

The Cosmological Argument and the Principle of Sufficient Reason

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The Cosmological Argument began with Plato, flourished in the writings of Aquinas, Leibniz, and Samuel Clarke, and was laid to rest by Hume and Kant. Although I think its death premature, if not unjustified, I shall not here attempt its resurrection. What I have in mind is more in the nature of an autopsy. I wish to uncover, clarify, and examine some of the philosophical concepts and theses essential to the reasoning exhibited in the Cosmological Argument

The Cosmological Argument is an argument for the existence of *God*. As such, the argument has two distinct parts. The first part is an argument to establish the existence of a necessary being, a being that carries the reason of its existence within itself. The second part is an argument to establish that this necessary being is God. A good deal of philosophical criticism has been directed against the first part of the argument. Much less has been directed against the second part. Indeed, some philosophers seem not to have realized that the argument has a second part. For example, in Part IX of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* Hume has Demea present a summary of only the first part of the Cosmological Argument. Demea appears to *assume* that a necessary being would be God. Thus, after concluding that there exists a necessary being, he simply remarks, “There is consequently such a Being, that is, there is a Deity.” But, of course, it is not at all obvious that the necessary being is a Deity. Indeed, Cleanthes quickly asks, “Why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being?” Hence, as an argument for the existence of God, the Cosmological Argument not only does but must contain a second part in which it is argued that the necessary being possesses the properties—omnipotence, infinite goodness, infinite wisdom, etc.—that God, and only God, possesses.

Using the expression “dependent being” to mean “a being that has the reason of its existence in the causal efficacy of some other being,” and the expression “independent being” to mean “a being that has the reason of its existence within its own nature,” we may state the argument for the existence of a necessary being (i.e., the first part of the Cosmological Argument) as follows:

1. Whatever exists is either a dependent being or an independent being;

therefore,

2. Either there exists an independent being or every being is dependent;

3. It is false that every being is dependent;

therefore,

4. There exists an independent being;

therefore,

5. There exists a necessary being.¹

This argument consists of two premises—propositions (1) and (3)—and three inferences. The first inference is from (1) to (2), the second from (2) and (3) to (4), and the third inference is from (4) to (5). Of the premises neither is obviously true, and of the inferences only the first and second are above suspicion. Before discussing the main subject of this paper—namely, proposition (1) and its connection with the Principle of

¹ This argument is an adaptation of Samuel Clarke’s discussion in his Boyle lectures of 1704, published under the title *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*. This work consists of twelve propositions, and arguments in support of these propositions. The first three propositions and their arguments constitute the first part of the Cosmological Argument. That is, the arguments for the first three propositions are designed to establish the existence of a necessary being. The substance of these arguments, I believe, is contained in the argument I have presented. There is also some resemblance between the argument I have presented and the argument Demea states in Part IX of the *Dialogues*. This is to be expected since Demea’s argument is a brief restatement by Hume of the argument formulated by Clarke.

Sufficient Reason—I want to describe the argument in support of premise (3) and the main criticisms of that argument.

Why is it false that every being is dependent? Well, if every being that exists (or ever existed) is dependent then the whole of existing things, it would seem, consists of a collection of dependent beings, that is, a collection of beings each member of which exists by reason of the causal efficacy of some other being. Now this collection would have to contain an infinite number of members. For suppose it contained a *finite* number, let us say three, *a*, *b*, and *c*. Now if in Scotus's phrase "a circle of causes is inadmissible" then if *c* is caused by *b* and *b* by *a*, *a* would exist without a cause, there being no other member of the collection that could be its cause. But in that case *a* would not be what by supposition it is, namely a *dependent* being. Hence, if we grant that a circle of causes is inadmissible it is impossible that the whole of existing things should consist of a collection of dependent beings *finite* in number.

Let us suppose, then, that the dependent beings making up the collection are *infinite* in number. Why is it impossible that the whole of existing things should consist of such a collection? The proponent of the Cosmological Argument answers as follows.² The infinite collection *itself*, he argues, requires an explanation for its existence. For since it is true of each member of the collection that it might not have existed, it is true of the whole infinite collection that it might not have existed. But if the entire infinite collection might not have existed there must be some explanation for why it exists rather than not. The explanation cannot lie in the causal efficacy of some being outside of the collection since by supposition the collection includes every being that is or ever was. Nor can the explanation for why there is an infinite collection be found within the collection itself, for since no member of the collection is independent, has the reason of its existence within itself, the collection as a whole cannot have the reason of its existence within itself. Thus the conception of an infinite collection of dependent beings is the conception of something whose existence has no explanation whatever. But since premise (1) tells us that whatever exists has an explanation for its

² See, for example, Samuel Clarke's discussion of Propositions II and III in his *Demonstration*.

existence, either within itself or in the causal efficacy of some other being, it cannot be that the whole of existing things consists of an infinite collection of dependent beings.

Two major criticisms have been advanced against this line of reasoning, criticisms which have achieved some degree of acceptance. According to the first criticism it *makes no sense* to apply the notion of cause or explanation to the totality of things, and the arguments used to show that the whole of existing things must have a cause or explanation are fallacious. Thus in his B.B.C. debate with Father Copleston, Bertrand Russell took the view that the concept of cause is inapplicable to the universe conceived as the total collection of things.

When pressed by Copleston as to how he could rule out “the legitimacy of asking the question how the total, or anything at all comes to be there,” Russell responded: “I can illustrate what seems to me your fallacy. Every man who exists has a mother, and it seems to me your argument is that therefore the human race must have a mother, but obviously the human race hasn’t a mother—that’s a different logical sphere.”³

According to the second major criticism it is intelligible to ask for an explanation of the existence of the infinite collection of dependent beings. But the answer to this question, so the criticism goes, is provided once we learn that each member of the infinite collection has an explanation of its existence. Thus Hume remarks: “Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.”⁴

³ “The Existence of God: a Debate between Bertrand Russell and Father F. C. Copleston,” John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1964),p. 175. The debate was originally broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1948. References are to the debate as reprinted in *The Existence of God*.

⁴ Hume, *Dialogues*, Part IX.

Although neither criticism is, I think, decisive against the argument given in support of proposition (3), they do draw attention to two crucial steps in the Cosmological Argument. First, it seems that the infinite collection is itself viewed as an existing thing. For only if it is so viewed will it follow from premise (1) that it (the infinite collection) must have a cause or explanation of its existence. Second, the question why each member of the infinite collection exists is felt to be different from the question why the infinite collection exists. For the proponent of the argument admits that each member of the collection has an explanation of its existence—namely, in the causal efficacy of some other member—and yet denies that this explains the existence of the entire infinite collection.

Perhaps neither of these steps in the argument for proposition (3) is correct. But even if both steps are correct—that is, even if the infinite collection itself may be viewed as an object or thing, and even if to explain each member is not sufficient to explain the collection—it is important to note that it is premise (1) from which it is then inferred that there must be an explanation for the existence of the infinite collection. Thus proposition (1) plays a crucial role not only as a premise in the main argument but also as a premise in the argument for proposition (3). Having seen the crucial role that proposition (1) plays in the Cosmological Argument, we may now examine that proposition in some detail.

Proposition (1) tells us that *whatever exists* must have an explanation for its existence. The explanation may lie either within the nature of the thing itself or in the causal efficacy of some other being. The claim that whatever exists must have an explanation of its existence I shall call the *strong form* of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. This is to be distinguished from the claim that *whatever comes into existence* must have an explanation of its existence. The latter claim I shall call the *weak form* of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. If we imagine a star that has existed from eternity, a star that never came into existence but has always existed, the strong form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason requires, whereas the weak form does not, that there be an explanation for the existence of that star. The Cosmological Argument, as we have seen, employs the strong form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

Can the Principle of Sufficient Reason be proved or otherwise known to be true? Some philosophers, it seems, thought that the Principle could be proved. Hume attributes the following argument to Locke.

(1) If something exists without a cause, it is caused by nothing;

(2) Nothing cannot be the cause of something;

therefore,

(3) Whatever exists must have a cause.

About this “proof” Hume remarks:

It is sufficient only to observe that when we exclude all causes we really do exclude them, and neither suppose nothing nor the object itself to be the causes of the existence, and consequently can draw no argument from the absurdity of that exclusion. If everything must have a cause, it follows that upon the exclusion of other causes we must accept of the object itself or of nothing as causes. But it is the very point in question, whether everything must have a cause or not, and therefore, according to all just reasoning, it ought never to be taken for granted.⁵

It is clear from Hume’s comment that he rejects premise (1). For he takes the proponent of the argument to mean by premise (1) that if something exists without a cause it, nevertheless, has a cause—although in this case its cause will not be some other thing, it will be *nothing*. But there is a subtlety in this argument that Hume overlooks. In the natural sense of the expression “caused by nothing” it is *true* that if something exists without a cause it is caused by nothing—to be caused by nothing is simply not to be caused by any thing whatever. Taken in this way, premise (1) is true. Moreover, premise (2) is true as well. For to say that nothing cannot be the cause of something is simply to say that if something has a cause then there must be some *thing* which is its cause. But so interpreted, the premises, although true, do not yield the conclusion that everything has a cause. For from (1) if something exists without a cause then there is no thing which caused it, and (2) if something has a cause then there is a thing which caused it, it in no way follows that everything has a cause.

⁵ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book 1, part III, section III.

Therefore, if the premises are interpreted so as to be clearly true, the argument is invalid; whereas, if the argument is to appear valid its first premise, as Hume points out, is false or, at the very least, begs the question at issue. In either case the argument fails as a demonstration of the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

Of course, if, as seems likely, the Principle of Sufficient Reason cannot be—at least, has not been—demonstrated, it does not follow that it cannot be *known* to be true. Clearly, if we know any propositions to be true there must be some propositions which we can know to be true without having to *prove* them, without having to derive them from other propositions we know to be true. If this were not so, we would have to know an infinite number of propositions in order to know any proposition whatever. Hence, the fact, if it is a fact, that the Principle of Sufficient Reason cannot be demonstrated does not invalidate the view other philosophers seem to take; namely, that the Principle is a necessary truth, known *a priori*.⁶

If the Principle in its strong form is analytically true then the view of these philosophers—namely, that the Principle is a necessary truth, known *a priori*, is probably correct. For every analytically true proposition is necessary and, if known at all, presumably can be known by simply reflecting on it, without relying on empirical evidence. But is the Principle of Sufficient Reason analytically true? Clearly the Principle is not logically true. Nor, it would seem, does the mere notion of the existence of a thing *definitionally* contain the notion of a thing

⁶ Samuel Clarke, for example, makes the following remark in correspondence with a critic:

“Nothing can be more absurd, than to suppose that anything (or any circumstance of anything) is; and yet that there be absolutely no reason why it is, rather than not. ‘Tis easy to conceive, that we may indeed be utterly ignorant of the reasons, or grounds, or causes of many things. But, that anything is; and that there is a real reason in nature why it is, rather than not; these two are as necessarily and essentially connected, as any two correlates whatever, as height and depth, etc.”

The letter from which this passage comes is included in the 9th edition of the work from which our quotations from the *Demonstration* have been taken, p. 490.

being caused. Kant argued—correctly, I think—that although the proposition “Every effect has a cause” is analytically true, “Every event has a cause” is not. The idea of an event, of something happening—a leaf falling, a chair collapsing, etc.—does not seem to contain the idea of something *causing* that event. If this is so then the Principle of Sufficient Reason is certainly not analytically true.

But if the Principle is not analytically true how can it be necessary? Indeed, can any proposition be necessary if it is not analytically true? Many philosophers have held that only analytically true propositions are necessary. But it is, I think, reasonable to argue, as some philosophers have, that, for example, the proposition “Whatever is red is colored” is necessary but not analytically true.⁷ For (i) we do not seem to have a *definition* of “red” or “colored” in terms of which the sentence “Whatever is red is colored” can be reduced to a sentence expressing a logical truth, and yet (ii) it certainly is *impossible* that something be red and not colored. Thus the proposition “Whatever is red is colored” may well be a synthetic, necessary proposition. Moreover, as Chisholm has argued, there seem to be reasons for the view that the proposition “Necessarily, whatever is red is colored” is known *a priori*. But even if this is correct, as I am inclined to think it is, it is far from clear that the Principle of Sufficient Reason is a synthetic, necessary proposition known *a priori*.

The difficulty with the view that the Principle, in either its strong or weak form, is *necessary* is that we do seem able to conceive of things existing, or even of things coming into existence, without having to conceive of those things as having an explanation or cause. Unlike the proposition “Some red things are not colored,” it does seem conceptually possible that something should exist and yet have no cause or explanation of its existence. As Hume remarks, “The separation, therefore, of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning of existence is plainly possible for the imagination, and consequently the actual separation of those objects is so far possible that it implies no

⁷ See R. M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 87-90.

contradiction nor absurdity...”⁸ Indeed, not only does the denial of the Principle seem to be possible, philosophers have held that the denial of the Principle is *true*.

... many philosophers have maintained that it is not true that everything that exists, or even that everything that has a beginning, has a cause, that is to say, is an effect. The world, they say, contains “spontaneous”, free, or uncaused and unoriginated events. In any case they assert very positively that there is no way of proving that such uncaused events do not occur.⁹

In view of this and other difficulties, some contemporary defenders of the Cosmological Argument have retreated from the view that the Principle of Sufficient Reason is a synthetic, necessary proposition known *a priori*. Instead, they have adopted the somewhat more modest view that the Principle is a *metaphysical assumption*, a presupposition we are forced to make in order to make sense of our world. Thus, for example, Father Copleston, in his B.B.C. debate with Russell, argued that something like the Principle of Sufficient Reason is presupposed by science. “I cannot see how science could be conducted on any other assumption than that of order and intelligibility in nature.”¹⁰ Another contemporary philosopher, Richard Taylor, has expressed this view as follows:

The principle of sufficient reason can be illustrated in various ways, as we have done, and if one thinks about it, he is apt to find that he presupposes it in his thinking about reality, but it cannot be proved. It does not appear to be itself a necessary truth, and at the same time it would be most odd to say it is contingent. If one were to try proving it, he would sooner or later have to appeal to considerations that are less plausible than the principle itself. Indeed, it is hard to see how one could even make an argument for it, without already assuming it. For this reason it might properly be called a presupposition of reason itself. One can deny that it is true, without embarrassment or fear of refutation, but one is apt to find that what he is denying is not really what the principle asserts. We shall, then, treat it here as a datum—not something that is

⁸ *Treatise*, book 1, part III, section III.

⁹ John Laird, *Theism and Cosmology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1942), p. 95

¹⁰ “A Debate,” p. 176.

provably true, but as something which all men, whether they ever reflect upon it or not, seem more or less to presuppose.¹¹

What are we to make of this view? It must be admitted, I think, that this view is a good deal more plausible than the view that the Principle is a necessary truth, known *a priori*. For the proponent of this more modest view is not contending—or, at least, need not contend—that the Principle states a necessary truth about reality. All he contends is that the Principle is presupposed by us in our dealings with the world. To this he may add that without this presupposition we cannot make any sense of the world. However, there are several critical points pertinent to this view that need discussion.

First, does the scientist in his work really assume that everything that happens has a cause? In the debate between Russell and Copleston, Russell took the view that Physicists need not and do not assume that every event has a cause.” As for things not having a cause, the physicists assure us that individual quantum transitions in atoms have no cause.”¹² Again, he remarks:

... a physicist looks for causes; that does not necessarily imply that there are causes everywhere. A man may look for gold without assuming that there is gold everywhere; if he finds gold, well and good, if he doesn't he's had bad luck. The same is true when the physicist looks for causes.¹³

How are we to settle this matter? Philosophers who hold that the causal principle is a fundamental assumption reply that the Heisenberg uncertainty principle “tells us something about the success (or the lack of it) of the present atomic theory in correlating observations, but not about nature in itself”¹⁴ Moreover, it is observed that the failure to find causes does not lead anyone to abandon the causal principle. Indeed, it is sometimes argued that it is *impossible* to obtain empirical evidence against the principle.¹⁵ If we don't find gold in a hill after a careful

¹¹ Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 86-7.

¹² “A Debate,” p. 176.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁴ Father Copleston, “A Debate,” p. 176.

¹⁵ G. J. Warnock has argued this in “Every Event Has a Cause,” *Logic and Language*, II, edited by Antony Flew (London: Blackwell, 1953)

search, we conclude that there's no gold there to be found. But if we don't find the cause of a certain event, we don't conclude that the event has no cause, only that it is extremely difficult to discover. Perhaps, then, there is some reason to think that we do assume that whatever happens has an explanation or cause.

But even if it is granted that in our dealings with the world we presuppose that whatever happens has a cause, there seems to be a serious difficulty confronting the recent defenders of the Cosmological Argument. For what the Cosmological Argument requires—or, more exactly, what the versions argued by Samuel Clarke, Copleston, and Taylor require—is what I have called the strong form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. That is, their arguments require as a premise the principle that whatever exists—even an eternal being—has a cause or explanation of its existence. But what we have just granted to be presupposed by us in our dealing with the world is the principle that whatever *happens* has a cause. This latter principle implies that whatever begins to exist has a cause, since the coming into existence of a thing is an event, a happening. Thus the principle we have granted to be presupposed in science and common sense implies what I have called the weak form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. But it does not imply the strong form of the Principle; it does not imply that whatever exists has a cause. If something comes into existence, its coming into existence is something that happens. But if something exists from eternity, its eternal existence is not one of the things that happen. Hence, even if it be granted that we presuppose a cause for whatever happens, it does not follow that we presuppose a cause or explanation for whatever exists.

Can it reasonably be argued that the strong form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason is, as Taylor suggests, a presupposition that all men make, a presupposition of reason itself? We have granted as a presupposition of reason that there must be a cause or explanation for anything that comes into existence.¹⁶ Thus if we imagine a star to have

¹⁶ Clarke, perhaps for reasons of simplicity, usually speaks of requiring a cause only for the existence of a thing. But, of course, the Principle of Sufficient Reason is not meant to require an explanation only for the existence of a thing. Thus if a table is made by a carpenter and subsequently painted red, sawed in half, or even destroyed, Clarke's view—and the view of others who have appealed to the Principle of Sufficient Reason—

come into existence, say, a thousand years ago, it is presupposed that there must be an explanation for its having come into existence. That is, it is assumed by us that there must be a set of prior events that was sufficient to cause the birth of that star. To say, “Nothing caused the birth of the star, it just popped into existence and there is no reason why it came into existence” is, we have granted, to deny a fundamental presupposition of reason itself. But imagine that there is a star in the heavens that never came into existence, a star that has always existed, that has existed from eternity. Do we presuppose that there must be an explanation for the eternal existence of this star? I am doubtful that we do. But short of a metaphysical investigation of mind and its relation to nature, it seems quite impossible to answer this question. Perhaps, then, our most fruitful course here is simply to note the consequences for the Cosmological Argument *if* the Principle of Sufficient Reason in its strong form is, as Copleston and Taylor maintain, a presupposition all men make.

However, before considering this last question it is, I think, important to clarify the nature of the question concerning a thing’s existence to which the Principle of Sufficient Reason demands there be an answer. Of the star that came into existence a thousand years ago, we may ask “Where did it come from?,” “What brought it into existence?,” or “Why did it come into existence?” Clearly none of these questions can be asked properly of a star that has existed from eternity. Once we learn that it has always existed we realize that it never came into existence. But there is a simpler question that can be asked both about the eternally existing star and about the star that came into existence a thousand years ago; namely, “Why does this thing exist?” Although we may answer—or, at least, show to be improper—the question “Why did this thing come into existence?” by pointing out that it has always existed, the question “Why does this thing exist rather than not?” cannot be answered or even turned aside by pointing out that it has always existed. As Taylor has noted:

is that there *must be* an explanation not only for the fact that the table came into existence but also for any change that occurs to it. Thus Clarke remarks (in a passage quoted earlier), “Nothing can be more absurd, than to suppose that any thing (or any circumstance of any thing) is; and yet that there be absolutely *no reason why* it is rather than *not*.”

... it is no answer to the question, why a thing exists, to state *how long* it has existed. A geologist does not suppose that he has explained why there should be rivers and mountains merely by pointing out that they are old. Similarly, if one were to ask, concerning the ball of which we have spoken, for some sufficient reason for its being, he would not receive any answer upon being told that it had been there since yesterday. Nor would it be any better answer to say that it had existed since before anyone could remember, or even that it had always existed; for the question was not one concerning its age but its existence.¹⁷

The question, then, to which the Principle of Sufficient Reason requires that there be an answer is: "Why does this thing exist?" This question, I am claiming, may be sensibly asked about a star that has existed from eternity, or one that has existed for only a thousand years.

It should be clear that it is one thing to argue, as I have done, that the question "Why does this thing exist?" makes sense when asked of something that has always existed, and another thing to argue, as I have not done, that all men presuppose that there must be an adequate answer to that question, even when it is asked about something that has existed from eternity. We have granted as a presupposition of reason that there must be an adequate answer to the question when the being of which it is asked has come into existence. But, as I have indicated, it seems at least doubtful that the strong form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason is a presupposition of reason itself.

Suppose, as Taylor, Copleston, and others have claimed, that the Principle of Sufficient Reason in its strong form is a metaphysical assumption that all men make, whether or not they reflect sufficiently to become aware of the assumption. What bearing would this have on the Cosmological Argument? It would not, of course, show that it is a good argument. For (1) the argument could be invalid, (2) some premise other than the premise expressing the Principle could be false, and (3) even the premise expressing the Principle could be false. The fact, if it is a fact, that all of us presuppose that whatever exists has an explanation of its existence does not imply that nothing exists without a reason for its existence. Nature is not bound to satisfy our presuppositions. As James

¹⁷ Taylor, *Metaphysics*, p. 88.

has remarked in another connection, “In the great boarding-house of nature, the cakes and the butter and the syrup seldom come out so even and leave the plates so clean.” However, if we do make such a presupposition we could not *consistently* reject the Cosmological Argument solely because it contains as a premise the Principle of Sufficient Reason. That is, if we reject the argument it must be for some reason other than its appeal to the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

If, as seems likely, the strong form of the Principle is not a presupposition of reason itself, and if, as I have argued, the Principle is neither analytically true nor a synthetic, necessary truth, known *a priori*, the Cosmological Argument—in so far as it requires the strong form of the Principle as a premise—cannot, I think, reasonably be maintained to be a *proof* of the existence of God. For unless there is a way of knowing the Principle to be true other than those we have explored, it follows that we do not know the Principle to be true. But if we do not know that one of the essential premises of an argument is true then we do not know that it is a good argument for its conclusion. It may, of course, be a perfectly good argument. But if to claim of an argument that it is a *proof* of its conclusion is to imply that its premises are *known* to be true, then we are not entitled to claim that the Cosmological Argument is a proof of the existence of God.