

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

by

W.D. Jeffcoat, M.A.

Copyright © Apologetics Press

All rights reserved. This document may be printed or stored on computer media, on the condition that it will not be republished in print, on-line (including reposting on any personal Web sites, corporate Web sites, organizational Web sites, electronic bulletin boards, etc.), or on computer media, and will not be used for any commercial purposes. Further, it must be copied with source statements (publisher, author, title, bibliographic references, etc.), and must include this paragraph granting limited rights for copying and reproduction, along with the name and address of the publisher and owner of these rights, as listed below. Except for those exclusions mentioned above, and brief quotations in articles or critical reviews, or distribution for educational purposes (including students in classes), no part of this document may be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher.

Apologetics Press, Inc.
230 Landmark Drive
Montgomery, AL 36117 U.S.A.
334/272-8558
800/234-8558



www.ApologeticsPress.org

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

by

W.D. Jeffcoat, M.A.

There are many arguments that can be presented to prove the existence of God. In defending the faith, however, it is useful to present a way of proving the existence of God that begins from the fact of the existence of the world. Arguments of this type are referred to as “cosmological” arguments. It will be my objective in this paper to state and explain this type of argument along the general lines of the “Third Way” of Thomas Aquinas, and to give some of the objections raised against it, with possible answers to them.

Some people, because of the similarity of the words “cosmological” and “cause,” have concluded that the cosmological argument is simply the claim that since causality exists, there must be a First Cause. Therefore, perhaps a definition of terms is in order at this point. The term “cosmological” means “based on the fact of the cosmos.” It has to do with cosmology, which is a branch of metaphysics that deals with the Universe as an orderly system. The term “argument” is used in the sense of a formulation (in words) of premises, and conclusions that have been inferred from them.

The cosmological evidence of God’s existence was affirmed by the apostle Paul in Romans 1:19-20 when he stated: “Because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them. For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse.”

The world obviously exists, and yet cannot explain its own existence; therefore, something else must account for it. But, if we are not to develop still another unexplained existence of some kind, this “something else” must contain within itself the cause of its own existence. Such an uncaused being is God (Thompson, 1955, p. 284). This simple statement gives the essence of the cosmological argument, but it is strengthened and made logically defensible when stated more precisely. Thomas Aquinas developed five lines of argument for God’s existence, the first three of which are cosmological in nature. The third of

these, the argument from contingency, has come to be known specifically as the cosmological argument. According to Aquinas, it is an observed fact that some things have a beginning and an ending. They therefore are capable of either being or not being; that is, they are not **necessary** but **contingent**, for if necessary, they could not have had a beginning, nor could they have an end. There must therefore be a necessary being to cause contingent beings; if not, nothing could exist (Frederick, 1962, p. 60). A modern form of the argument by Bruce R. Reichenbach is as follows:

A contingent being exists. a. This contingent being is caused either (1) by itself, or (2) by another; b. If it were caused by itself, it would have to precede itself in existence, which is impossible.

Therefore, this contingent being (2) is caused by another, i.e., depends on something else for its existence.

That which causes (provides the sufficient reason for) the existence of any contingent being must be either (3) another contingent being, or (4) a noncontingent (necessary) being. c. If (3), then this contingent cause must itself be caused by another, and so on to infinity.

Therefore, that which causes (provides sufficient reason for) the existence of any contingent being must be either (5) an infinite series of contingent beings, or (4) a necessary being.

An infinite series of contingent beings (5) is incapable of yielding a sufficient reason for the existence of any being.

Therefore, a necessary being (4) exists (1972, pp. 19-20).

Note that both forms of the argument begin with the existence of a contingent being. Aquinas describes contingent beings; Reichenbach does not, because it is an accepted fact that such exist. A being that is contingent is one that does not have to exist; that is, it does not contain the cause of its existence within itself, but depends for its being upon one or more other things.

Contingency may be proved on the basis of time and change. Everything in nature exists in the context of time; but, everything existing in time undergoes change. If no change has occurred, time has not elapsed. Therefore, everything in nature changes. But everything that changes does so because it is affected by other things. If it contained its various forms altogether within itself, all these forms would exist at once, and thus no change could occur. Then, since everything that is thus affected by other things is contingent, everything in nature is contingent (Thompson, 1955, pp. 312-318).

Since everything that is contingent must be caused by something else, when people consider an item or being in the natural realm they know that it, too, had to have a cause. But if people locate this cause, it also is contingent and thus has a cause. We may continue this process (A is caused by B, B is caused by

C, etc.) to infinity and still have a series of caused beings. Since no one of these could cause itself, none could exist unless there were a non-contingent being—i.e., one needing no external cause—to initiate the cause/effect process. Such a non-contingent being contains its own cause in itself, thus is different from the other beings in that it is **necessary**—it **must** exist. It therefore is possible to prove the existence of a non-contingent being simply because contingent beings exist.

The argument depends upon the principle of causality, which is a basic, pervasive, and self-evident feature of the world, notwithstanding the efforts of some to discredit it. Science, for example, is altogether based upon the principle that every material effect has an adequate cause (Thompson, 1955, p. 334). Men of all societies and cultures have attempted explanations of the existence of the world; although the specific features of these explanations have varied from the ridiculously physical to the abstrusely abstract, the causal principle underlies every one. Samuel M. Thompson, having shown that everything in nature changes, defends the causal principle by saying that “...if causation does not really happen, then change is not real and the world of nature does not exist” (1955, p. 330).

Another aspect of the cosmological argument is the distinction between existence and essence. The essence of a man, for example, consists of all the properties that make him a man—viz., his characteristics. But existence is not one of these properties, for people can perceive of a man who does not exist. The properties that make him a man do not make him exist. Thus, his essence is separate from his existence, and man is a contingent being. But in God, essence and existence are identical; that is, God’s essence **is** existence (Owen, 1971, p. 14). Thus, God is a **necessary being** because it is His very nature to exist. He gives existence to His creatures, but the existence that He gives to them, though real, is not self-existence like His own, but contingent existence. Otherwise, He would create an impossibility—a non-contingent contingent (Thompson, 1955, pp. 345-346).

Thompson provided an effective illustration of contingency by comparing it to the relationship between a corporation and the government. The corporation is brought into existence by an act of the government and depends upon the government for its continued existence. So long as the government continues to permit its corporate status, the corporation continues to exist. The corporation, then, is contingent

upon the government, not only for its creation, but for its maintenance (p. 350). Thus it may be seen that the argument is not dealing with an historical relationship of contingent origin, but with a present relationship of contingent maintenance (Bobik, 1969, p. 180). Having examined the argument itself in some detail, and having seen that it concludes with the existence of a necessary being, let me focus attention on several of the objections offered to it.

The first objection I would like to address is that of infinite regress. It has been shown that, for any given contingent being, there can be a series of causes. One of the premises of the argument is that, even if carried to infinity, this contingent series could not provide sufficient reason for the existence of a contingent being. Contradicting this, the objection states that, if the series is infinite, no other cause is necessary; the series itself is the cause. P.S. Wadia stated: "...critics have maintained...that an infinite series of beings, each one of which can be explained in terms of the causal efficacy of a preceding being, involves no arbitrary exception to the Principle of Sufficient Reason" (1975, p. 411-420).

Several answers may be given to this objection. First, as shown above, we are not dealing with a historic-sequential series of causes that finds sufficient reason for its existence in an infinity of past time. Even if the series were of historic nature, it would be a contingent series; so to label it would not involve a fallacy of composition because it is demonstrable that if every part can cease to exist, and does so, the whole also will cease to exist. Thus, such a series must itself have a cause. Whether or not such a historic-sequential series exists, then, the vertical-present series still must exist. Second, since nature is the sum of its parts, there can be no infinite causal series because a total number of real things is always a finite number. Third, an infinite causal series does not itself give the first cause, but only extends its distance from the effect (Reichenbach, 1972, p. 96).

When the theist claims that God caused the world and everything else, he is affirming that all things are dependent upon a Being Who Himself necessarily transcends space and time as well as all coming and going. In regard to this point, E.L. Miller wrote as follows:

The question, "Where did God come from?" can thus be discarded as ill conceived, because it construes God to be, like other things, the sort of being that can come and go. If God himself can come into being, then he cannot possibly be the cause of things that come into being and would not therefore be what the

theist means by **God** (1972, p. 55, emp. in orig.).

What does it mean to say that God creates out of nothing? Thomas Aquinas thought that if God is the source of all being, there cannot be any other source of being. Thus, prior to creation, there is only God.

In considering this, Samuel Enoch Stumpf wrote:

God does not act upon any existing material since no such primary matter exists. Only God exists originally, and whatever comes to be, derives its existence from God. Everything, then, is related to God, is a creature of God because it came ultimately from God, there being no independent source of being other than God (1966, p. 197).

Aristotle, who also offered a cosmological argument, held the concept of an impersonal “something” rather than a personal God. He observed that there are chains of cause-effect patterns in ordinary happenings, and assumed that every ordinary effect must have been caused by something. But he reasoned, further, that there could not be an endless chain of effects and causes reaching back into history. Concerning this, John H. Gerstner stated:

Because every effect must have a cause, there must ultimately be one cause that is not an effect, but pure cause, or how, indeed, can one explain effects? A cause that is itself an effect would not explain anything but would require another explanation. That, in turn, would require another explanation, and there would be a deadly infinite regress (1967, p. 53).

The Universe is an effect, and as such cannot be self-explanatory. Thus, it requires something to explain it that is not, like itself, an effect. The argument is not that everything must have a cause but, rather, that every **effect** must have a cause. The first cause, God, is not an effect at all, nor indeed can He be. Therefore, the theory that there is an argument for infinite regress is based on the false supposition that everything must have a cause. Again, it may be objected that the whole of nature is the uncaused cause. On this point, Thompson wrote: “At no time in its history is the whole of nature in existence” (1955, p. 319). It must be remembered that we are dealing here with a causal system that exists now. The whole of nature, with parts long since extinct and other parts not yet existing, cannot possibly be a cause now.

Immanuel Kant and others have objected that the cosmological argument is dependent upon the ontological argument (Runyan, 1963, pp. 56-58). In their view, this at least eliminates the cosmological argument as an independent proof. Kant admitted that the argument proves the existence of a necessary being, but alleged that it relies upon the ontological argument to show the properties of that being are those

of God (Ariel, 1974, pp. 298-306). Reichenbach, however, has shown that this is not true. He demonstrated that Kant divided the cosmological argument into two parts; the first, which Kant admitted to be sound, proves the existence of a necessary being, and the second, which he claimed to refute, shows that this being is God. But, Reichenbach said Kant's first part is the cosmological argument proper, and establishes its claims without the second part; the additional reasoning required to show the necessary being's characteristics are not part of the argument itself. Furthermore, Kant, in his second part, made the ontological argument appear to be involved by apparently (1) ignoring the fact that his final conclusion is based upon an existential premise inferred from empirical facts, and (2) confusing conditional necessity with logical necessity (Reichenbach, pp. 142-143).

Closely connected with the above is the objection that the cosmological argument, although concluding that a necessary being exists, does not prove that this being is identical with the God of the Bible, or that it is even a personal being (Wadia, 1975, p. 416). Thus, John S. Mill, for example, has suggested that force is the first cause or necessary being (Stewart, 1957, p. 14). It is clear that, in resolving this difficulty, we must not merely take the theistic concept of God and claim without proof that the cosmological argument leads to it. Reichenbach, however, suggested a three-step procedure to be used in connecting the argument's conclusion with theological descriptions of God: (1) determine the characteristics of the necessary being by reasoning from the cosmological argument itself; (2) determine the characteristics of God from theology; and (3) correlate the two (1972, pp. 142-143).

It is possible to determine the characteristics of the necessary being: (1) it is eternal, because if it could be brought into or taken out of existence, it would not be a necessary being; (2) since it is uncaused (non-contingent), it cannot be limited or modified by another being, and therefore it is infinite; (3) since it contains in itself the sufficient reason for its own existence and that of all contingent beings, it is "self-sufficient and self-sustaining" (Reichenbach, 1972, p. 142); and (4) it is singular, not plural. This follows from (2) above, and is reinforced by the fact that if there were two or more such beings, that which differentiated between the two would have two characteristics that one of them derived from something other than its own existence, making that one a contingent being (Thompson, 1955, p. 343). Without going into

great detail here concerning steps (2) and (3) of Reichenbach, it is suggested that an examination of such passages as Genesis 1:1, Exodus 3:14, John 5:58, Acts 17:28, and 1 Timothy 1:17 will show that the God of the Bible fits all of these characteristics. No claim is made here to be exhaustive; more characteristics might be found in step (1), and certainly many more passages of Scripture could be found in step (2).

Furthermore, since this necessary being is the cause of all contingent beings, it is the cause of man; since it must be assumed that man is rational before any process of proving or refuting logical propositions can take place, and since rationality is not derived from irrationality, the necessary being must be rational. But, at least to human experience, the only rational beings are people. This, combined with the reinforcement obtained from the ontological, teleological, and moral arguments, makes it exceedingly difficult to conceive of the necessary being as other than a person.

Although the cosmological argument is not wholly without difficulties, it provides a conclusion carrying sufficient weight to be an important part of the cumulative evidence for the existence of God. Its strongest point, and the source of its greatest importance, is that it begins from the existence of real things instead of dealing with mere concepts, as do the other major lines of proof (Caputo, 1974, pp. 686-691).

One final matter needs to be considered. The existence of God does not result from the cosmological argument. What results from the argument is a **truth** (i.e., a statement about God's existence). Theistic arguments are not a ground for God's existence. God is behind all other existence. At best, the argument is a logical principle based on reality that rationally explains why limited beings must be caused.

There are evidences that establish the reasonableness of faith in God and His existence; yet His existence cannot be established by **scientific** demonstration. The Bible teaches that people must believe that God is (Hebrews 11:6). Belief in the existence of God is not based on faith mixed with emotion. People can **know** that God exists. This knowledge is based on clear and sure revelation.

On the other hand, belief in the existence of God is much more reasonable than a denial of God. Atheists claim to be scientific and rational in their denial of God. It can be seen, however, that they are neither scientific nor rational. Atheists have not proved mathematically, or by any scientific experiment, that God does not exist. The very fact that God is a Spirit (John 4:24) makes this line of approach impos-

sible in the first place. Not being able to prove or disprove the existence of God by scientific experiment can only be an argument against God's materiality, not against His existence.

There is nothing in the physical world that can disprove the existence of a spiritual being. To be able to disprove the existence of God people would have to be present everywhere and know all things. If people could possess such powers, they would but demonstrate that they are God, for the possession of such powers is an attribute of Deity. Faith is based on evidence. People can **know** that God exists, for the evidence indicates His existence.

REFERENCES

- Ariel, R.A. (1974), "Theistic Proofs and Immanuel Kant: A Conflict Revisited." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, June.
- Bobik, Joseph (1965), *Aquinas on Being and Essence: A Translation and Interpretation* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press).
- Caputo, John D. (1974), "Kant's Refutation of the Cosmological Argument," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, December.
- Copleston, Frederick (1962), *A History of Philosophy* (Vol. II, *Mediaeval Philosophy* [Part 2], *Albert the Great to Duns Scotus*) (Garden City, NY: Image Books), 2[2]:60.
- Gerstner, John H. (1967), *Reasons for Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker).
- Mill, John Stewart (1957), *Theism* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill).
- Miller, E.L. (1972), *God and Reason* (New York: Macmillan).
- Owen, H.P. (1971), *Concepts of Deity* (New York: Herder and Herder).
- Reichenbach, Bruce R. (1972), *The Cosmological Argument: A Reassessment* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas).
- Runyan, Mary Edith (1963), "The Relationship Between Ontological and Cosmological Arguments," *Journal of Religion*, January.
- Stumpf, Samuel Enoch (1966), *Socrates to Sartre* (New York: McGraw-Hill).
- Thompson, Samuel M. (1955), *A Modern Philosophy of Religion* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery).
- Wadia, P.S. (1975), "The Cosmological Argument," *Religious Studies*, December.