

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 2, Theistic Arguments, Part 1, The Cosmological Argument

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 2, Theistic Arguments, part one, The Cosmological Argument.

Okay, the first Theistic Argument we're going to look at is the Cosmological Argument for the existence of God.

All Theistic Arguments aim to prove or support or confirm the reasonableness of belief in God, and these arguments have been deployed for centuries in the West, at least as far back as Plato. This Cosmological Argument is one that seems to have been first devised by Plato in one of his works called *The Laws*. The other arguments that have been used, and many of which we'll talk about, include the Teleological Argument, which is the argument from design. The Moral Argument for the existence of God, the argument from mind or consciousness, the Ontological Argument, the argument from religious experience, and the argument from miracles, and there are other arguments as well. The ones that we will look at are the Cosmological, Teleological Arguments, the Argument from Mind, and the Ontological Argument.

So, beginning with the Cosmological Argument, which was actually named by Kant, he gave the names of the Cosmological Argument, the Teleological Argument, and the Ontological Argument. The basic idea of the Cosmological Argument is reasoning from the existence of the world to a first cause, the need for some sort of ultimate causal explanation of the world. One example of a Cosmological Argument is that if something exists, then something exists necessarily.

Something does exist; therefore, there is a necessary being. We will look at a version of the Cosmological Argument, which has been called the Kalam Argument, which originated in the medieval period with some Islamic philosophers. This argument is unique because it focuses on the idea that the universe had a beginning, that the universe had to have had a beginning.

So, the Kalam Cosmological Argument goes like this. The first premise is that everything that begins to exist has a cause for its existence, and the universe began to exist therefore the universe has a cause for its existence. One prominent defender of the Cosmological Argument is Alexander Pruss, and we will look at some of his thoughts on the argument.

He addresses three basic questions that are posed with regard to the Kalam Argument. One, does the cosmos actually have an explanation? Can there be an explanation that does not involve a first cause, and does the first cause of the cosmos need to be God? So, we'll look at these questions and how Proust deals with them in reverse order, beginning with the question, must there be a first cause of the cosmos? There is what may be called a gap problem of moving from the idea that the universe has a first cause to theism. The idea here for defenders of the Kalam Argument is that the ultimate explanation of the cosmos can't be a scientific or mechanistic one.

It has to be a personal being, so the first cause must be a person, thus suggesting something God-like, since such a being would have to be not only extremely powerful but atemporal, immutable, and also extremely intelligent or omniscient. When you put all those characteristics together, you get something like the God of classical theism. Now, some object that, well, maybe there's another explanation that isn't a kind of mechanistic cause or a personal explanation, but actually a constitutive explanation that would be analogous to explaining that an object is hot in a given case because it has, say, high kinetic energy.

There, we're not referring to anything beyond the object itself to explain, in this case, its heat. Proust replies to this by noting that a constitutive explanation, which appeals to aspects of the thing itself, is not an ultimate explanation because, as he puts it, all ultimate explanations of contingent states of affairs have to be causal, not constitutive. And that's because we can always ask why a constitutive state of affairs holds or why, in the case of the knife, it exists at all.

There, you need some sort of causal explanation or how it came to have a high kinetic energy to explain its heat. There has to be some sort of causal explanation there. So, constitutive explanations won't do.

When it comes to the universe, mechanistic causes don't make sense. Therefore, there must be some sort of personal explanation. That's the basic idea there.

But now, we might ask, can there be an explanation that does not involve a first cause? And those who pose that question go one of two routes: asking either can be a non-causal ultimate explanation or if a causal explanation can be given by appealing to a chain of non-ultimate causes, that is, a causal chain that has no first element, that's a beginningless series of finite causes. So, those who take the first route, claiming that there can be a non-causal ultimate explanation, will typically invoke some sort of metaphysical principle or ultimate cosmic laws. Therefore, they will try to avoid admitting the existence of some entity or being outside the universe that gave rise to the universe.

The problem here, according to Proust, is that this is really incoherent. An ultimate explanation has to be a thing, has to be some sort of being, in order to explain the cosmos because principles are not things; they are not entities such that they have any causal power. That's true of the laws of nature when we think about, say, the inverse square law, the law of gravity, or the first or second law of thermodynamics.

Those laws are actually formulas; they describe how things go in the universe; they are not entities such that, say, gravity causes anything. In fact, that remains an open question. What is it that causally explains this regularity that we observe in nature? Even to call it a force doesn't provide an explanation.

There must be some sort of entity or agent or being that explains that, and so it goes with the whole universe itself. There must be some entity. A metaphysical principle is not a causal explanation. David Hume takes the second route, which is to appeal to the idea of a beginningless chain of non-ultimate causes.

He says that each contingent being could have a cause that is another contingent being, and so on, ad infinitum. Thus, one need not admit the existence of an ultimate, almighty being that got the process going. So, if we can explain each part of the universe by appealing to another finite part, and this goes on endlessly, then every part will be explained, and we need not appeal to an ultimate cause.

Proust says that this is problematic simply because what needs to be explained is the whole chain itself. How do you ever get a chain going, a causal chain of contingent beings, without some first member or agent that got the whole chain going? He gives the illustration of a cannonball, which the flight of a cannonball can be explained by each moment in its flight. The ball state can be explained by a previous state.

Some will try to use that as an analogy to what Hume is talking about here. But again, that begs the question, what explains the flight of the cannonball at all? How did it ever get going? How did it ever come to be flying through the air? And that is the sort of ultimate explanation for the flight of the cannonball that's analogous to the starting of the universe. What got this causal chain of contingent beings going in the first place? A beginningless series makes no sense.

That's something that Aristotle emphasized, and many others have since is problematic with this kind of approach. So, does the cosmos even need an explanation? That question suggests the need for a principle that accounts for our desire to find an ultimate explanation. What sort of principle is involved here? It's something called the principle of sufficient reason, which has been articulated in a number of different ways.

Proust's version is that all contingently true propositions have explanations. A contingent truth is one that's not necessary. It is true, say, that there is a table in this room, but it could have been otherwise.

It could have been the case that there was no table in this room, as opposed to necessary truths, which cannot be false. Like that a triangle is three-sided or a bachelor is married. Those are necessarily true.

They can't be false. And so, when we're talking about the universe, something that might not have existed, that's a contingent truth. What explains that? There needs to be some sort of causal explanation.

According to the principle of sufficient reason, all contingent truths have explanations. Now, one of Hume's objections is when it comes to the idea of the universe needing an explanation, the fact that we can imagine the universe or anything coming into existence *ex nihilo*, or without any explanation, shows that it must be possible. We can imagine any object whatsoever suddenly popping into existence.

That shows that it must be possible for, in some sense, for that to happen. Maybe that could have happened with the universe. So maybe not all things do demand an explanation.

Maybe the principle of sufficient reason is wrong here. Proust responds to this by noting that this really demands too much in terms of our ability to imagine anything coming into existence purely and simply without any causal forces being involved. We would have to successfully imagine the lack of any causal influence on the sudden appearance of the object that we're imagining coming into existence.

So, Proust would say that this is really a kind of self-deception or a lack of proper understanding of what's going on when we imagine something. We're not really being faithful to the truth of the situation if we think that we can truly imagine something popping into existence without any causation involved. So, he would say that Hume is misguided there.

So, what are our justifications for believing in the principle of sufficient reason? One of the things that Proust notes is that the principle of sufficient reason is self-evident. And that's clear, he would say, in the fact that no one ever questions whether some event in daily life has a causal explanation. You know, if you go out to your car and you find that there's a flat tire, you know, you never consider the possibility that maybe it didn't, it wasn't caused to be that way, it just happened spontaneously.

Or if money disappears from your wallet or your purse, it never occurs to you to think that, well, maybe it just spontaneously disappeared. No, there's always some sort of causal explanation. We look for causes in every other context of life.

Why would we not do the same when it comes to the universe as a whole? Secondly, denying the principle of sufficient reason defeats most of the rest of our knowledge and understanding. There are some domains where causal explanations don't come into play, like when we're doing, say, pure mathematics. But when it comes to most of the rest of life and inquiry, we're talking about, you know, causal relationships.

And our understanding of the world depends certainly on science and so many other fields on this idea that states of affairs and beings have causal explanations. So, if we can't trust the principle of sufficient reason or we don't accept that, then all of the knowledge that we have that's based on the principle of sufficient reason ultimately fails. So, we'd have to be pretty radical skeptics if we reject or doubt the principle of sufficient reason.

Now, some complain that cosmological defenders are inconsistent because after employing the principle of sufficient reason to infer the existence of a first cause, they abandon it and refuse to explain the first cause's choice to create the world. So, the question is posed: what caused God to make the cosmos? If we're going to appeal to God as the ultimate cause of the cosmos and we're going to be so committed to causal reasoning here, can't we then, in turn, ask, well, what about God? What caused Him to do this? Proust's answer here is that God chose to create the world because of certain values He has and the fact that He knew our world would satisfy these values or God's aims. So, we can appeal to God's own intentions or motives, but why God holds the values that He does is another question we could ask and that some do ask in response.

Charles Proust says that for whatever reason, God prefers the things that He does. He has the values He does. Maybe we need a special revelation to know this, and if we look at scripture, I think we get some clues about God's ultimate values, the kind of being that God is, which might explain why He made the universe and why He made human beings the way He has, but it always goes back to the nature of God, Proust would say.

Affirming the principle of sufficient reason does not commit one to saying that all of the explanations are ultimately knowable and that we know everything about every explanation. So, you can know how a being came into existence or who caused it without knowing why the person or thing that caused it or how the thing brought it into being. You don't have to know these other bits of background information in order to know the thing you're looking for an explanation for, that it has the causal explanation that it does.

So even though we don't know that da Vinci, we don't know why da Vinci painted the Mona Lisa; we don't know if there was an actual individual who went by that name; at least, I don't think historians know that. There are different theories about why he painted that painting, but we still know that he did it. So, you can know the basic causal explanation of a thing without knowing these other details. So why can't we know that God created the universe even if we don't know all the reasons why or maybe any of the reasons why?

William Lane Craig is another leading defender of the Kalam argument, and he and another philosopher named Wes Morriston have gone round and round debating this argument. Wes Morriston was a Christian philosopher, but he was very critical of natural theology and theistic arguments in particular. He was a leading critic of the Kalam argument and of Craig's particular defense of the argument.

So, we'll look at some of Craig's arguments in defense of the Kalam argument, especially his defense of the second premise that the universe began to exist. He gives a couple of philosophical arguments in defense of this and one scientific argument. So, his first philosophical argument against the idea of an infinite past is that an actual infinite series cannot exist.

A beginningless series of events in time is an actual infinite series; therefore, a beginningless series of events in time cannot exist. He uses this analogy of an infinitely long shelf of library books. Suppose that on this shelf of library books, every other book is blue and every other book is red.

So, it's infinitely long, infinitely long, blue, red, blue, red, blue, red, blue, red, blue, red, and red. We're assuming, for the sake of argument, that you can have an actually infinitely long series of books. The total number of books there would be, of course, infinite, but now, what would the total number of blue books be in that series? It would be infinite as well.

So, half the total number of books would be equal to the whole number of books in that series. That implies a contradiction where the half is equal to the whole. Craig argues that that shows there's something incoherent about the idea of an actual infinite series.

So that's what he's getting at here. Now, Wes Morriston's critique of this is to note that Craig's argument assumes a version of what's called Euclid's Maxim, which says that a set must have a greater number of elements than any of its proper subsets. That is what Craig is assuming here.

And Morriston argues that this is only true of finite sets. But when it comes to infinite sets, all bets are off with regard to Euclid's Maxim. In any case, he says that Euclid's Maxim is controversial and has been debated.

So, there's a bit of an impasse between them on that point. Morriston also points out that there are examples of sets that have infinitely many members. Any finite chunk of space, he says, can be infinitely divided into sub-regions.

Cut it in half, cut that half in half, cut that in half, and do that presumably indefinitely. And if that's the case, then doesn't that suggest that there is an infinite number of sub-regions, even in just a small, finite space? Craig's response to that is that that only shows that space is potentially infinitely divisible. It doesn't prove an actual infinite series of spaces.

Morriston replies that space couldn't be potentially divisible infinitely in that way if those distinct regions weren't already there. You can't make a division if you don't have a span there or a region that can be so divided. So, the potential divisibility of a finite span shows that there are some actually infinite sub-regions there.

Craig offers another philosophical argument against an infinite past. It goes like this. A series of events in time is a collection formed by adding one member after another.

A collection formed by adding one member after another cannot be actually infinite. Therefore, a series of events in time cannot be actually infinite. To this, Morriston says, sure.

But he doesn't think that this applies to a series that has no temporal beginning. That changes everything we're talking about, in his view, potentially. The universe has no temporal beginning, and so Craig's thinking here doesn't apply.

Then Craig has a scientific argument against an infinite past, appealing to Big Bang cosmology. He refers here to the redshift, which was discovered by Edwin Hubble in the first part of the 20th century. He noticed, looking out into the night sky, that light from distant stars, distant galaxies, was shifting towards the red end of the light spectrum.

Suggesting that all of these heavenly bodies are getting farther and farther away. It's kind of an optic Doppler effect. And he naturally inferred from that that the universe is expanding.

And then, as more research was done, more discoveries about just how vast the universe is, hundreds of billions of galaxies with hundreds of billions of stars, expanded at roughly the speed of light. So, if we rewound that, since the universe doesn't go out infinitely, presumably, then at some point in the finite past, all the matter of the universe must have been contained in some sort of finite chunk. And

then, for whatever reason, it exploded at the speed of light and has been expanding ever since.

But the idea here is that the universe had to have had a beginning. And Big Bang cosmologists will say, anywhere from, I don't know, 12 to 14 billion years ago, that the Big Bang happened. And it's agreed on the part of most, the great majority of cosmologists, that that is what happened.

So that the universe has a finite past. That is the view that is being received by scientists and cosmologists today. And so that is a kind of recommendation of that second premise of the Kalam argument.

Morrison's response to this is that, at best, this shows that the universe likely, very likely, had a beginning. It doesn't prove it with certainty. And it doesn't rule out the possibility of an oscillating universe, where you have expansions and contractions that go on endlessly.

Even though the oscillating universe theory is out of fashion these days, I guess Morrison would say, for all we know, it could be true. So, must the beginning have a cause? Craig spends a little bit less time discussing this question, specifically the first premise of the Kalam argument because there's a lot less controversy here. There's a lot less challenge to this premise than there is to the other premise of the Kalam argument.

Craig's point here is that everything that begins to exist has a cause for its existence. We've talked about the principle of sufficient reason and the absurdity of supposing that any object could just suddenly appear out of nothing, purely and simply. Craig brings up the illustration of a tiger.

Supposing that a tiger could just suddenly appear in the middle of this room is absurd. It's also a terrifying thought. But that is intuitive evidence, he would say, that the whole universe couldn't just appear and come into existence uncaused out of nothing.

So, if we recognize the absurdity of that proposal when it comes to a particular object or animal, then how much more absurd is it to suppose that the entire universe could come into existence purely and simply out of nothing? Morrison's reply to that is that we believe that about tigers because they're the sorts of objects that we experience, but we don't have similar experiences regarding the entire universe. So, he's skeptical about whether we can extrapolate to that extent. One could argue that if a comparatively small object like a tiger or a chair can't pop into existence, why would we be any more inclined to think that the whole universe of such objects could suddenly appear spontaneously without a causal explanation?

Finally, must the first cause be a person? Craig says that the first cause must be a person because mechanical causes operate only as soon as the relevant conditions are in place. Again, this is a point that Proust made, as we noted. But then, the universe could have no beginning if this were the sort of cause that it had.

But the universe does have a beginning, so what other cause could have brought it into existence? It has to have been a personal cause. It's the other main category of causal explanations. So, whatever it was that made the universe would have to be extremely powerful, would have to have made a decision to make the universe, would have to have intentions, and would have to be extremely intelligent and wise to make the universe such that it's right for the possibility of life.

We'll talk about another argument, the fine-tuning argument, that focuses on that. You take all of these qualities together: power, intelligence, intentionality, and the ability to choose, and you end up with a personal being. It seems like that is a portrait of a personal God as far as the ultimate cause of the universe.

Morrison's response here is that this leads to difficulties in explaining how God's willing creation was sufficient for his bringing it about. And that is a tantalizing thought. How is it that God made the universe? He is a spirit.

It's a physical universe. It certainly begs questions about the nature of the universe, the nature of matter or energy, and how God as a spirit could bring about the universe. And there are certainly difficulties there.

But I think Craig would respond that just because there are conceptual difficulties in working that out doesn't mean that we can't be confident that there was some sort of transcendent, super-powerful, intelligent cause of the universe to explain how it came into existence. So that's the cosmological argument with special attention to the Kalam version of the argument.

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