The Cosmological Argument – Kenneth Chi 2013

Throughout history, many philosophers have attempted to formulate arguments for the existence of God. One of the oldest is the cosmological argument, developed by Christian, Jewish and Islamic thinkers over centuries. First posited by Plato and Aristotle, it was notably developed by Islamic philosopher Avicenna, as well as Christian philosophers Leibniz and Aquinas.

The cosmological argument has taken many forms, with variations arguing from different premises, but for our purposes, we will examine a version called the ‘kalam’ cosmological argument, developed by contemporary philosopher and theologian William Lane Craig:

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
2. The Universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the Universe had a cause.

The argument seems to be sound, that is, the conclusion follows from the premises. For the purpose of the argument, we define ‘the Universe’ as: ‘all of physical, spatial reality; the encompassing of everything material’.

The great thing about arguments like these, is that the premises don’t need to be proven to the enquirer. Rather, in order to reject the conclusion, the enquirer must reject one or both of the premises. Thus, we go on to examine the premises in turn. From then, we examine the implications of the conclusion for the existence of God.

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.

This is a deeply intuitive truth, known in logic as the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Given some sustained thought, it is clear that everything that begins to exist has something or set of circumstances prior that begins it.

To look at it from another perspective, suggesting otherwise means to conceive of something simply popping into existence, for literally no reason at all. Human beings will accept the most ludicrous explanation for any phenomenon before accepting that something came about without any circumstance to explain it. If you were to observe an object, for example, a carrot, popping into existence seemingly spontaneously, it seems natural to seek an explanation for it. To reject this principle requires strong justification, as it is in fact, almost indistinguishable from magic.

2. The Universe began to exist.

Atheists have traditionally maintained that the universe is eternal, in order to avoid the conclusions that can be drawn from the cosmological argument. As the science surrounding it has become clearer, however, this position has become much less reasonable. The prevailing cosmological model held today is known popularly as the Big Bang Theory. The history of cosmology in the 20th century has been that of theory after theory being proposed, and then in turn being rejected as inferior to the Big Bang, which has only been further confirmed as more evidence is discovered.
The Big Bang sprung from observations that the Universe appears to be inflating, that is, increasing in size. Out of this, scientists proposed that the Universe must have once been an infinitesimally small singularity, which, 13.7 million years ago, expanded rapidly in a ‘Big Bang’. Before this cosmic event, there was no time and no space. If the Big Bang Theory is correct, it seems to be conclusive that the universe came into existence.

If, however, the Big Bang Theory turns out to be astoundingly mistaken as a model of our universe, it seems there is philosophical reasoning to support this conclusion. Consider the opposing stance: That the universe is eternal. This at first seems reasonable, but when we think about the implications, they quickly become absurd. The belief that the universe is eternal means that the time before the present is infinite. The number of hours before the present hour would also be infinite. But infinite hours would never end! Reaching the present would be impossible. Trying to divide infinite time into units also seems impossible. If you split infinity in half, each half is also infinite. No matter how thinly you try to divide the infinite, each part will also be infinite. Where then, do we get the individual minutes and seconds that tick by? It seems that a true infinite cannot consist of finite parts. Seeing that time without beginning has patently absurd consequences, it is reasonable to assert that time, and therefore the universe, had a beginning.¹

The premises are shown to have solid foundation, and so we move to the conclusion.

3. Therefore, the Universe had a cause.

What then, is this cause, this ‘First Mover’? It must be outside the Universe; it is impossible that something causes its own beginning. This cause must be outside of time and space, non-material, yet immensely powerful. There are two things that we can conceive of that fit these categories, an abstract idea, or a mind. Abstract ideas do not affect change on their own, so we conclude that this cause must be a mind. An immensely powerful, non-material mind outside of space and time is what many people consider to be God.

There are limitations to the scope of this conclusion. The argument establishes the existence of a God, but does not go on to prescribe any characteristics. Namely, the omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence of the Christian God must be established by other means. This is why the cosmological argument has provided support for Islam and Judaism, as well as the theism of Ancient Greek philosophers. However, given the validity of this argument, certain worldviews are already shown to be false, namely, atheism and atheism-dependant worldviews such as Buddhism, as well as the eternal and cyclical religions such as Hinduism.

A final, and common, objection is that God too, thus requires a cause. It seems that a universe that exists within time cannot be eternal. However, a being outside of time might possibly be eternal, thus requiring no cause for its existence.

¹ While we cannot conceive of a time without a beginning, we can conceive of a time without end. A person cannot count down from infinity, but taking all limits out of consideration, it seems a person could count upwards from zero indefinitely. This is what is called a potential infinite: This hypothetical person could continue to count forever, but of course, can never attain infinity.