

The Cosmological Argument

Samuel Clarke was a contemporary of Leibniz and Newton. His argument for the existence of God goes as follows:

1. Something exists.
2. Something cannot come from nothing.
3. Therefore, something has always existed.
4. Now, it may be the case that something has always existed in one of two ways: (1) There is some eternal, non-dependent thing that has always existed, or (2) The series of finite, dependent causes is infinite and extends backwards forever without beginning.
5. Option (2) by itself is impossible. There cannot be ONLY “dependent beings”. For, if all the things that exist were dependent beings, then the entire collection of dependent beings would lack a cause or explanation for itself.
6. Therefore, option (1) is true. Namely, there is some eternal, non-dependent thing. Call this a “self-existent being”, or “God”.

1. Something exists: This should be clear enough. I certainly exist, for example.

2. Something cannot come from nothing: Clarke suggests that it would be a contradiction to assert that “Something comes from nothing.” For in this case, you would be asserting that “Something is caused” while at the same time asserting that “Nothing is causing anything.” Or, “Something is being affected,” while at the same time asserting that “Nothing is affecting anything.”

This premise assumes that a principle of Leibniz’ called the “Principle of Sufficient Reason” (PSR) is true. This principle states: Everything MUST have some reason, cause, or explanation. So, if something exists, it MUST have a cause. If some fact is true, there MUST be a reason why it is true.

3. Something has always existed: From this, we can easily see that there has ALWAYS been something. For, if there was ever a time when there was absolutely nothing, then whatever now exists would have had to have come from it—i.e., something would have come from nothing—which is impossible.

4. Either an infinite being or an infinite chain: If something has always existed, then either there was some eternal, self-existent thing (i.e., one that contains the reason for its existence INSIDE of itself) that brought about the finite things, or else ALL the things that exist are finite and dependent (i.e., ones with a reason for their existence OUTSIDE of themselves), and the series of them goes back forever, without beginning.

5. An infinite chain of finite, dependent things is, by itself, impossible: Clarke uses something like the following justification for premise 5:

- The justification for premise 5: Consider the chain of events leading up to yourself: You were caused by your parents, and they by their parents, and so on. And your ancestor was caused by some event or other on the Earth, and the Earth was caused by some event or other in our solar system, etc. If this series of events just STOPPED at some point, we would have reached some first cause. But, this first cause would either have to have NO cause (which is impossible) or be self-caused (in which case, there IS a self-existent being).

But, you may ask, what if the chain of events went back infinitely? What if time has no beginning, and it is dependent beings all the way back? Then, for every being, there WOULD be an explanation or a cause; namely, the prior being.

Even so, about the FACT that there is an infinite series: Either it has no explanation (which is impossible), or its explanation is grounded in some self-existing being (in which case, there IS a self-existent being).

6. God exists: The conclusion is that there has to exist one independent being to ground the explanation of everything else. This problem is still very relevant today. For today, it seems as if we are faced with only four options:

- The universe has a beginning, but there is no explanation for why the universe began to exist.
- The universe has a beginning, and the reason the universe exists is because it was caused by something outside of this finite series (i.e., God?).
- The universe has always existed, and extends back in time infinitely, but there is no explanation for why the universe exists.
- The universe has always existed, and extends back in time infinitely, and the reason this infinite series exists is because it was caused by something outside of the infinite series (i.e., God?).

Clarke would argue that only the God options are coherent. In any case, ALL of these options are absurd. ...But there are no other options.