

Issues with the Cosmological Argument

What you need to know:

Issues that may arise for the cosmological arguments, including:

- the possibility of an infinite series
- Hume's objection to the 'causal principle'
- the argument commits the fallacy of composition (Russell)
- the impossibility of a necessary being (Hume and Russell).

The possibility of an infinite series

Mathematical possibility: Cantor created set theory to solve paradoxes, such as a hotel with an infinite number of rooms.

Scientific possibility: New theories of the universe imply infinity e.g. The Big Bang / Big Crunch hypothesis suggests the universe expands but eventually collapses in on itself before another Big Bang, and so on for infinity. The multiverse hypothesis suggests there are an infinite number of multiple universes, which exist in parallel.

Logical possibility: Aquinas may be confusing a long chain of causes with an infinite chain of causes. Aquinas argues that if motion/causation went back infinitely, then there would be no start to the chain and hence no motion/causation, which is evidentially false. However, although this might be true for a very long chain, it is not true for an infinite series. An infinite series of causes has no first cause that can be removed, and so the chain continues to exist.



Possible Exam Questions

- Outline Hume's objection to the 'causal principle' (5 marks)
- Outline Russell's complaint that the cosmological argument commits the fallacy of composition (5 marks)
- Outline Hume and Russell's claims that a necessary being is impossible (5 marks)

- Does the cosmological argument prove that God exists? (25 marks)

Hume's objection to the causal principle

Is the causal principle a matter of fact?

According to Hume, we see that A is followed by B but this does not prove that A CAUSES B. It is due to 'habit' that we make assumptions about causal links. Furthermore we can not experience the cause of the universe and therefore we are wrong to try and say what caused it – it is beyond our epistemological limits!

P1: If we see two types of event (X and Y) constantly connected then our mind is led by the observation of one (X) to expect the other (Y).

P2: the sense of expectation provides our idea of a necessary connection between X and Y.

C: This idea of a necessary connection gives us our belief that X causes Y.

Moreover, he argues that just because we have seen X and Y constantly conjoined in the past, does not give us grounds to assume they will be conjoined in the future, as we cannot observe the future.

Is the causal principle a relation of ideas?

P1: If 'every event has a cause' can be known a priori, then denying it would lead to a contradiction.

P2: 'Not every event has a cause' is not contradictory, as we can conceive of events that have no cause.

C: 'Every event has a cause' cannot be known a priori.

Russell uses an example from physics (quantum tunnelling) to show that some people, namely scientists, really can conceive of events without a cause.

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The Fallacy of Composition

Hume argued that you cannot infer from 'every individual event has a cause' to the conclusion that 'the whole universe has a cause'. For Hume, if you have successfully explained a long series of events, then it is unreasonable to ask "But what caused the whole chain?"

Russell builds on this, arguing that we know about causes within the universe but this does not entitle us to move to a cause of the universe as a whole.

It is one thing to state every human being has a mother, but one cannot move from this to say that there is a mother for the whole human race.

The impossibility of a necessary being

Hume argues that we can have knowledge of just two sorts of things:
the relations between ideas (later called a priori or analytic)
matters of fact (later called a posteriori or synthetic)

P1: A Relation of Ideas exists where its denial entails a contradiction.

P2: Nothing that can be distinctly conceived entails a contradiction. For any being that we can conceive of as existent, we can also distinctly conceive of that being as non-existent.

C: Therefore, there isn't any being whose non-existence entails a contradiction.

As a result, cosmological arguments from contingency (e.g. Aquinas' 3rd Way and Leibniz's argument) which argue there must be a necessary being are false.

Russell put this simpler:

P1: The concept of 'necessary' can only be applied to propositions, and in particular to propositions that are analytic.

P2: An analytic proposition is one that is self-contradictory to deny

P3: It is not self-contradictory to say 'God does not exist.'

C: 'God exists' is not analytic and is not a necessary proposition.

Key terms

Causal Principle: The belief that every event has a cause

Proposition: a statement or assertion.

