

“Why is there something rather than nothing?” – Leibniz

“The fundamental question of metaphysics is, ‘Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?’” – Heidegger

The Cosmological Argument

1. Three Sorts of Being: Logically, whatever exists, it must fall into one of three categories: Either (1) It has some reason, cause, or explanation for its existence, or (2) It does not. And, of those things that DO have some explanation for their existence, that explanation would either have to be: (a) Internal to the thing, or (b) external to the thing. So, the following list is exhaustive. Logically, anything that exists:

- Has NO cause or explanation whatsoever (call this an **uncaused being**),
- Has some cause or explanation OUTSIDE of itself (call this a **dependent being**), or
- Has some cause or explanation INSIDE of itself (call this a **self-existent being**).

2. Uncaused Beings Are Impossible: The following principle is highly plausible:

The Principle of Sufficient Reason: There must be a reason or explanation (a) of the existence of any being, and (b) of every fact whatsoever.

This seems fairly plausible. Look at all of the things around you. They all have causes, or explanations, or REASONS for their existence. You were caused by your parents. That chair was made by a chair manufacturer. The atoms in your body were formed in the centers of stars. That slamming sound happened because someone dropped a book. Everything has an explanation. This is the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR).

But, then, if we return to our list of the three imaginable types of beings, we see that one of those types turns out to be impossible; namely, if PSR(a) is true, then UNCAUSED beings are impossible. The sorts of things with no cause or explanation whatsoever are simply not possible. There is nothing in the universe like that, nor could there be.

So, we are left with only TWO possible sorts of things:

- **Dependent Being:** A being that has some cause or explanation OUTSIDE of itself.
- **Self-Existent Being:** A being that has some cause or explanation INSIDE of itself.

[[Question:](#) What in the heck is a self-existent being? That doesn't make any sense.

Let me try to motivate the concept. Perhaps it is not so very counter-intuitive if we consider an analogous case: Contingent vs. Necessary TRUTHS. Contingently truths are those that could be true, and could be false. We might say that they do not contain the reason for their own truth within themselves. For instance, <Chad exists> is contingently true (i.e., it is true, but it could have been false—in fact it WILL be false again someday). That proposition doesn't explain its own truth. Rather, its “**truthmaker**” (i.e., the reason

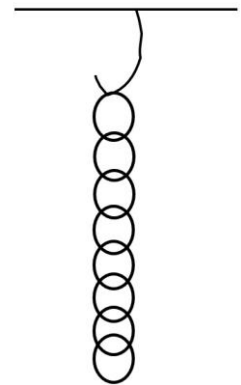
for its truth, or the THING THAT MAKES IT TRUE) is me, Chad, the physical object. So, the truthmaker for <Chad exists> is something EXTERNAL to that proposition. Contrast this with a necessary truth—i.e., a truth that CANNOT be false—such as <All bachelors are male>. This proposition is necessarily true. It did not start being true, and it will never stop being true. It is impossible for it to be false. We might say that it contains the reason for its own truth WITHIN itself. Namely, the proposition is true because “bachelor” just MEANS “unmarried male”. Its truthmaker is in some sense INTERNAL to itself. ...Now imagine that truths are not the only things that are like this, but that existence can be like this too. That’s what a self-existent being is like. Whoa... Dude...]

3. A World With ONLY Dependent (Contingent) Beings is Impossible: The next claim focuses on PSR(b), and claims that a world cannot contain ONLY dependent beings.

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. Now, either this series of causes (1) just STOPS at some point, or (2) it goes on forever and ever.

If (1), then as we go back in the series of causes, we must reach some first cause. But, this first cause would either have to have NO cause or be self-caused. But, by PSR(a), it’s IMPOSSIBLE for there to be something that has NO cause or explanation. So, that first cause must be the sort of being that we called “self-existent” (i.e., one that is SELF-explained). So, there must be at least one self-existent being.

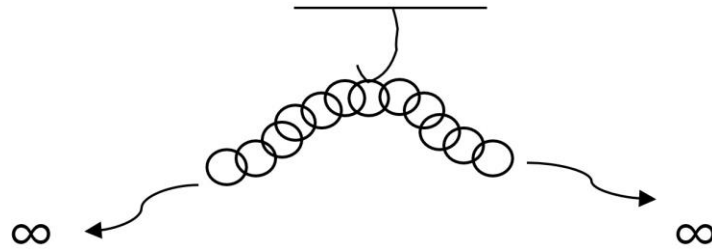
We might liken this to a chain. Each of the links in the chain represents a dependent being. Imagine that the chain is hanging, suspended in mid-air. Such a chain simply cannot hang from NOTHING. It needs an anchor, or a “hook” so to speak, to hang from. That first link, or hook, cannot ITSELF be a dependent being—or else IT TOO would need something to anchor it. So, it must be a self-existent being (i.e., one which contains an explanation or reason for its own existence within itself). This follows from PSR(a).



Alternatively, (2) is the case, and the series of causes goes back and back forever and ever, without beginning. Now, since every member of the series has a cause before it, it follows that every member of the series is a dependent being. But why would there need to be a self-existent being in addition to the beginningless series of dependent beings? If the series *has no beginning*, it doesn’t require a cause or explanation, right?

Reply: Wrong. According to PSR(b), even if the chain were beginningless, we would still need an explanation for the existence of the ENTIRE CHAIN. For, this fact would be true: <The collection of dependent beings exists>. But, what is the explanation of this fact?

PSR(b) requires that there be one. Obviously, this explanation cannot itself be a dependent being, for then IT TOO would require an explanation outside of itself. So, the explanation for the entire chain would still have to be a self-existent being. Like this:



In argument form:

The Cosmological Argument for the Existence of God

1. Something exists.
2. Everything that exists is either a dependent being or a self-existent being; PSR(a).
3. It is impossible for there to be all and only dependent beings; PSR(b). *
4. Therefore, at least one self-existent being exists (and this is God).

* Justification for Premise 3: Either (a) the series of dependent beings has a beginning, or (b) it does not (i.e., there is an infinite, beginningless series of dependent beings).

- If (a), then—by PSR(a)—the first cause must be a self-existent being (it cannot be dependent for then it could not be first).
- If (b), then—by PSR(b)—the series itself would require some external explanation. But, the explanation for the collection of dependent beings cannot itself be a dependent being. Therefore, it must be a self-existent being.

4. **Objections:** Let's look at some criticisms.

(1) Denying P3: An Uncaused Series: It is not clear that a beginningless series of dependent beings requires an external explanation—as if the collection of dependent beings were ITSELF a dependent being! [*Collections often have attributes that their individual members do NOT have. For instance, the collection of all sentient beings is not sentient; the set of all numbers is not itself a number; and so on. So, perhaps the set of all dependent things is not itself dependent, but rather self-existent?*]

Imagine that 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. But, it seems true that, *to provide an explanation for every PART of a set of things JUST IS to provide an explanation for the WHOLE set.* For instance, if I have a collection of 5 keys, and I gave you a complete explanation of the causes and reasons of EACH individual key, it would be rather odd to then ask, "But, what is the explanation for the whole five?" For, the explanation for the whole JUST IS the 5 explanations for all of the individual parts. But, now consider the infinite series of causes: Every member of that infinite series of beings DOES have an explanation; namely, the prior cause. That is, for every individual

in the series, the one before it explains its existence. But: **If every PART of a series is explained, then it follows that the WHOLE series is automatically explained.**

If that is correct, then perhaps the entire SET of dependent beings is itself self-existent, even though all of its members are dependent. In short, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Reply: The present objection confuses two similar, but importantly different claims:

- (i) The existence of every dependent being (individually) is explained.
- (ii) The existence of all dependent beings (as a totality) is explained.

It is NOT the case that an explanation for every member of some group constitutes an explanation for the group itself. Consider the keychain example. Even if I give the explanation for all five of the keys on the chain, it actually DOES make sense to then ask, "But, why are there any keys at all?" And the answer would be something that is not itself a key: Namely, it would be US—we human beings, and our desire to protect certain belongings, are the explanation for why there are any keys at all.

Notice that we must go OUTSIDE of the set of keys in order to explain why there are any keys at all. So too, we must also go outside of the set of dependent beings in order to explain why there are any dependent beings at all. And this is true EVEN IF the set of dependent beings is infinite, extending forever back into the past, such that no member of the series is left without a cause for its existence. Rowe writes,

We cannot explain why there are (or have ever been) dependent beings by appealing to all the members of the infinite collection of dependent beings. For if the question to be answered is why there are (or ever have been) any dependent beings at all, we cannot answer that question by noting that there always have been dependent beings, each one accounting for the existence of some other dependent being. (158)

The objection assumes that an answer to (i) counts as an answer to (ii). But, this simply is not the case. Even if each INDIVIDUAL dependent being is explained—satisfying PSR(a)—this fact still remains: <Dependent beings exist>. If this has no explanation, then PSR(b) still has not been satisfied. The only candidate is a self-existent being.

(2) Denying P2: Uncaused Beings: This whole time we have been assuming that a thing with NO cause or explanation is impossible, and that EVERY fact has an explanation. But, PSR might not be true. Maybe some things DON'T require a cause or an explanation. In fact, some experiments in quantum physics seem to suggest that this is actually the case. This is not an incoherent position. For instance, the idea of something popping into existence with no cause at all seems coherent enough. I can imagine it happening without imagining anything that is a contradiction. If that's right, then perhaps the universe doesn't NEED a cause. Maybe it's just here, with no explanation whatsoever.

Reply: PSR is self-evident. Just by reflecting on the matter, we can see that EVERYTHING has a reason. This is as plain as the fact that two physical objects cannot be located in exactly the same place at exactly the same time. Or, even if it is not self-evident, it is still a principle that we all ASSUME is true every day, always. PSR simply cannot be avoided.

[Is this satisfying? Even if PSR holds for every object that we regularly interact with, is it obvious that it must also hold for things like entire UNIVERSES, or infinite series of dependent beings?]

(3) Self-Existent ≠ God (against the conclusion): EVEN IF the entire argument is sound, all that it demonstrates is that there exists something called a “self-existent” being outside of the universe. To add that this self-existent being is God is a much stronger claim. Why does something that contains a reason for its own existence need to be God-like? Why can’t we just claim that the UNIVERSE is a self-existent being?

Reply: As we saw above, the only way in which something could be self-existent is if its explanation were somehow INSIDE itself. We might say that its essence, or nature, somehow GUARANTEES its own existence, such that its essence would need to somehow BE or INCLUDE existence. So, this is a very strange sort of being indeed—unlike anything we have ever observed in nature.

But, surely we can say SOMETHING about it: we must at least admit that a being that caused all of the dependent beings must be VERY powerful, and outside of matter, energy, space, and time, and therefore eternal and immaterial. That’s STARTING to sound like a god.

The cosmological argument is just the beginning. Theists often go further, combining it with teleological (the universe shows evidence of design and so has an intelligent designer) and moral arguments (moral laws require the existence of a moral law-giver). They then add that such a being would also need to be incredibly knowledgeable, be capable of having a purpose, or design for its creation (i.e., the sort of being which has intentions), while also being the source of morality (and so be morally good). This is very close to the standard idea of God.

[An excellent video of Leibniz’s version of the cosmological argument can be found [here](#).]

Conclusion: In the end, note that you have only three options, all of them crazy:

- (1) There is a beginning, a first thing, but ultimately NO explanation for this.
- (2) There is no beginning; the chain of beings extends back infinitely, and ultimately there is NO explanation for it.
- (3) There is (at least one) self-existent being; a being whose essence is such that it guarantees its own existence, and that thing caused everything else.

[A helpful historical aside: Medieval Islamic philosopher Avicenna believed that our three categories of being (self-existent, dependent, and uncaused) corresponded to necessary, contingent, and impossible beings, respectively. We have discussed two of these:

Necessary Being: A being that cannot fail to exist. It *must* exist. Positing its non-existence results in a contradiction.

Contingent (i.e., Merely Possible) Being: A thing that can either exist, or fail to exist. Neither positing its non-existence nor its existence entails a contradiction.

Avicenna argued that that all contingent beings require a cause for their existence, while necessary beings do not. They have no cause. Why is this? First, consider that the difference between the essence and the existence of a thing:

Essence: *What* a thing is; i.e., the reality by virtue of which a thing is what it is.

Existence: *That* a thing is; i.e., a thing actually existing in reality.

The essence of a triangle is its triangularity—i.e., to be a 3-sided, 3-angled thing. You can contemplate the essence of, or the WHAT IT IS to be, a triangle—but this will not tell you THAT a triangle exists in reality. Its essence doesn't necessitate its own existence. There's nothing about the nature of triangularity that guarantees that any triangles exists. Its essence is INDIFFERENT to existence, so to speak. So, it needs something external to itself to "tip the scales" toward existence by causing that essence to be imprinted onto some physical stuff.

In short, just by considering the essence of a triangle, we see that it needs a cause in order to exist. It needs existence to be ADDED TO its essence in order to exist in actuality (so it's possible for any triangle to fail to exist, since its cause could have failed). Similarly, there is nothing about YOU that GUARANTEES your existence. You needed something to bring you INTO existence in order to exist; namely, your parents

On the other hand, a necessary being is one whose essence is such that it DOES necessitate its own existence. It doesn't need existence ADDED to its essence in order to exist. And this can only be because its essence IS existence. Any being with THAT sort of essence simply MUST exist. For, *what it is* is pure existence. Thus, it's impossible for such a being to NOT exist.

Does that make sense? The following may help: Though we only presented two categories of being above, Avicenna says that, conceptually, we can divide existents into THREE categories: (1) The necessary, (2) The possible, and (3) The impossible.

An impossible being would be one such that positing its existence results in a contradiction; i.e., its essence is such that it necessitates NON-existence. Example: A **square circle**. The essence of (i.e., the "what it is" to be) a square circle is to be *a figure composed of four sides of equal lengths, at right angles to one another, such that every point of the figure is equidistant from some central point*. It is clear that positing the existence of such a thing results in a contradiction. Its essence guarantees its non-existence.

A **necessary being** is the opposite of this. **Positing the NON-existence of a such a thing results in a contradiction. Its essence guarantees its existence.**

This may help us to understand why the explanation of the existence of a self-existent (i.e., non-dependent) being is INTERNAL to itself. Quite simply, its essence GUARANTEES its own existence (perhaps because its essence IS or INCLUDES existence, for instance).]