

Descartes' cosmological argument¹

Descartes provides three arguments for the existence of God, his Trademark argument, a cosmological argument, and an ontological argument. Cosmological arguments for God's existence start from (some version of) the question 'Why does anything exist?'.

THE ARGUMENT

At this point in the *Meditations*, the only thing that Descartes knows to exist is himself. Why so? Descartes is seeking to find out what he can know as true. To achieve this, he has decided to avoid believing anything that is not 'completely certain and indubitable'. He then argues that he can doubt his senses, his memory and even that he has a body (note that these are all a posteriori claims we would use perception to establish). Descartes supposes that all that he perceives and remembers is an illusion; that he has no body or senses at all; that in believing anything else, he is being deceived by a 'supremely powerful and cunning deceiver', an 'evil demon'. The demon could make it seem that he sees a tree when he doesn't, that he has a body when he doesn't, and so on. But he has managed to establish his own existence as a 'thinker', and is now meditating on this and the implications of the concepts that he finds in his mind.

So, Descartes asks what causes his existence. As the argument is long and complicated, I have divided it into sections.

- P1. If I cause my own existence, I would give myself all perfections (omnipotence, omniscience, etc.).
- P2. I do not have all perfections.
- C1. Therefore, I am not the cause of my existence.

- P3. A lifespan is composed of independent parts, such that my existing at one time does not entail or cause my existing later.
- P4. My existence is not uncaused.
- C2. Therefore, some cause is needed to keep me in existence.
- P5. I do not have the power to cause my continued existence through time.
- C3. Therefore, I depend on something else to exist.

- P6. I am a thinking thing and I have the idea of God.
- P7. There must be as much reality in the cause as in the effect. (See the handout 'Descartes' Trademark Argument' for discussion of this claim.)

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2 and Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2

- C4. Therefore, what causes my existence must be a thinking thing and have the idea of God.
- P8. Either what causes me is the cause of its own existence or its existence is caused by another cause.
- P9. If its existence is caused by another cause, then the point repeats: this second cause is in turn either the cause of its own existence or its existence is caused by another cause.
- P10. There cannot be an infinite sequence of causes.
- C5. Therefore, some cause must be the cause of its own existence.
- P11. What is the cause of its own existence (and so, directly or indirectly, the cause of my existence) is God.
- C6. Therefore, God exists.

Descartes adds a further argument, picking up (P3) and (C2).

- C2. Some cause is needed to keep me in existence.
- P12. There cannot be an infinite chain of causes because what caused my existence also causes my continued existence in the present.
- P13. My parents, or any other supposed cause of my existence, do not keep me in existence.
- P14. The only cause that could keep me in existence is God.
- C7. Therefore, God exists.

The cause of continued existence

Why does Descartes say that not only the start of his existence, but his continued existence through time, needs to be caused (C2)? For instance, we might object that my continued existence doesn't require a cause, because nothing changes - I simply continue to exist. If I cease to exist, that requires a cause.

But this misunderstands both causation and continued existence. I am sitting on a chair - nothing is changing. But there is a cause of this continued state of affairs, namely gravity and the rigidity of the chair. Should either of those standing conditions change, then I would no longer be sitting on the chair. I'd either be floating (no gravity) or sitting on the ground (collapsed chair). That people don't die at any given instant is the result of whatever it is that keeps them alive. Therefore, we should accept that my continued existence does require a cause. It is worth noting that what causes my continued existence must itself continue to exist - it can't be a cause in the past, since my continued existence must be caused from moment to moment (just as my sitting on a chair is).

We might object, however, that my continued existence is simply dependent on the immediately preceding state of affairs, and so we don't need to say that what caused me to exist in the first place also keeps me in existence. For instance, my bodily processes keep me alive at any moment, but they didn't give me life.

But, first, this forgets that Descartes is talking about his self, which is his mind, not his body. Descartes has argued that he, his mind, is an entirely separate

substance from the body. So what keeps a mind in existence through time? If it was something in his mind itself, he would know, he claims (C1). If he could cause his own existence at the next moment, he would give himself all perfections (P1). And it can't be his parents - they only gave existence to him originally, but don't keep him in existence. Second, even if we allowed that our bodily processes keep us alive from moment to moment, what are they causally dependent on? This line of thought triggers the argument from (P7). Bodily processes aren't the cause of their own continuation. If Descartes' existence is causally dependent on something else, and an infinite regress of causal dependency is impossible, then, Descartes argues that something must exist that is not causally dependent on anything else for its existence. This is God.

EMPIRICIST RESPONSES TO DESCARTES' COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Descartes assumes that his existence has a cause (P4). He also assumes that an infinite series of causes is impossible. We can raise doubts about both claims.

Hume on the causal principle

The causal principle is the claim that everything has a cause. But is it true? Must everything be sustained in existence by causal dependency on something else? Hume argues in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, that we cannot know whether everything has a cause.

The claims 'everything has a cause' and 'something cannot come out of nothing' are not analytically true. 'Some things do not have a cause' is not a *contradiction in terms* like 'Some bachelors are married' is. Of course, from our experience, we have good reason to think that everything has a cause, but this is still only a contingent truth; it may be false. We cannot show that it holds without exception. Thus (P4) and (C2), we may object that it is possible that Descartes' existence is uncaused; we cannot show otherwise by rational intuition and deduction. What causes what is a matter of fact, and this can only be established by experience.

Second, if we can't know that it is impossible for something to come out of nothing, then we can't know, either, that a cause must contain at least as much 'reality' as its effect. Rather, 'anything may produce anything'. What causes what is something we must discover from experience; we cannot know it by a priori reason. Thus to (P7), we can object that we cannot know that a cause must have as much 'reality' as its effect. What the cause of a 'thinking thing' is we must discover through experience, and cannot know not a priori. There is no a priori reason to think that matter cannot produce thought, and experience would indicate that matter does indeed produce thought. So we cannot infer that either the first cause or what sustains Descartes' continued existence as a mind must itself be a mind, let alone one that has the perfections attributed to God.

The possibility of an infinite series

Descartes claims that there cannot be an infinite series of causes. Before going further with this thought, can't we just cut it short by invoking science? We don't need to show that an infinite series of causes is impossible, because cosmology shows that the universe started with the Big Bang, just under 14 billion years ago.

However, there are two problems with this response. First, it deals with a sequence of causes in time, while Descartes is interested in what keeps him in existence now. Second, it doesn't get rid of the problem of an infinite series of causes. The universe isn't the kind of thing that is self-sustaining - not itself causally dependent on anything. We can ask what caused or causes the universe? At this point, the possibility of an infinite series arises afresh. Even if *this* universe has a cause, perhaps it was caused by a previous (or another) universe, and so on, *infinitely*. Current speculation in physics suggests several different ways in which universes might be related to each other, including the idea that our universe is just one aspect of an infinite 'multiverse'. But could there be an infinite series of causes in this sense?

An infinite series is not a very long series. Infinity is not a very large number. It is not a number at all. An infinite series of causes, quite literally, has no beginning. Because the universe exists, to claim that it is part of an infinite series of causes is to claim that an actual infinity - something that is in fact infinite - exists. This is quite different from talking about the idea of infinity. The idea of infinity makes sense; but does it make sense to think that something infinite actually exists?

Here's a popular example. Suppose there is a hotel with infinite rooms. Even when the hotel is completely full, it can still take more people! You cannot add any number to infinity and get a bigger number: $\infty + 1 = \infty$. Suppose, when the hotel is full, infinitely more people show up. They can all be accommodated! $\infty + \infty = \infty$. But it is impossible for the hotel to be full and still have room for more guests. So there cannot be an 'actual' infinity.

We can apply the point to an infinite series of causes. Each thing that begins to exist in the universe - stars, planets, people - is caused to exist by something before it, and whatever caused each thing is itself caused by something before it. But if there is an infinite chain of causes, that series of causes never has a starting point. The process never gets started, because it has always been going on. So each new cause doesn't add one more cause to the series, since $\infty + 1 = \infty$. But surely each cause is one more cause. And we would never have reached the point in the series of causes at which we are now if it were an infinite series. How could anything exist if there were an infinite number of levels of sustaining cause below it? So we have good reason to think that an infinity of causes is impossible.

In response, we may appeal again to Hume. The claim 'there cannot be an infinite series of causes' is not an analytic truth, nor can we have experience of this matter. It seems conceivable, therefore, that something has always existed, and each thing has in turn causes the next. We cannot infer, then, that something that is its own cause - God - exists and is the cause of everything else.

But this is too quick. An actual infinity (of causes or hotel rooms or whatever) leads to paradoxes. If these paradoxes cannot be resolved, then they are genuine self-contradictions (e.g. that each new cause adds to the number of causes and that it does not). Anything that entails a contradiction must be false. So, if we cannot solve the paradoxes, Hume is wrong: we can deduce that there cannot be an infinite series of causes. We do not need experience to establish the claim.

But perhaps the paradoxes are the result of limitations on how we are thinking about infinity. Mathematicians (following Georg Cantor) argue that we are mistaken to apply intuitions about finite numbers to infinity, and new ways of thinking are needed (e.g. about different 'sizes' of infinity).