence of the universe.¹

The arguments have been varied including, Aquinas who appealed to the features of motion, cause and contingency as explainable either in terms of infinite regression or God.² Since infinite regressions were impossible, he concluded that the explanation must be God. Similar arguments³ that derive from the view that the universe had a beginning equally conclude that God is the only viable answer. However,⁴ the idea of a God is, for many people, no answer at all, since it leaves begging the question as to what caused God. In addition the cosmological arguments have been challenged by a variety of criticisms such as the universe is just a brute fact or that infinite regression is possible.

For many there is a much simpler answer that science offers.⁵ Recent scientific theories have given support to idea that atoms can appear out of nothing and that the 'Big Bang' may have happened spontaneously, like atomic particles in a vacuum.

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....However the scientific view is not without its difficulties.⁶ Hume had earlier pointed out the weaknesses of the empirical approach.....

Indeed, the case for God as an explanation may be more persuasive. For instance⁷ the argument that God requires a cause may be mistaken. God is not one more in a series but something outside of sequence....

1. Compared to the previous answer, this is a much better way to start the answer. It focuses directly on the issue in the question and leads into arguing for a position that can later be evaluated.
2. The student has successfully avoided a lengthy rehearsal of the argument since the question is not about that. It is about the alternatives between science or God as explanations. The specification includes more than just Aquinas' form of the argument and the student has acknowledged that fact.
3. The specification includes more than just Aquinas' form of the argument and the student has acknowledged that fact.
4. This is a succinct rebuttal of God as the explanation based on (i) problems with the whole idea of God as an explanation and (ii) weaknesses in the actual arguments themselves.
5. Clear focus on the issue that is being evaluated
6. Evaluating both sides that will lend itself to a reasoned conclusion.
7. The evaluating involves reflecting on how persuasive the arguments are rather than just stating the argument.

Summary comment

Although by no means a perfect answer it has the structure that will lead the student to develop a reasoned argument. There is also clear evaluating taking place where the student is reflecting on the persuasiveness of the arguments.

Test Yourself:

1. Name 4 philosophers/scholars connected with the cosmological arguments AND state whether each supports or challenges the argument.
2. Explain the difference between
 - i. Inductive argument and deductive argument
 - ii. Unmoved mover and uncaused causer
 - iii. Potentiality and actuality
 - iv. Contingent being and necessary being
 - v. Scientific and empirical
3. Explain what is meant by the principle of sufficient reason and explain how this supports the idea of God.
4. State what is meant by the fallacy of composition AND explain why this challenges the cosmological argument.
5. Explain what is meant by infinite regression and explain why some philosophers reject the idea that there can be infinite regression.

Answers:

1.

Aquinas – supports
Craig – supports
Hume – challenges
Hawking – challenges

2.

- (i) Inductive arguments can provide support for the conclusion whilst deductive arguments may provide absolute proof for conclusion.
In an inductive argument, if all the premises are true then the conclusion could still be false. Whilst in a deductive argument, if all the premises are true then the conclusion must also be true.
- (ii) The unmoved mover puts the first object in motion (change) since the natural condition is for things to be at rest (not changing). In contrast, the uncaused causer began the chain of existence for all things since nothing can be the cause of itself.
- (iii) An object has the potential to become something different and actuality is the fulfillment of that potential.
- (iv) A contingent being has dependency on something else for its existence. It has the property that it need not be or could have been different. In contrast, a necessary being, if it exists, cannot not exist. It is not dependent on any other for its existence.
- (v) Scientific is agreeing with the methods and principles of science, whilst empirical is based on observation or experience rather than theory or logic.

3.

The principle of sufficient reason states that for everything that is the case, there must be a reason why it is the case. The universe does not seem to contain within itself the reason for its own existence. Therefore the reason must lie outside the universe, namely God.

4.

The fallacy of composition states that what is a property of the parts need not also be a property of the whole. In other words, if things within the universe have a cause it does not therefore mean that the universe itself has a cause. Russell expressed it with the illustration – every individual human being has a mother but it is a fallacy to assume that the human species as a whole has a mother.

5.

Infinite regression is the idea of a chain of events or causes that go back for ever and so make the idea of a first cause unnecessary. Infinity is a concept not a reality. Its impossibility is illustrated by Hilbert's Hotel (look up on internet?) that has infinite rooms and infinite guests. Equally, you cannot add to an infinite number of past events. Craig argues that an actual infinity is impossible.

Apply the Cosmological Argument to the photograph and answer the following questions:

- How was it caused? What caused the cause of it?
- Has there been a chain of causes which has led to it?
- If so, does that change of causes have a beginning or does it appear to stretch to infinity?
- To what extent does the Cosmological Argument offer a satisfactory explanation?
- Could there be a different and more acceptable solution?

