

# Why the Cosmological Argument is Not a Valid Proof of God

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The Cosmological Argument, in its various forms, is probably the oldest and arguably the most substantial proof of the existence of God. The first known formulation of the argument is that presented by Plato, and the proof has evolved while retaining the same basic theme. Although I consider it to be the best of the five traditional proofs, the Cosmological Argument fails to conclusively prove the existence of a theistic God. There are two general reasons for this failure. The first, and most important, is that the argument fails to prove the existence of a necessary being, or of a single primary source of everything else which exists. Secondly, even if this necessary entity does exist, the argument fails to prove that this being would have the qualities of a theistic God. After a brief clarification of the formulations of the Cosmological Argument, I will discuss these objections in turn.

The various forms of the Cosmological Argument share two common features. They all require an empirical premise, making them *a posteriori* as opposed to *a priori* proofs such as the Ontological Argument. All forms of the Cosmological Argument are deductive, which is a point they have in common with the Ontological Argument. The most important formulations of the Cosmological Argument are those of St. Thomas Aquinas as presented in his Five Ways. The first three of these proofs are variations on the theme which was first described by Plato and further developed by Aristotle:

But if there is nothing eternal, then there can be no becoming; for there must be something which undergoes the process of becoming, that is, that from which things come to be; and the last member of this series must be ungenerated, for the series must start with something, since nothing can come from nothing<sup>1</sup>

Aquinas' first three ways of proving the existence of God are the arguments from motion, from the nature of efficient causes, and from the contingency of the world, respectively. All of these formulations argue that since we observe motion, causation and contingency in the world, and since these have their source in something external to themselves, there must be some ultimate original source, which we call the unmoved mover, the first or original cause, the necessary being, or simply God. The argument therefore depends on the rejection of the possibility of an infinite chain of causation or contingency.

The biggest problem with the Cosmological Argument is that it has as a basic premises the claim that the chain of causation or contingency cannot go on to infinity. Aquinas says little to support this premise in the first way, stating simply:

But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover, and consequently, no other mover<sup>2</sup>

In the second way he elaborates this point further:

Now in efficient causes it is not possible to go on to infinity, because in all efficient causes following in order, the first is the cause of the intermediate cause. Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect. Therefore, if there be no first cause among efficient causes, there will be no ultimate, nor any intermediate, cause. But if in efficient causes it is possible to go on to infinity, there will be no first efficient cause, neither will there be an ultimate effect, nor any intermediate efficient causes; all of which is plainly false.<sup>3</sup>

And in the third way he merely refers back to this explanation:

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<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 999b.

<sup>2</sup>Aquinas, T. *Five Ways to Prove the Existence of God*. In John Hick, ed. 1990 *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*. Third Edition. Prentice Hall, New Jersey. p. 41.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another, as has been already proved in regard to efficient causes.<sup>4</sup>

This so-called 'proof', cited above, begs the question of the possibility of an infinite chain of causation. Aquinas claims that without a first cause there can be no effects, and hence no series. In the case of an infinite regress, it is true by definition alone that there exists no first cause. However, this does not mean the series cannot exist as an infinite chain, which is composed of causes and effects. His argument for the impossibility of an infinite chain therefore reduces to stating that there can be no such thing; he offers no real proof to support this claim. In the face of this absence of proof, it becomes necessary to modify the argument to include the possibility of an infinite regress. This revised version of the argument, rather than proving the existence of a first cause, proves only that there is *either* an infinite chain, *or* there is a first cause.

Father F. C. Copleston argues that the case of an infinite chain still requires the existence of a necessary being. He claims that even without a first cause, there still needs to be a cause for the series as a whole. Since nothing contains within itself its reason for existence, the reason for the universe<sup>5</sup> as a whole must be external to it.

You see, I don't believe that the infinity of the series of events...would be in the slightest degree relevant to the situation. ...if you add up contingent beings to infinity, you still get contingent beings, not a necessary being. An infinite series of contingent beings will be, to my way of thinking, as unable to cause itself as one contingent being.<sup>6</sup>

He therefore concludes that without invoking a necessary being, the existence

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup>For the purposes of this essay I am using the term *universe* to include everything that exists, has ever existed, and ever will exist. This may, of course, include more than one universe in the strict astronomical sense of the word.

<sup>6</sup>Copleston, F.C. *The Existence of God: A debate between Bertrand Russell and Father F.C. Copleston, S.J.* In John Hick, ed. 1990 Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion. Third Edition. Prentice Hall, New Jersey. p. 231-232.

of the world is unintelligible. The universe as a whole cannot have necessary existence, according to Copleston, because everything in it is contingent and the whole can be no more than the sum of its parts. This means that the universe is itself a contingent being and there is, therefore, a cause of the universe which is external to it. For Copleston this constitutes "the fundamental metaphysical argument for God's existence".<sup>7</sup>

Copleston's argument hinges on the claim that a necessary being must exist because contingent beings exist; in other words, a necessary being is the only thing that can explain why anything exists. This argument from contingent to necessary being has been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny and has generated much criticism. Bertrand Russell argues that there is no such thing as a necessary being, and that this does not mean the universe is unintelligible - it simply means it is without explanation. It is intelligible in that we can make sense of the inner workings of the universe; we can describe these as a chain of causes and effects. It is inexplicable in that it cannot be ascribed an external cause, and in Russell's opinion it is a mistake to attempt to do so; "I do think the notion of the world having an explanation is a mistake. I don't see why one should expect it to have".<sup>8</sup> Russell's argument supports the view that the universe consists of an infinite chain of contingent beings, *and that's all*; there is no need (and indeed it is a mistake) to look for a reason or external cause for the existence of the whole. This does not mean that the universe is its own cause, but rather "that the concept of cause is not applicable to the total".<sup>9</sup> On these grounds Russell rejects Copleston's argument for an external cause of the universe, and thereby his proof of the existence of a necessary being.

The disagreement between Russell and Copleston on the validity of the Cosmological Argument therefore reduces to their differing opinions on whether or not the universe has to have an external cause. Copleston accuses Russell of denying the problem, and this is valid; but Copleston fails to really prove that the problem exists, and the burden of proof lies with him. There is no intuitive reason why the infinite chain has to be caused by something external to it - why it cannot just exist eternally. Immanuel Kant agrees with this notion and takes it one step further:

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<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, p.228.

<sup>8</sup>Russell, B. *Ibid*. p.234.

The principle of causality has no meaning and no criterion for its application save only in the sensible world. But in the cosmological proof it is precisely in order to enable us to advance beyond the sensible world that it is employed.<sup>10</sup>

Aristotle's claim that nothing can come from nothing is true, but in the infinite chain this is the case (everything comes from something). He says "if there is nothing eternal, then there can be no becoming", and this I also agree with, but I see no reason why the thing that is eternal cannot be the becoming itself, manifested in the infinite chain of contingent beings. Copleston would argue that this would make the world intrinsically unintelligible, but I find this no less intelligible than the concept of a necessary being. In the case of an infinite chain which has no external cause, the Cosmological Argument proves nothing. Russell is fully justified in saying "the universe is just there, and that's all".<sup>11</sup>

The other major problem with Copleston's position, and with all formulations of the Cosmological Argument, is the leap in reasoning which is necessary in moving from the contingent to the necessary. The argument is that since everything we've ever experienced of the world is contingent, there must exist something necessary. I argue that since everything we've ever experienced of the world is contingent, we ought to be very leery of postulations which involve necessary beings. Both Russell and Immanuel Kant argue that the Cosmological Argument fundamentally depends on the Ontological Argument, in that it invokes as the cause of the universe an entity whose essence involves existence. Although the Cosmological Argument differs in that it claims a premise based on our experience of the world, Kant argues that this difference is merely superficial:

But the cosmological proof uses this experience only for a single step in the argument, namely, to conclude the existence of a necessary being. What properties this being may have, the

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, p.232.

<sup>10</sup>Kant, I. *Critique of the Theistic Proofs*. In John Hick, ed. 1990 *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*. Third Edition. Prentice Hall, New Jersey. p. 130.

<sup>11</sup>Russell, B. *Ibid*, p. 232.

empirical premise cannot tell us. Reason therefore abandons experience altogether, and endeavours to discover from mere concepts what properties an absolutely necessary being must have, that is, which among all possible things contains in itself the conditions essential to absolute necessity.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of whether or not one accepts the validity of reasoning from the contingent to the necessary, the problem remains of defining what this necessary being might be. Whether arrived at via the cosmological or the ontological route, the concept of a necessary entity must be clarified if one is to prove the existence of a theistic God.

Aquinas' formulation of the argument makes no attempt to prove that the first mover or cause has to be a theistic God; he simply states that the first mover is that which "everyone understands to be God" and that the first efficient cause is that "which everyone gives the name of God".<sup>13</sup> The argument jumps from the sub-conclusion, "a first mover/cause exists", to the conclusion, "God exists", without justification. The cosmological argument, if it did prove the existence of a first mover, would be perfectly compatible with a deistic God, a demiurge, or polytheism. There is nothing in the argument to disprove these ideas of God, or to prove that the first cause has theistic characteristics.

For the Cosmological Argument to work it must do two things. First, it must either disprove the possibility of an infinite chain of contingent beings, or it must prove that this chain has an external cause. Having accomplished this first step, the argument must then prove that this primary cause of everything has the characteristics of a theistic God. I have shown that Aquinas' formulation of the Cosmological Argument fails at both of these tasks, and therefore fails as a proof of the existence of God.

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<sup>12</sup>Kant, I. *Ibid*, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup>Aquinas, T. *Ibid*.