

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 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 arbitrarily the universe is the exception to the rule. 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 does nothing to remove the need for an explanation of its existence.

Notice, as well, how unscientific this objection is. The main 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 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. 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. Why think 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. But, they say, that would be a state of nothingness. Without the universe, 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. 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 question-begging. 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 existence 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.

Before we proceed to premiss (2), let me say one last thing about the first premise. This first premise can be reformulated in a simpler 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.

Premiss 2

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?" It seems like a *deus ex machina* – God out of the machine. But 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 "logically equivalent"? 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. Take any proposition p . p is logically equivalent to double negation $not-not-p$. Those are logically equivalent. If you say, "It is not impossible that Steve 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. "That is not unusual" we say, which is to say, "That is usual." That would be an example of logically equivalent statements.

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:

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).

Here is a second argument for premise (2). I think premise (2) is plausible in its own right regardless what the atheist thinks. 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 amazing. 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, that is, 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.

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 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?