

The Cosmological Argument

The Cosmological Argument is an argument that attempts to demonstrate the existence of God using only one starting assumption: Something exists.

1. Three sorts of being: Whatever exists, it must fall into one of three categories. For, of everything that exists, we can make the following distinctions: (1) Either has some reason, cause, or explanation for its existence, or (2) It does not. 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, we get a complete list of three ways that a thing could be, with regard to its existence. A thing could:

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

This list is complete. There is no other way for a thing to be.

2. Uncaused Beings Are Impossible: The Cosmological Argument begins with a principle about the nature of causation:

The Principle of Sufficient Reason: (a) Everything that exists must have some explanation (i.e., some REASON) for its existence; (b) and every fact that is true must have some reason for why it is true.

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

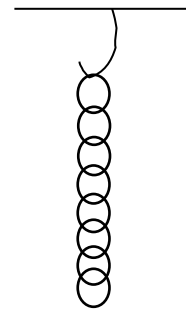
So, we are left with only TWO possible sorts of things:

- **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.

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

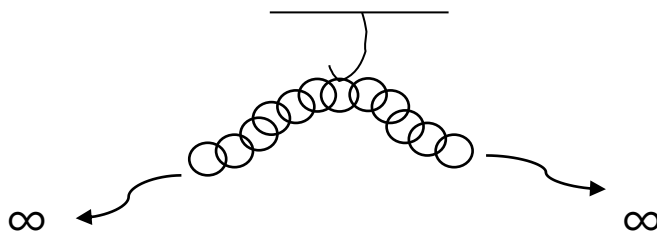
Consider the chain of events leading up to yourself: You were caused by your parents, and they by their parents, and so on. And your ancestor was caused by some event or other on the Earth, and the Earth was caused by some event or other in our solar system, etc. If this series of events just STOPPED at some point, we would have reached some first cause. But, this first cause would either have to have NO cause or be self-caused. But, 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).



Objection: But, what if the series of explanations, or causes, were made up entirely of dependent beings, AND HAS NO BEGINNING? A chain that extends back infinitely requires no first cause, and therefore no self-existent being.

Reply: If the entire chain were infinite, we would still need an explanation for the existence of the ENTIRE CHAIN. For, this fact would be true: <An infinite chain exists>. But, what is the explanation of this fact? PSR(b) requires that there be one. Now, 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.



4. The Argument: The cosmological argument is then given as follows:

1. The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) is true.
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).

Justification: Either (a) there is a first being which explains all of the others, or (b) there is not (i.e., there is an infinite, beginningless series of beings).

(a) If there is a first being, then it must be a self-existent being.

(b) If there is a beginningless series, then the fact <There is an infinite series of beings> would require some external explanation; namely, a self-existent being.

4. Therefore, at least one self-existent being exists.
5. The self-existent being is God.

5. Objections: There are a number of ways that this argument may be attacked.

(1) Premise 3 is false: Even if PSR is true, it still seems possible that all of the beings be dependent beings, and require no self-existent being for their explanation, so long as the chain of causes has no beginning. 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.

This objection requires the following assumption: **To provide an explanation for every PART in a group of things JUST IS to provide an explanation for the whole itself.**

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?" Rather, the explanation for the whole JUST IS the 5 explanations for all of the individual parts. But, every part of the infinite series of beings DOES have an explanation; namely, the prior cause. That is, for every individual in the series, the one before it is its explanation. If every PART of the series has an explanation, then it seems to follow that the whole requires no FURTHER explanation.

Reply: 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.

Furthermore, 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. 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)

Basically, the present objection confuses two entirely different claims:

C1: There is an explanation for the existence of every single being (all of which are dependent).

C2: There is an explanation for why there are any dependent beings at all.

The objection assumes that an answer to C1 counts as an answer to C2. But, this simply is not the case. Even if each INDIVIDUAL dependent being is explained, this fact still remains: An infinite series of dependent beings exists. According to PSR(b), this fact still requires an explanation. Now, either the fact has NO explanation (but this is ruled out by PSR), or its explanation is grounded in some self-existing being (in which case, there IS a self-existent being).

(2) Premise 1 (PSR) is false: 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. 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.

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 must ASSUME is true every day, in everything that we do. PSR simply cannot be avoided.

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

(3) The conclusion is false: 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? What IS a self-existent being anyway?

Reply: First, regarding what a being that contains an explanation of its own existence within itself even IS, consider: Such a being would be one that could not be created, nor destroyed. It just IS. Furthermore, it explains its own existence.

This is not so very counter-intuitive if we consider an analogous case: Necessarily true propositions. Now, ordinary, contingently true propositions do not contain the reason for their own truth within themselves. For instance, <Chad exists> is contingently true, and 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. Contrast this with an analytically true proposition such as <All bachelors are male>. This proposition is NECESSARILY true. It did not start being true, and it will never stop being true. Furthermore, 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 that, but that existence can be like that too.

Second, regarding the claim that the self-existent being is God: Surely, we must at least admit that a being that caused all of the contingent beings must be VERY powerful, and outside of matter, energy, space, and time, and therefore eternal and immaterial. But, once coupled with certain conclusions drawn from the teleological argument and the nature of morality (in the next few units), we can also conclude that such a being would need to be incredibly knowledgeable, be capable of having a purpose, or design for its creation (and therefore be an INTENTIONAL being), and furthermore be the source of morality (and so be morally good). This is very close to our idea of God.