

## Chapter 25

### A Second Cosmological Argument that God Exists

#### 1. *The argument*

Aquinas's second way, the so-called first cause argument, certainly does not give us reason to think that God exists. Even if we weaken its conclusion to say only that a being having at least one of the attributes of God, namely, great power, exists, Aquinas's argument still fails to give us any reason at all to accept that a being like God exists. In our discussion, we listed eight problems with Aquinas's argument, each of which is serious enough on its own to render the argument a total failure.

Can we do any better? Can what we have learned from our analysis and evaluation of Aquinas's second way help us to construct a better cosmological argument, one that does give us reason (even if not compelling reason) to think that God exists? Let us see.

An argument that something exists that could well be God counts as a *cosmological* argument that something that could be God exists if it begins with a very general statement regarding the universe and then proposes that that statement wouldn't be true except that there exists a being having or having something like at least one of the attributes of God. Aquinas's first cause argument begins from the general statement that the universe is a chain of cause and effect. We saw that that statement itself was troublesome, for the universe might consist in a whole bunch of chains of causes and effects (and other things as well). Is there any other general claim, then, one we can agree is true, that might serve our purpose of constructing a cosmological argument and that avoids the problems we identified in Aquinas's argument?

Here is a very general claim about the universe, perhaps the most general claim one can make about it: At least one universe exists. At least one universe exists, namely, our universe, this universe. Our universe, the universe in which we live, we can delineate as that which extends from this moment to all moments before and after it and from this place to all places around it every which way. Our universe might not be the only universe (we need have no opinion on this matter), but we will call it *the* universe anyway. It is that thing that includes all times and places continuous with this time and place and all the things—objects, events, properties, states, whatever—present in those places and times.

That the universe exists raises a question. *Why* does the universe exist? Why not, instead of our space and time and all that resides and occurs within it, nothing at all? The cosmological argument we will attempt to construct is inspired by the question why does the universe exist. The fact that the universe exists, our argument will seek to show, implies that there exists a God-like being outside the universe to whom the universe owes its existence and nature. There must exist such a being, for there must be an answer to the question why the universe exists—and only if there exists such a being can there be an answer to it.

We do not need to have any very definite opinions about the nature of the universe in order to construct this argument. We don't, for instance, have to decide between the idea that the universe itself is a series of causally connected events or the idea that it is merely the collection of many different causal chains. Actually, we don't even have to suppose that all events are caused. Further, we needn't bother as to whether there was a first event in the

universe. Our argument is silent on the matter. Perhaps the universe is infinite in all temporal and spatial dimensions; perhaps the universe never not was and never will not be. We are happy to learn whatever science (and, perhaps, philosophy) tells us about the nature of the universe, but our argument will remain unaffected by what we learn, as all that matters to our argument is that the universe exists.

Here, then, is another cosmological argument, one that, I think, avoids many of the problems we discovered in Aquinas's first cause argument. It begins with the observation that the universe exists and concludes that there exists a being outside the universe who is intelligent and powerful enough to be the reason why the universe exists. Thus, it concludes that there exists outside the universe a being with at least two attributes of God (omniscience and omnipotence). The key thought in this argument is that for any fact, there must be some reason why that fact is as it is.

1. The universe exists.
2. For anything that exists, there is a reason why that thing exists (and why it exists as it does rather than in some other way).
- Thus: 3. There is a reason why the universe exists (and exists as it does rather than in some other way).
4. Each thing that exists either is its own reason for existing or has its reason for existing in some other thing.
- Thus: 5. Either the universe is its own reason for existing (and for existing as it does rather than in some other way) or the reason the universe exists lies in something outside the universe.
6. From the perspective of the universe itself, the universe need not have existed at all (and need not exist exactly as it does).
- Thus: 7. The universe is not its own reason for existing (or for existing as it does).
- Therefore: 8. There exists a being outside the universe to which the universe owes its existence (and its nature).
9. Any being to which the universe owes its being (and nature) must be immensely intelligent and powerful.
- Therefore: 10. There exists a being outside the universe who possesses at least two of the attributes of God (omniscience and omnipotence).

It might help to go through this argument informally. The universe exists and, so, we can ask *why* the universe exists. The fact that the universe exists clearly does not itself explain why the universe exists; the existence of the universe is not self-explanatory. Whatever is the answer to the question why the universe exists, then, that answer must have to do with something outside the universe. Thus, there does exist something outside the universe, and it is to this something outside the universe that the universe owes its existence. The universe is everything within space and time and space and time themselves. Anything to which the universe owes its existence must, then, be immensely intelligent and powerful—intelligent and powerful enough to be the reason for the existence of something as immense and variegated as the universe. Therefore, there exists outside the universe a being having at least two of the attributes of God.

Statement 6 in our new cosmological argument is that the universe need not have existed at all and need not exist exactly as it does. The argument draws from statement 6 together with statement 5, that either the universe is its own reason for being or its reason for being lies in something outside the universe, the conclusion, statement 7, that the universe depends on something outside itself for its being. (In our informal presentation of the argument, statement 7 is expressed in the claim that the existence of the universe is not self-explanatory.) The thought here is that since the universe need not have existed at all or in the way it does exist, the universe is not its own reason for being, its existence is not self-explanatory. But why think the universe need not have existed at all or need not have existed as it does? Well, we can imagine the universe existing with more or less matter in it than it has (we can imagine it to contain one more object than it does or one fewer object, an atom of hydrogen, say); and we can imagine events occurring according to different physical laws. Each of these points seems to imply that from the perspective of the universe alone, there is no reason why the universe is exactly as it is.

And, hard though it may be to do, we can even imagine that there is no universe at all—no objects or matter, no space, not even duration. That would seem to imply that from the perspective of the universe alone, there is no reason why the universe exists. There must, then, be another perspective apart from that of the universe alone from which there is a reason why the universe exists.

The argument, we should note, does not propose an answer to the question *why* the universe exists, the question that inspires the argument. It merely draws the conclusion that the answer to that question must involve a being like God. The argument is silent, we are noting, on God's purpose in creating and sustaining the universe. Two people who differ fundamentally on the answer to the question why the universe exists can both equally accept that the argument we have constructed shows that something resembling God exists.

Draw a diagram of the cosmological argument presented above, the one that we think improves on Aquinas's argument from the previous chapter. (Rewrite it first, if you can improve it in any way.) Then compare your diagram to mine (below).

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### **A Diagram of Our Improved Cosmological Argument**

1. The universe exists.
2. For anything that exists, there is a reason why that thing exists (and why it exists as it does rather than in some other way).
3. There is a reason why the universe exists (and exists as it does rather than in some other way).
4. Each thing that exists either is its own reason for existing or has its reason for existing in some other thing.
5. Either the universe is its own reason for existing (and for existing as it does rather than in some other way) or the reason the universe exists lies in something outside the universe.
6. From the perspective of the universe itself, the universe need not have existed at all (and need not exist exactly as it does).
7. The universe is not its own reason for existing (or for existing as it does).
8. There exists a being outside the universe to which the universe owes its existence (and its nature).
9. Any being to which the universe owes its being (and nature) must be immensely intelligent and powerful.
10. There exists a being outside the universe who possesses at least two of the attributes of God (omniscience and omnipotence).
11. We can imagine the universe existing with more or less matter in it than it has (we can imagine it to contain one more object than it does or one fewer object, an atom of hydrogen, say).
12. We can imagine events occurring according to different physical laws.
13. From the perspective of the universe alone, there is no reason why the universe is exactly as it is.
14. We can imagine that there is no universe at all—no objects or matter, no space, not even duration.

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## 2. *Our argument compared with Aquinas's first cause argument*

Does the cosmological argument we have just constructed go any distance toward showing (even if not demonstrating) that a being that might be God exists? No, it doesn't. But before we see why, let us appreciate how our cosmological argument improves on Aquinas's first cause argument.

We found eight serious problems in Aquinas's argument. The cosmological argument we have constructed avoids most of them.

1) Aquinas's argument can be faulted for stopping at God. On its own terms, since it says both that every event has a cause and no event caused itself, God himself (or at least his action of creating a first event) must have had a cause, and on and on. Our argument, though, is consistent with the claim that God is his own sufficient reason for existing, that God is God's own explanation or ground of being. (One who accepts our argument would want also to give an argument that God indeed is God's sufficient reason for existing.)

2) Aquinas's argument was poor in that its premises had to do with events while its conclusion posits an entity. The argument entitles one at most to conclude that a supernatural event occurred, not that some being was the agent of that event. Our argument likewise concludes that an entity exists, and not that an event occurred. Perhaps it could not posit that the ground of the universe is an event, as events occur in time and involve spatial objects and, so, are members of the universe. In any case, its premises concern the existence of an entity, the universe, and they do not mention causation; for these reasons, the conclusion of our argument need not be about an event.

3) Aquinas's argument could not show that the agent of the event that caused the first event was intelligent, only that he was powerful (though perhaps the sense of powerful here is vacuous; after all, an ant that causes a massive flood by moving a pebble is powerful enough to cause a massive flood). Our argument might do no better. But maybe, since the being our argument concludes must exist is the *reason* for the existence of the universe or its *ground*, and not just (in fact, simply *not*) its cause, we are entitled to attribute intelligence (and, non-trivially, power) to it. Whether our argument improves on Aquinas's in this matter is still open.

4) Our argument does not assume that the universe is a single chain of cause and effect. We need not decide between any rival accounts of the nature of the universe. Our argument concerns the universe, that is, all of space and time, as a whole. It is irrelevant to it whether the universe is in any interesting sense a unit or not.

5) In our argument, the universe includes all the stuff that has ever existed in space. Our argument, thereby, is inconsistent with the idea that God and stuff are co-eternal, as Aquinas's argument was not.

6) Our argument allows that time might well never have begun (and that it might never come to an end). God, it concludes, must be outside of time, for God is the ground of time. In that way, our argument rules out the idea that God and time are co-eternal, an idea consistent with Aquinas's argument.

7) We have not presupposed that every event has a cause. Perhaps some events in the universe occur without causes, perhaps all have a sufficient cause in some prior event. It doesn't matter to our argument whether a supposed first event in the universe was caused or uncaused (we have already noted that it doesn't matter to our argument whether there was a first

cause). Our argument is not about any particular event and it is not about a cause. It is about the universe as a whole and it is about a reason or explanation or ground.

8) Aquinas's argument depends on the idea that no chain of cause and effect could recede infinitely into the past; this idea underlies the crucial claim that there must be a first event in any causal chain. But Aquinas's defence of that idea seems to make little sense; as well, that idea contradicts the claim that all events have causes; and, anyway, the idea itself is false. Our argument, on the other hand, does not depend on the idea that no chain of cause and effect could recede infinitely into the past. It is neutral on the matter.

### *3. Nonetheless, our argument gives us no reason to think that God exists*

There are at least four difficulties with this argument. Until each is resolved, our argument must be judged no less a failure than Aquinas's. Maybe each difficulty *can* be resolved, though I am not hopeful, especially concerning difficulties 3) and 4). As it presently stands, though, our argument gives us no reason at all to think that a being with one or another attribute of God, or with what might well be such an attribute, exists.

1) *Perhaps the universe is its own reason for existing.* A crucial part of our new argument is the contention that the universe is not its own reason for existing (statement 7). (Only if the universe is not its own reason for existing would its reason for existing have to lie in something outside the universe, given that for everything that exists, there is some reason why it exists.) But this contention might be false; for all we find in the argument, the universe might contain its own reason for being. The universe is a vast collection of objects and events and facts regarding them, each of which has in some other object, event, or fact in the universe its sufficient reason for existing. (At least, according to statement 2 in the argument, each has a sufficient reason for existing.) The answer to the question why does the universe exist might, then, simply be the totality of answers to each question asked of a particular thing in the universe why that thing exists. As the universe is a collection of things, the reason why it exists need be nothing in addition to the set of reasons why each of the things within it exists. Those reasons need refer to nothing outside the universe.

This statement that the universe is not its own reason for existing is derived in the argument from the claim that the universe need not have existed (statement 6). If the universe might after all be (or contain) its own reason for existing, what is wrong with this little argument? It fails because if the reason for the existence of the universe is just the totality of reasons for the existence of each thing in it, then we cannot hold that the universe need not have existed. It needs to exist simply because it is the collection of things each of which had to exist given that there is a sufficient reason for its existence.

2) *Perhaps the universe is not really a thing.* Our argument begins with the observation that the universe, the totality of time and space and everything within space or time, exists. According to statement 2 in our argument, for anything that exists, there is some reason why it exists. In the first difficulty with our argument, the difficulty we described above, we said that perhaps the sufficient reason why the universe exists is just the sum of sufficient reasons for the existence of the particular things of which the universe is comprised. Now we will ask whether the universe is in any real sense a thing such that there is some reason why it exists. Perhaps the fact that the universe exists is not really itself a fact at all and, thus, is not a fact to which statement 2 applies.

Not everything we might describe in a short, well-formed true sentence counts as a fact—or, at least, we have no reason to think that everything we can describe truly is a fact. For instance, suppose that each of some couple's eight children died on his or her eighth birthday. Suppose that these deaths had nothing in common except that they occurred on the child's eighth birthday; suppose also that for each child the fact that the day of his or her death was his or her eighth birthday had nothing to do with his or her death. We can, if we want, say that it is a fact that the couple's eight children each died on their eighth birthday, but as this is just an eight-fold coincidence, we don't hold that there is any reason that explains it. For each of the eight deaths there is a reason, a cause; but it is mere superstition to think that there is a real fact over the eight particular facts for which there is also a reason.

That the universe exists might be a fact in only the way that it is a fact that all the couple's children died on his or her eighth birthday. That is, it might be an artifact, a product of our ways of categorizing things. The universe exists only in that we call everything that exists in space and time the universe. If the existence of the universe is an artifact of our ways of categorizing things and not really itself an independent fact, then, even if it is true that for each fact there is a sufficient reason why that fact is as it is, there is no reason why the universe exists.

3) *A ground or reason that is not a cause; and explanation that is not causal.* Our argument leaves mysterious how God is the ground or reason for the existence and nature of the universe. We understand how something is the reason for something in at least three senses. First, when one event causes another event, we can say that the first event is the reason the second event occurred (though we would speak more clearly were we to avoid the term "reason" and just call the cause a cause). Second, when we a person performs an action that brings about some event, we can say that the person's goal or desire or intention was the reason that that event occurred. Third, when we note that some feature of a thing enables that thing to fulfil a function, we can say that that function is the reason the thing has that feature (or that having that feature is the reason the thing can perform that function). Importantly, each sense would seem to make sense only because it implies causality. An intention isn't the reason for some action or event except that that intention caused the action or event and a thing's function isn't the reason it has a particular feature unless it was caused to have that feature in light of that function. None of these senses, though, could be the sense in which God would be the reason for the existence of the universe—or, at least, it is unclear how God could be the reason in any of these senses.

God, on our argument, cannot be the cause of the universe, nor can an action performed by God be the cause, for the universe has no cause. (Causality is a relation that obtains between events in time, while the universe is the totality of all moments and durations.) So God is not the reason for the existence of the universe in the sense of being its cause. (We can come to the same conclusion by noting that to be a cause of something, an action that God performs must be an event within the universe, which implies that God is an entity within the universe. But nothing within the universe could be God.) But it is entirely unclear how something could be the reason for something's existence without being the cause of its existence. Phrases such as "God is the ground or foundation of the universe" are metaphors that express the mystery, not descriptions that dissolve it. Until the key idea that God is or contains the reason for the existence of the universe is explained clearly, we cannot accept our cosmological argument as a reason for thinking God exists. We cannot yet accept our argument because we do not yet understand it.

4) *The principle of sufficient reason.* “Why does the universe exist?” This is the question that inspired our argument. Our argument supposes that this question has an answer (though it doesn’t itself purport to answer that question). Perhaps, though, we are wrong to think that that question has an answer.

Statement 2 of our argument is that for anything that exists, there is some sufficient reason why it exists. We can call this the principle of sufficient reason. Do we have any reason to believe that the principle of sufficient reason is true? We might think that our experience of everyday events and processes shows the principle of sufficient reason to be true. Whenever something happens, we assume that something caused it to happen, and that that something was enough to cause it to happen. But well served by that assumption though we might be, we certainly have not found a sufficient cause for everything we’ve experienced. Our experience might properly incline us to believe that for many events or processes, there is sufficient reason behind them, but it cannot justify the claim that for any event or process there is sufficient reason. In any case, in our argument we apply the principle of sufficient reason to the universe itself, and the universe itself is an object unlike the common objects of everyday experience. Even if the principle does apply to common objects within the universe and we somehow know that it does, we cannot conclude that it applies to the universe itself.

Notice that the principle touches everything. Suppose I find a sufficient reason why it rained today in the pattern of changes in humidity and temperature and wind speed and whatever else. These factors, then, explain why it rained today. And that’s a fact—which means that there is a sufficient reason why these factors explain why it rained today. Suppose I find a sufficient reason why these factors explain why it rained today in laws or meteorology or laws of nature generally. Now I have another fact—that these laws of nature explain why these factors explain why it rained today—, another fact to which the principle of sufficient reason applies. That the laws of nature are as they are (and not some other way or no way at all) has a sufficient reason. And there’s a sufficient reason why that sufficient reason is a sufficient reason why the laws of nature are as they are. The point that “everything” means *everything* is not an argument that the principle of sufficient reason is false, of course. But it does raise the possibility that maybe some facts are just surd, just the way they are without there being any reason why they are as they are.

Notice also that according to many philosophers of physics, there is no sufficient reason why such and such particular electron jumped to another level when a quantum of energy was introduced into the atom to which it belongs. That 70% of the time in similar circumstances an electron will jump does not, they say, sufficiently explain why this particular electron did. Since 30% of the time, no electron jumps, the introduction of the quantum of energy was not sufficient to make it jump even though it did make it jump. These philosophers conclude that the principle of sufficient reason is false, and is so on empirical grounds. Whether they are right to conclude this, though, depends on whether they are right to think that sufficiency requires deterministic laws. It might also depend on whether there is a sufficient reason why the statistical laws are as they are.

Is there any good argument in favour of the principle of sufficient reason? I know of none. The other three difficulties aside, our cosmological argument is no more or less acceptable to reason than is the principle of sufficient reason. Before we can accept our argument as giving us reason to believe that God exists, we need reason to accept the principle of



sufficient reason. If we have no good reason to think that for anything, there is a sufficient reason why it exists, we have no good reason to think that our argument goes any distance at all toward showing that God exists.