

# THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

## INTRODUCTION TO THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT: FIRST CAUSE

Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) was a medieval Christian theologian from Italy. He proposed a set of philosophical arguments which he said offered evidence for God's existence. These are known as the cosmological arguments.

The cosmological arguments (also known as '*The Five Ways*') are based on the order of the cosmos and the natural laws and logic therein. A summary of these five arguments were published in Aquinas' '*Summa Theologiae*' in 1485. You can find a summary of each of these five arguments in a separate resource [here](#).

The second of these arguments is the first cause or cosmological argument. It is arguably the simplest argument of all the classical arguments for the existence of God; it proposes that God can be shown to exist with reference to a simple, indisputable fact: the universe exists.

Here is a summary:

- Events do not just happen, there is something that causes them. For example, a bow cannot fire itself, an archer is needed to pick it up and direct it
- Every event has a cause
- In order to have been caused, there has to have been a cause: nothing comes from nothing
- If each event has been caused by a cause, there has to have been an original cause, right at the start; it can't go back forever
- This original, or first cause, can only be God
- Therefore, God exists.

Basically, nothing happens on its own, there is always a cause for everything. The world didn't just appear; it was caused into being. As God is the only person powerful enough to do this, it is taken that this first cause is God.

## IS THE UNIVERSE JUST A HAPPY ACCIDENT?

When we apply this logic to the creation of the world it is easy to see how a conclusion is drawn that God not just exists but caused the universe to exist.

The great advantage that this argument has is that it begins with a statement that nobody can seriously doubt. It begins with the simple FACT that there is a universe.

Think about this:

- Our galaxy, the Milky Way, contains about 400 billion stars.
- The largest galaxies in the universe contain about 1000 billion stars.
- There are about 100 billion galaxies in the universe.
- The furthest parts of the universe are about 15 billion light years away.

Have you ever wondered why it all exists? It's perfectly possible that nothing should exist at all. But the fact is, the universe does exist. But what caused it to? It can't have *just appeared*, can it?

## EXPAND

The cosmological argument is based on the idea that any event that happens or anything that exists didn't just occur from out of nowhere; there has to be a cause.

For example:

- Someone falls over. There are a number of possible causes; they don't just fall over. It could be someone pushed them, they slipped or a medical problem. BUT there is a cause, it doesn't just happen.
- A car moves. It doesn't move on its own; it requires fuel and a person or computer to set it in motion.
- For dominos to fall, someone must push the first to allow the rest to.

All of these demonstrate the idea behind the cosmological argument: that if the world needed a cause, the only explanation is that God is this person who began the infinite causes that progressed the universe.

## ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

### 1. Theology

Christians believe that God is the creator of the universe, that without God there would be nothing. Where do they get this idea from?

The Bible is full of references to God as creator of all things, but it is in Genesis that we find the creation story.

*"[1] In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. [2] And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. [3] And God said, Let there be light: and there was light."*

- Genesis 1:1-3

Christians differ in their view of creation. Some believe it is to be taken literally; that God created the world in six days. Others believe it is allegorical, that God created the world, but then the world continued to adapt and grow, evolving to the point where we are at today.

One thing all Christians agree on, however, is that God was the creator, at the centre of everything in the universe, creating everything for a purpose.

### 2. Peter Vardy

The English theologian and philosopher Peter Vardy (1945-) has argued that the success of the cosmological argument lies in the question of *why* there is a universe. If you insist that the universe is just there or that it can be explained by infinite regress, then it is a pointless task. However, if you are inclined to ask the question why then the cosmological argument does succeed in at least posing some difficult questions about the origins of the universe, even if you don't accept that it shows God exists.

### 3. The Kalam Cosmological Argument

This is a modern version of the cosmological argument for the existence of God. It was named after the kalam (medieval Islamic scholasticism) from which its key ideas originate. The philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig (1949-) promoted this in his book, *'The Kalām Cosmological Argument'* (1979).

It states:

- Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
- The universe began to exist.
- Therefore, the universe has a cause.
- The cause of the universe is God.

### 4. The Leibniz Version

Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) added to the argument by asking:

- Why does anything exist at all?
- Why do the things that do exist have the form or shape that they do?

Leibniz was trying to point out that there must be some sort of reason for existence and that something must have decided on the forms of existence - a creator. Like Aquinas, he also thought that the creator cannot be created by anything else. There must be a first creator (first cause) and that can only be God.

### 5. Science: The Big Bang

You might be forgiven for thinking that science disproves philosophical arguments for the existence of God, however it does the exact opposite!

The Big Bang theory offers great support to the cosmological argument. If the world was created by the 'Big Bang', then what caused the 'Big Bang'? The cosmological argument would suggest that God was the cause. Therefore, a scientific explanation of the beginning of the universe is perfectly compatible.

## CRITICISM OF THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

### 1. Science: The Big Bang Theory

This theory is said to prove that the universe does not need a first cause and, instead, it began because of the random collision of sub-atomic particles. The physicist Niels Bohr (1885-1962) tried to show that things can come into existence without any apparent cause – they simply appear out of nothing. Bohr posed the question: if some things can appear from nothing then why not other things?

### 2. David Hume

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher who said that there was no necessary link between cause and effect.

In his book, *'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding'* (1748), Hume noted the difference between impressions and ideas. He argued that assumptions of cause and effect between two events are not necessarily real or true.

It is possible to deny causal connections without contradiction because causal connections are assumptions not subject to reason. Therefore, he disputed the reliability of the cosmological argument, saying it did not prove the existence of God.

### 3. Bertrand Russell

As well as talking about scientific explanations like the Big Bang, critics have commented on the logic of the cosmological argument itself. One such famous critic was the English philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970). He made two key criticisms.

#### i. What caused God?

Many people point out that the cosmological argument appears to contradict itself. Russell said:

*'If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God...'*

#### ii. How can we possibly know that the universe needs a cause?

Russell argued that the only thing that we can know for sure is that the universe exists. He thought it was just as likely that the universe has always existed as it is that it could appear out of nothing.

**TASKS**

1. What simple fact is at the heart St Thomas Aquinas' cosmological argument for the existence of God?
2. Create a biographical profile about St Thomas Aquinas. Be sure to include information about:
  - a. When/where he was born/lived/died.
  - b. His faith.
  - c. His book.
  - d. A summary of his first cause argument: why did he think God was the 'uncaused cause'?
3. Do you think the theory of the Big Bang shows that we don't need God as an explanation for the existence of the universe? Explain your answer.
4. What is your opinion of the first cause argument? Do you think it offers evidence for God's existence? Explain your answer.
5. Why did Bertrand Russell say that the cosmological argument contradicts itself? Do you agree with him? Explain your answer.
6. Why did David Hume say that we could never know whether the universe had a cause? Do you think that this is a good reason to say that the cosmological argument doesn't work? Explain your answer.
7. Look at the Aquinas quote below:

*'Assume that at one time there was nothing. It is clear that nothing can come from nothing. If, therefore, there were once nothing, even now there would be nothing. The universe cannot, therefore have come into existence from nothing unless something brought it into existence.*

*However, we know that the universe now exists. If God, or something equivalent in terms of power, does not exist then the universe must always have existed since, if it was not created, it could not have come into existence of its own accord from nothing.'*

- a. Do you believe that the universe has always existed, or do you prefer to think that God has always existed? Explain your answer.
  - b. Do you think that it's possible for the universe to come into existence of its own accord from nothing? Explain your answer.
8. Why do some people say that the Big Bang supports the cosmological argument? Do you agree with them? Explain your answer.
  9. *'The cosmological argument offers sound evidence that God exists.'*

Do you agree with this statement? Explain your viewpoint, with reference to arguments for and against.