

§ 4. Excursus on Natural Theology
Lecture 6
Objections to the Contingency Argument

We've been looking at the contingency argument for God's existence. Last time I offered a defense of premise (1) of the argument that everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or else in some external cause. In defense of this premise I shared Richard Taylor's illustration of going on a walk through the woods and finding a ball lying on the forest floor. You would naturally wonder how it came to be there. If anyone said it just exists without any explanation of its existence you would think he was joking. It is not just the ball that this would apply to. Any sort of object you might think of would fit the bill. A tree in your front yard. A car in your driveway. A person who works at your office. In every case we would say there is an explanation of why that thing exists rather than not. Merely increasing the size of the object does nothing to provide or remove the need for an explanation of its existence. That leads naturally to the question: then what is the explanation of the existence of the universe?

Atheists will typically say in response to premise (1) that this principle of sufficient reason as it is called is true of everything in the universe but they want to exempt the universe itself from the principle. The universe itself is the exception to the rule and it doesn't need to have an explanation of its existence. Everything in the universe has an explanation of its existence, but the universe itself exists without explanation.

I think this atheist response to the principle commits what has been aptly called "the taxicab fallacy." The nineteenth century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer pointed out that the principle of sufficient reason is not something that can be dismissed like a hack when you arrive at your desired destination! When you get to the universe you can't just say the universe is the exception to the rule. That commits the taxicab fallacy of thinking you can just dismiss the principle of sufficient reason when you get to your explanatory ultimate. Remember Leibniz does not exempt God from the principle of sufficient reason. He says, yes, God has an explanation of why he exists. He exists by a necessity of his own nature. Leibniz can't be accused of arbitrarily exempting the explanatory ultimate from the principle of sufficient reason, but that is what the atheist tries to do. He simply says the universe is the exception to the rule, and in so saying he is being arbitrary. He doesn't give any reason for thinking that the universe should be exempt from the principle – he just arbitrarily exempts it. That is without justification. Remember the illustration of the ball in the woods. Merely increasing the size of the ball even until it becomes the entire universe itself does nothing to remove the need for an explanation of its existence.

Notice, as well, how unscientific this objection is. The whole project of contemporary cosmology (the study of the large scale structure of the universe) is devoted to a search for an explanation of the universe's existence. This atheist attitude of thinking that the universe just exists without any explanation would actually be a science-stopper. It would cripple the project of modern cosmology of trying to explain why the universe exists.

So this typical atheist response, I think, commits Schopenhauer's taxicab fallacy.

Some atheists have tried to avoid this arbitrariness – this fallacy – by providing a justification for exempting the universe. They try to give an argument for why the universe should be exempted from the principle of sufficient reason.¹ They will typically say that it is impossible for the universe to have an explanation of its existence, and therefore it is the exception to the rule because it is impossible for there to be an explanation of the existence of the universe. Why is that? What is there about the universe that would make it impossible for it to have an explanation? One pair of philosophers I've read on this says that if there were an explanation of the existence of the universe it would have to be in some sort of explanatorily prior state of affairs in which the universe did not exist. If this is going to be an explanation of the existence of the universe then this would have to be some sort of explanatorily prior state of affairs in which there is no universe. But, they say, that would be a state of nothingness. There would be nothing, and nothingness can't be the explanation of anything, and therefore the universe must just exist inexplicably.

If you think about this for a minute, I think you can see that this reasoning is obviously fallacious because in saying that the explanatorily prior state of affairs in which the universe doesn't exist is nothingness these people are assuming that the universe is all there is. So if there were no universe there would be nothing. That just is to assume that atheism is true. Right? So the whole objection is reasoning in a circle. It is presupposing that there is no God. It is presupposing the truth of atheism! So it is reasoning in a circle. We can agree that if atheism is true then the universe has no explanation of its existence. But the whole question is: is atheism true? You can't just assume that it is true in order to object to Leibniz's argument.

Leibniz would agree that the explanatorily prior state of affairs that explains the existence of the universe is going to be a state of affairs in which the universe does not exist. But it wouldn't be a state of nothingness; rather, it would be God and his will. That would be the explanation of the origin of the universe.

So don't let the atheist get away with assuming the universe is all there is. Because that assumption presupposes the truth of atheism, and that is what is under question. That is what we are trying to investigate.

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START DISCUSSION

Student: Going back to the “true of everything in the universe but not the universe itself” atheist argument, would you say that that is the atheist essentially looking for a necessary something out there? They understand that having a necessary thing is necessary, so they attribute it to the universe and not to God?

Dr. Craig: Not typically. Do you hear his question? Because this is perceptive. Is the atheist saying, *When you get to the universe, the universe exists by a necessity of its own nature. So the universe isn't an arbitrary exemption to premise (1). It has an explanation of its existence, namely the universe exists by a necessity of its own nature.* As I will say later on, that isn't typically what they are saying. I don't know of any contemporary atheist who holds to this position – that the universe exists by a necessity of its own nature. Instead, what they say is the universe is the exception to the rule. Everything else has an explanation of its existence but not the universe itself. As I say, in the absence of some sort of justification for that, that is committing this taxicab fallacy because there is nothing about the universe other than its just being big that would prevent its having an explanation of its existence.

Student: A lot of atheists also say that we just don't have the explanation yet. We don't know. They lean on, *Hold on, we'll have an answer. We don't know when, but we will. We'll figure this out.* The agnostic wants to say, *I want to know how God created the universe, so we are going to continue with science to develop and research and all of that.* Us, as Christians, I want to know do we want to know how God created the universe or is that just a mystery?²

Dr. Craig: I think that the person who says what you've just said hasn't understood the argument. This is not an argument to which science is even relevant. Your friend is confusing this argument with the *kalam* cosmological argument which does “Ask how did the universe originate? What was the temporal origin of the universe?” But as I said last week in response to a question, Leibniz is quite willing to admit that the universe is past-eternal – that it has always been there. So there is no explanation of its origin. It maybe didn't have an origin in a temporal sense. But what Leibniz points out is that even an eternally existing universe is still contingent. It doesn't have to exist. It could have failed to exist, or a different kind of universe could have existed – maybe one with a beginning instead of an eternal one. So just positing the past eternity of the universe doesn't escape this argument. That means that scientific questions about where the universe came from and how it was created are just irrelevant to this. This is a philosophical argument, or a meta-physical argument. It is asking why is there a space-time reality at all (no matter how big it is, how wide-ranging, whether it had a beginning

or no beginning, or what its laws are)? All of that is irrelevant. What is being asked here is what is the explanation for why there is such a thing rather than not. That is not a question to which science is relevant.

Student: One thing I have a problem with understanding is things like contingency and necessary beings. You mentioned Leibniz is willing to accept the universe even being past-eternal but it is still contingent. Can you explain to me how that is possible? Because what I've always understood is if something is eternal it will of course not have a beginning. That is one thing I don't understand. How can it still be contingent even if it is past-eternal.

Dr. Craig: Because it could not exist. There could be nothing instead. We can imagine another possible world in which there is no universe. Or, as I said a moment ago, we can imagine another possible world in which there is a different kind of universe – maybe one that does have a beginning. So, an eternal universe is only one of a wide range of logical possibilities and therefore it is contingent that such a thing exists. There happens to exist a universe with a beginning according to the best evidence we have. But that is a contingent fact. If there had been a universe that is past-eternal that would also be a contingent fact. It is not logically or metaphysically necessary that there be that kind of universe. There could have been one like ours, right? As long as you can see that there could have been one like ours, then you've got to see that an eternal one is contingent. It is not necessary because you could have had ours instead, like we do have. If you think this world is possible (which it obviously is) that shows that that other type of world isn't necessary, if that had been instead.

Student: If you had an eternal universe it would be heat-dead.

Dr. Craig: That is getting into the next argument. We will talk about thermodynamic properties of the universe when we get to the so-called *kalam* cosmological argument. That is a different kind of argument than this one. And that is very important to distinguish the two because objections against one version just won't apply to the other version, particularly one's like we just heard about "maybe science will explain how the universe originated back when." That is just irrelevant to Leibniz's argument.

Student: Do you think that Peter van Inwagen's objection to the principle of sufficient reason apply to this particular version of it?

Dr. Craig: I've read van Inwagen on this and I think that those who have defended the principle of sufficient reason in a modest form like this (and I'm thinking here of people like Alexander Pruss of Baylor University) have had adequately addressed that.³ Van Inwagen's objection is to Leibniz's own very radical strong version that every fact – every truth – has an explanation. Van Inwagen says that would make everything

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necessary if you have that. But this version of the principle – premise (1) – doesn't say every truth has an explanation or every fact has an explanation; just that every thing that exists has an explanation why it exists rather than not. That would be found in a necessary being and his will. Given the freedom of his will, this necessary being can choose to create a contingent reality or not create a contingent reality. So I don't think this modest version of the principle falls prey to the objections to Leibniz's own very strong version of the principle. That was one of the reasons that I came to accept this version of the argument. I had been skeptical of Leibniz's argument for many years until I read this reformulation by Stephen Davis, who is a Christian philosopher, using this very modest version of the principle. I thought, "Wow, this really makes sense and avoids those problems."⁴

Student: Some people would talk about a multiverse. This argument, even if someone believed in a multiverse, wouldn't answer the explanation for our universe. The multiverse itself would have to have an explanation of its existence.

Dr. Craig: That is the idea, yes. Because when Leibniz is talking about "universe" here he means all of physical space-time reality including any embedding multiverse that you might want to have our universe be a part of; we'll then want to know why does the multiverse exist rather than nothing, rather than, say, a single universe. Why is there a multiverse? Ultimately I think he is right. You've got to get back to a necessary being which exists by necessity of its own nature.

END DISCUSSION

Let me say this about the first premise. This first premise can be reformulated in a more simple way if you want to. We could reformulate it to simply say "every contingent thing has an explanation of its existence." That would be a simpler version that would also be acceptable. Obviously, if everything has an explanation of its existence (as this premise states) then every contingent thing has an explanation of its existence. So they are compatible, but this would just be more modest – every *contingent* thing has an explanation of its existence. Then you would modify premise (3) to say the universe is a contingent thing. Then it will follow that the universe has an explanation of its existence. Sometimes in my debates – like the one coming up in Germany – in order to make this more accessible to a lay audience who is hearing it orally, I'll use that simpler version of the premise, and then use the story of the ball in the woods to make the point. I hope that will be helpful to you in memorizing the premises and being able to share them with someone else. That is a simpler version.

⁴ For more details on van Inwagen's objection and Dr. Craig's response to it, see Q&A #132 "Leibniz's Cosmological Argument and the PSR" at <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/leibnizs-cosmological-argument-and-the-psr> (accessed on September 20, 2015).

Let's now go on to premise (2) which is that if the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God. At first, this sounds rather jarring. I remember when I first saw Steve Davis' version of the argument I thought, "Wait a minute. Where does that come from?" He seems like a *deus ex machina* – God out of the machine. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God. What Davis pointed out is that premise (2) is actually logically equivalent to the atheist's typical response to Leibniz's argument. What do I mean by that? Two statements are logically equivalent if it is impossible for one to be true and the other one to be false. They stand or fall together. They can both be true. They can both be false. But if they are logically equivalent, one can't be true and the other false. Here is a real simple illustration.⁵ Take the proposition p . p is logically equivalent to double negation *not-not-p*. Those are logically equivalent. If you say, "It is not impossible that Bryant is preaching this morning" that means it is possible that he is preaching this morning. Very often we will talk in these sorts of double-negatives. I remember one scientist saying to me once, "That is definitely not a non-trivial result," which is just to say that this is a significant result. We sometimes talk in these double-negatives. "That is not unusual" we say, which is to say, "that is usual." That would be an example of logically equivalent statements.

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Student: Could you illustrate two logically equivalent statements where implication is involved?

Dr. Craig: Yeah, actually we can. P implies q is equivalent to *not-p or q*. If p implies q , that means *either not-p or q*. That is a simple logical equivalence. The one I am going to appeal to is if p implies q , that is equivalent to *not-q implies not-p*. That is called contraposition, actually. There is a name for that logical equivalence. Don't be confused by all of these symbols. This is just illustrative of the idea of statements that are logically equivalent to each other – they are either both true or both false, but you can't have one be true and the other false.

END DISCUSSION

What does the atheist almost always say in response to Leibniz's argument? As we saw in our examination of premise (1), what the atheist typically says in response to Leibniz is:

A. If atheism is true, then the universe has no explanation of its existence.

He says the universe is the exception to the principle of sufficient reason. The universe just exists inexplicably. He says if atheism is true, the universe has no explanation of its existence. But that is logically equivalent to saying:

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B. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, then atheism is not true.

Those two statements are logically equivalent, right? But (B) is virtually synonymous with premise (2)! So premise (2) which might at first blush seem very daring and bold is really virtually synonymous with what the atheist himself believes. So premise (2) is not one that the atheist disputes.

So in affirming (A) the atheist is also implicitly affirming (B) and (B) is virtually synonymous to premise (2) so the atheist himself is affirming premise (2).⁶

Here is a second argument for premise (2). I think premise (2) is plausible in its own right regardless what the atheist thinks. I think premise (2) is very plausible. Just think of what the universe is: all of space-time reality, all matter and energy. So it follows that if the universe has an explanation of its existence, that must be found in a cause which exists beyond space and time, beyond matter and energy, and is therefore a non-physical, immaterial, spaceless, timeless being. This is incredible. The explanation of the universe could only be found in something that transcends space and time, matter and energy, and has created the universe.

Now what possible candidates could there be for such a being? I can think of only two things that could fit that sort of description: either an abstract object like a number (or other mathematical object) or else an unembodied mind or consciousness. An abstract object is, you'll remember, immaterial, non-physical, exists beyond space and time, exists necessarily (if it exists at all, it doesn't exist contingently). So an abstract object would really fill the bill very nicely for a transcendent, immaterial, timeless, spaceless, metaphysically necessary being. The problem is abstract objects don't stand in causal relations. Indeed, among contemporary philosophers that is virtually definitive for what is an abstract object. What differentiates an abstract from a concrete object is that only concrete objects stand in causal relations. Abstract objects are causally effete, or causally impotent. The number 7, for example, has no effect upon anything. So it follows that the cause, or the explanation, of the universe cannot be an abstract object. Therefore it must be an unembodied mind or consciousness which would be a transcendent, immaterial, non-physical, spaceless, timeless, personal being who has freely created a contingent universe.

This is clearly a conclusion that is pregnant with theological significance. I hope you begin to grasp the power of Leibniz's argument. The explanation of the universe has to be a necessary, uncaused, timeless, spaceless, immaterial, personal being. This is not some ill-conceived flying spaghetti monster. This is a being which must exhibit the traditional attributes of God. This is truly a mind-blowing conclusion.

START DISCUSSION

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Student: What if the atheist were to say something about the philosophy of mind – they believe the mind is only material, and if you don't have the neurons firing then you don't have a mind and therefore it is inherently physical.

Dr. Craig: It is important to see that this argument that Leibniz is giving here is an argument *for* an immaterial mind! This would be a reason to believe that minds are not just physical or material like brains, but that they are immaterial entities. Because that is the only way to explain the existence of a contingent universe. This is actually an argument for the immateriality and non-physicality of mind. The atheist probably doesn't believe in minds like that. So he can then raise objections to this. He can try to give us his proofs for materialism or reductive physicalism. The theist will have to respond to those arguments. But he can't just presuppose it. Otherwise he is begging the question again. If he just presupposed there can't be a mind then he is begging the question because this is an argument for such a mind.⁷ But if he has some arguments for reductive physicalism or materialism, great! We'll hear them and see if we can respond to them. Typically the arguments against the existence of mind, I have found, will be based upon human cognition and that in human beings minds are typically conjoined with brains and the claim is that their brain states that correlate with mental states and all the rest of that. The problem with that is at the very best that would only prove that we are physical creatures, not minds. But that doesn't show that a mind is impossible. It is going to be pretty hard, I think, for the materialist or atheist to show that there cannot be an immaterial transcendent personal mind that has created the universe. The most he is going to do would be to maybe make that kind of dualism implausible with regard to human creatures. But then he'd need to extrapolate that to a cosmic creator, and I am not sure how he would be able to do that.

Student: Can you clarify the idea of metaphysical necessity. A lot of people get hung up on that. If I say, "the universe exists and God doesn't," there is no strict contradiction. We are not contradicting some stipulated definition. But we don't mean "impossible" in the way of saying it is impossible to move faster than light, it is impossible to create a perpetual motion machine.

Dr. Craig: We can rely upon you to make things more complicated than we want them to be! What he is pointing out is there are different kinds of possibility and necessity. For example, one would be physical possibility and necessity. It is physically impossible to accelerate an object through the speed of light and make it go faster than light. That is physically impossible. It is against the laws of nature. But there is no logical impossibility with that. There could have been a universe with different laws of nature where you could accelerate something through the speed of light. That would be a kind of low-level possibility and necessity based upon the laws of nature. On the other hand, there is what

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we could call strict logical possibility and necessity. Here in order for something not to be strictly logically possible its opposite would have to involve a contradiction. For example, a married unmarried man. That would be strictly logically impossible because there you've said he is married and unmarried – those are strictly logically contradictory. What philosophers have noticed is there is a different kind of possibility and necessity different than these that is usually called broad logical possibility and necessity as opposed to strict. Sometimes it is called metaphysical possibility or necessity. The idea is something that could be actual would be metaphysically possible. It is not enough just to be free from contradiction. That would show it is strictly logically possible, but that wouldn't show that it could really exist, that it could be metaphysically possible. One of my favorite examples is the illustration that Alvin Plantinga gives: could the prime minister have been a prime number? Obviously not. There is no logical contradiction in that statement, right? The prime minister is a prime number. There is no strict logical contradiction, but nevertheless it is obviously metaphysically impossible for the prime minister to be a prime number. If you wonder why, just think of the fact that prime ministers are causal agents and a prime number as an abstract object isn't a causal agent. We've already said abstract objects don't stand in causal relations. So it is metaphysically impossible that the prime minister could be a prime number even though there is no strict logical contradiction. What we are talking about here is a being which is metaphysically necessary in his existence. God is a metaphysically necessary being. It doesn't refute this for the atheist to point out that the statement "God does not exist" doesn't involve a logical contradiction.⁸ "God does not exist" doesn't involve a strict logical contradiction anymore than the prime minister is a prime number. But that doesn't mean that therefore God is not a metaphysically necessary being. God is metaphysically necessary in his existence even though there is no strict logical contradiction in saying God does not exist. That is what the question is getting at here – he wants me to make it clear that what Leibniz is talking about is metaphysical necessity. God exists with metaphysical necessity. The way I cash that out is he exists by a necessity of his own nature.

END DISCUSSION

If these two premises are true that everything that exists has an explanation of its existence (either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause) and it is also true that if the universe has an explanation of its existence that explanation is God then it follows that God exists by a necessity of his own nature. He is a metaphysically necessary being.

Next week we will consider one final objection to Leibniz's argument. Suppose the atheist says, *All right, I withdraw my objection to premise (1) and I am going to say*

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*instead the universe is a metaphysically necessary being. The universe exists by a necessity of its own nature. What can we say in response to that?*⁹