Cosmological arguments from contingency[1]

The question at the heart of the cosmological argument is 'why does anything exist?' The argument is that unless God exists, this question is unanswerable. In this handout, we consider two arguments, from Aquinas and Leibniz, that develop the thought in terms of contingent and necessary existence.

AQUINAS' THIRD WAY

Aquinas' 'Third Way' is a third cosmological argument. His two previous cosmological arguments appeal to concepts of causation. His third appeals to ideas of 'possibility' or 'contingency' and 'necessity'. To understand the argument, we need to distinguish between contingent existence and necessary existence. Something exists contingently if it is possible for it to exist and for it not to exist. Something exists necessarily if it must exist, i.e. if it is impossible for it not to exist.

We can summarise Aquinas' argument, presented in his *Summa Theologica*, like this:

P1.   Things in the universe exist contingently.
P2.   If it is possible for something not to exist, then at some time, it does not exist.
C1.   If everything exists contingently, then it is possible that at some time, there was nothing in existence.
P3.   If at some time, nothing was in existence, nothing could begin to exist.
C2.   Since things do exist, there was never nothing in existence.
C3.   Therefore, there is something that does not exist contingently, but must exist.
P4.   This necessary being is God.
C4.   God exists.

Discussion

(P3) states an implication the causal principle, the claim that everything has a cause. In *A Treatise of Human Nature, David* Hume argues that the causal principle is not analytic; we can deny it without contradicting ourselves. (That every *effect* has a cause is analytic. But is everything an effect?) Without contradiction, we can assert 'something can come out of nothing'. Logically, this claim may be true or false. That means that these claims are not only are they not analytic, they are also not *certain*. If they are not analytic, we can only know them through experience. Now, our experience supports these claims; they are probably true. But experience cannot establish that a claim holds *universally*, without exception.

So we can't know (for certain) that everything, without exception, has a cause. As a result, we cannot know that (P3) is true.

(P2) is puzzling, and looks false. Just because it is possible for something not to exist doesn't mean that it actually does not exist at some time. We have no reason to think that everything that is possible actually occurs. It may be that Aquinas is thinking of things that we have experience of, since he talks of our experience of things coming into existence and going out of existence. And of these things, it seems true of any of them, that at some time, they did or will not exist. Alternatively, Aquinas might reply that if there was something that always existed, then we need a very peculiar explanation for how this could be so given that its existence is not necessary.

A similar point, however, may be made about the inference to (C2). We should agree that it is possible that, if everything exists contingently, then at some point, nothing exists. But, again, from the fact that it is possible, it doesn't follow that there actually was nothing in existence. It is equally possible that there has always been, and always will be, some contingent thing in existence. However, this response presupposes an infinite sequence of contingent things, and as such would face the difficulties of claiming that an actual infinity exist.

LEIBNIZ'S ARGUMENT FROM CONTINGENCY

In his *Monadology*, Leibniz refocuses the argument from contingent existence. We don't need the difficult premises in Aquinas' argument to make the argument work. We can put aside the question of whether nothing ever existed, and even whether the causal principle is true. Suppose that Big Bang was the beginning of the universe, and even that it was uncaused. Stopping there is unsatisfactory. We have no explanation of the Big Bang. As Aquinas says, everything in the universe – and we may want to add, the universe itself – exists contingently. It doesn't have to exist. So there is no reason why the Big Bang had to occur. It was possible that it never took place. So why did it occur?

Leibniz begins his argument with a commitment to the idea that there must be an answer to that question.

P1.   The principle of sufficient reason: every true fact has an explanation that provides a sufficient reason for why things are as they are and not otherwise (even if in most cases we can't know what the reason is).
P2.   There are two kinds of truth: those of reasoning and those of fact.
P3.   Truths of reasoning (e.g. mathematical truths) are necessary, and their opposite is impossible. When a truth is necessary, the reason for it can be found by analysis. We understand the reason for it by understanding why it is necessary.
P4.   Truths of fact (e.g. truths about physical objects) are contingent, and their opposite is possible. For contingent truths, reasons can be given in more and more detail, because of the immense variety of things in Nature. But all this detail only brings in other contingent facts. For example, if we want to explain why I am as tall as I am, we have to refer to many factors, such as

genes and upbringing, but each of these truths is itself contingent.

C1.   Each of these further contingent facts also needs to be explained. For example, why do I have the genes I do, why did I have the upbringing I did?

C2.   Therefore, when we give explanations of this sort we move no nearer to the goal of completely explaining contingencies. The sequence of contingent facts doesn't contain the sufficient reason for any contingent fact.

C3.   Therefore, to provide a sufficient reason for any contingent fact, we must look outside the sequence of contingent facts.

C4.   Therefore, the sufficient reason for contingent facts must be in a necessary substance.

P6.   This necessary substance is God.

P7.   This necessary substance is a sufficient reason for all this detail, which is interconnected throughout.

C5.   So there is only one God, and this God is sufficient.

DISCUSSION

Both arguments from contingency focus on the distinction between what is possible and contingent and what is necessary, between things which do not have to be the case and things which do. The belief that everything that exists is contingent leaves us with an inadequate of what exists, the argument claims. Only if there is something that must be the case – a necessary being – can we understand why there is anything at all. Again, why God? Because only God is the kind of being that exists necessarily.

Russell on the fallacy of composition
We said above that in Aquinas' Third Way, the inference to (C2) was puzzling. Even if we grant that each contingent thing does not exist at some point (P2), why think that this means that at some point, there were no contingent things at all? Aquinas could reply that because each contingent thing exists contingently, then all contingent things (e.g. the universe) as a whole exist contingently. Therefore, according to (P2), all contingent things did not exist at some point.

We can object that just because each thing exists contingently, it doesn't follow that the collection of all things exists contingently. Bertrand Russell presented a version the objection.

Russell accepts that of any particular thing in the universe, we need an explanation of why it exists, which science can give us. But it is a mistake to think that we can apply this idea to the universe itself. Just because everything in the universe is contingent (and so needs an explanation), it doesn't follow that the universe is also contingent or needs an explanation. The universe, he says, is 'just there, and that's all'.

Russell is arguing that the argument commits the fallacy of composition. This fallacy is an inference that because the parts have some property, the whole has the property, too. For instance, each tissue is thin, so the box of tissues is thin. Not true. Thus we can't infer from the contingent existence of each thing in the

universe that the universe is contingent.

We can argue that Leibniz implicitly makes the same fallacy in (C2), which seems to say that in explaining one contingent thing in terms of another, we don't have a sufficient reason until we can explain all contingent things. To explain each contingent thing in turn is not to provide a sufficient reason for each of them.

One reply is that the explanations of each part are in terms of other contingent things. So this will lead to an infinite regress of explanation, which is unsatisfactory. But why?

Perhaps a better response is that inferring from parts to whole does not always commit the fallacy of composition. For instance, each part of my desk is wooden, so my desk is wooden. We can argue that the same applies in the cosmological argument. For instance, if every part of the universe ceased to exist, so would the universe. This shows that just as everything in the universe is contingent, so is the universe. As a contingent being, the universe requires an explanation. There is no other contingent being we can appeal to, since the universe comprises all contingent beings, so we must appeal to a necessary being.

But is the universe contingent? Is it possible for every thing in the universe to cease to exist at the same time? Perhaps, suggests Hume in *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, if the argument shows that a necessary being must exist, then it is matter/energy (in some form) that is the necessary being, rather than God. For example, a fundamental law of physics is the conservation of energy: the total amount of matter/energy in the universe remains constant, it cannot be increased or decreased. If a version of this law applied even at the beginning and end of this universe and others, then matter/energy is a necessary being.

We can respond that we have no reason to believe that this law does apply at the beginning (and possibly the end) of the universe. The Big Bang theory suggests that matter/energy was created, along with time and space, i.e. the universe came into existence – so it is contingent.

If the argument doesn't commit the fallacy of composition, Russell needs to find some other objection to the principle that all contingent beings, including the universe, require an explanation for their existence. We could develop such an objection from Hume, applying Hume's fork to Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason (P1). It is not an analytic truth that all contingent beings have an explanation, any more than it is an analytic truth that everything has a cause. Thus, Russell remarks that while scientists will look for causes, that doesn't imply that they can find them everywhere. Likewise, we should leave open the possibility that the universe has no explanation.

We can avoid the objection by giving up the deductive form of the cosmological argument, to claim that it is an inference to the best explanation instead. God's existence is certainly a better explanation than no explanation at all!

The impossibility of a necessary being
The arguments from contingency conclude that some being exists necessarily. The

final objection we will discuss targets this conclusion, rather than the arguments for it. The objection doesn't try to show that the arguments don't work, but it provides an independent reason for rejecting the conclusion. And if the conclusion can't be true, then something must be wrong with the arguments, even if we don't know what that is.

Both Hume and Russell argue that the concept of a being that necessarily exists is problematic. Hume argues

P1.   Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction.
P2.   Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent.
C1.   Therefore, there is no being whose non-existence implies a contradiction.

Russell agrees. If there were a being that exists necessarily, it would have to be self-contradictory to deny its existence. But it isn't self-contradictory to deny the existence of something. So the concept of a being that exists necessarily is confused – it is the concept of something that is logically impossible (like a square with three sides). So there can be no such being.

We can respond that Hume and Russell are wrong to think that the concept of a being that exists necessarily is confused. The concept of God is a concept of such a being. For example, both Descartes and Norman Malcolm argue that God's omnipotence entails that God exists necessarily.

Now both Descartes and Malcolm think that this in itself shows that God exists (which is why they defend ontological arguments). We needn't accept that. All we need to respond to Hume and Russell is to show that the concept of God, as a being that exists necessarily, is coherent. In other words, we only need to argue that if God exists, then God exists necessarily. This helps us see where Hume and Russell go wrong.

Hume and Russell think that a being that exists necessarily is one whose existence we cannot deny without self-contradiction, i.e. they assume that 'God exists necessarily' means 'The sentence 'God exists' is necessarily true'. But, following Malcolm, we should distinguish between existence and necessary existence. Hume and Russell are right that we can deny 'God exists' without self-contradiction. But, we may argue, we cannot deny 'if God exists, God exists necessarily' without self-contradiction. And this is enough to reject their conclusion that a being that exists necessarily is logically impossible.

'God exists necessarily' tells us not that God exists but what kind of existence God has – necessary, not contingent. And Hume and Russell have offered no reason to think that it is impossible for a being to have this kind of existence, if it exists at all. The cosmological argument from contingency then supplies a reason to think that such a being exists.