

§ 4. Excursus on Natural Theology

Lecture 7

Another Objection to the Contingency Argument

We've now looked at the two premises of the argument from contingency for God's existence that are under dispute. Those were, as you recall:

1. Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence either in the necessity of its own nature or in some external cause. (Or, more simply, I said we can reformulate that as "every contingent thing has an explanation of its existence.")

Then I offered a defense of the second premise that:

2. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God.

Again, if you find that premise too jarring to suit your tastes, that could be reformulated as well to a more modest premise. You can reformulate that as "if the universe has an explanation of its existence then that explanation is a transcendent personal being." You don't have to call it God if you don't want to, but this will be a metaphysically necessary, transcendent, personal being which has created the universe. And then the defense that you would give of the premise would be similar.

I think we have good grounds for thinking that these two premises are true, and therefore if the universe exists it has its explanation or ground in such a metaphysically necessary, transcendent being.

What can the atheist do at this point? I think he does have one recourse left to him, though it is a radical one. He can retrace his steps, withdraw his objection to premise (1), and instead admit that, yes, the universe does have an explanation of its existence. But, he might say, that explanation is: the *universe* exists by a necessity of its own nature. The atheist can regard the universe as a kind of God-substitute. It is the metaphysically necessary being that explains why everything else exists. For the atheist, the universe could be a sort of surrogate for God as the metaphysically necessary being that grounds the existence of everything else.

This would be a very radical step for the atheist to take. In fact, I cannot think of any contemporary atheist philosopher who says such a thing. Several years ago I was participating in a conference on the Philosophy of Time at City College in Santa Barbara. I thought that Professor Adolf Grünbaum, who was speaking at the conference and is a vociferous atheistic philosopher, was flirting with this idea – that the universe exists necessarily. But when I raised the question from the floor whether he thought the universe exists necessarily, he was very indignant at the suggestion. "Of course not!" he said and went on to say the typical line that the universe just exists inexplicably. It is contingent, but it just has no explanation for why it exists.

The reason that atheists haven't been eager to embrace this escape from the argument, I think, is fairly obvious. When you look about the universe, none of the things that make the universe up seem to exist necessarily, whether we are talking about planets, intergalactic dust, radiation, stars, or galaxies. None of these things seem to exist necessarily. They all seem to be contingent. They could all fail to exist. In fact, at one point in the past, when the universe was very dense and very hot, none of them did exist. So these things don't exist necessarily, and the universe is just the collection of all these things. It would seem the universe doesn't exist necessarily. So atheists have not been eager to try to adopt this escape route from the argument.

Somebody might say in response to this: granted all of the things in the universe are contingent, nevertheless, what about the matter that they are made out of? Maybe the matter itself exists necessarily, and it just takes these different contingent configurations.¹ All of these different configurations of matter – like stars, and planets, and galaxies – are contingent, but the matter itself is necessarily existent. I think the problem with this suggestion is that according to the standard model of subatomic physics matter is itself composed of tiny fundamental particles like quarks and electrons. All of the things in the universe are made out of these tiny fundamental particles. Indeed, the universe just is the collection of all of these particles arranged in different ways.

Let's focus on the quarks and talk about them. Couldn't a collection of different quarks have existed instead of the collection that actually does exist? Does each and every one of these quarks exist necessarily? It seems crazy to think that each and every quark in the universe exists by a necessity of its own nature so that there couldn't have been fewer quarks or there couldn't have been more quarks or different quarks. This is the only collection of quarks that could possibly have existed. That seems crazy.

Notice what the atheist cannot say at this point. He cannot say all of these quarks are just different configurations of matter, and they could have been different but the matter itself exists necessarily. He can't say this because quarks are not made up of anything else. They just are the fundamental units of matter. So if the quark doesn't exist, the matter doesn't exist. Quarks aren't composed of anything else. They just are the fundamental units of matter. Without the quarks there wouldn't be any matter.

But then it seems obvious that a different collection of quarks might have existed instead of the collection that actually does exist. If that were the case – suppose a different collection of quarks were to have existed – I think then you would conclude a different universe might have existed. If a different collection of quarks could have existed, a different universe could have existed.

¹ 5:00

To see this point, I want to invite you to think about the shoes that you have on right now. Think about the shoes you are wearing. Could those shoes have been made of steel instead of what they are made out of? Certainly you could have had a pair of steel shoes that were the same shape and size as the shoes that you are wearing, but would they be the *same* shoes? Or wouldn't it be a different pair of shoes – a steel pair of shoes? Could the very shoes that you have on have been made of steel? I think the answer is obviously not. They would be a different pair of shoes, not the very shoes that you have on. The same would be true of the universe. A universe which is made up of different quarks would not be the same universe even if all of those quarks were arranged in exactly the same way so that the same macroscopic objects existed, it would be a different universe because it is made up of a different collection of quarks.

Somebody might object at this point – wait a minute, they might say, the matter in my body is completely recycled every several years so that the molecules or the particles that I have in my body today are not the ones that I had, say, when I was a little boy and yet I am the same person. I remain identical even though all of the matter in my body is completely recirculated and there is none of the particles in my body now that used to be there. So they might say analogously a universe could be identical across different possible worlds even though it is made up of a wholly different collection of quarks. I think these two situations are not analogous though. The crucial dis-analogy is that the difference between possible worlds does not involve any kind of intrinsic change. There is no enduring subject which undergoes a change from one state to another, whereas in my body there is an enduring subject that goes through intrinsic change.² So comparing different universes in different possible worlds would be more like comparing human bodies which have no connection whatsoever with each other and are made up of different matter. In that case I think you would say it is not the same body. These are different bodies because the one doesn't change into the other one as my boyhood body changed into my adult body. In the case where there is no intrinsic change and there is completely different matter making up the object you would have two objects. You would have two human bodies. Similarly, you would have two universes.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I am wondering about Spinoza. Do you think he would have bit the bullet and said yes it is? Do you have any idea what response he might have?

Dr. Craig: Yeah, that is why I said no contemporary atheist. You are pointing out the 17th century Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza did believe that the universe is a sort of God substitute. He coined the famous phrase *Deus sive Natura* – God or Nature. He took the universe to be God and to exist with metaphysical necessity. You are right. There

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have been people like this, but I can't think of anybody on the contemporary scene that would defend Spinozism, or this alternative. Where you would find it, I think, would perhaps be in pantheistic religions – some form of Hinduism or Buddhism. Though there they usually think the universe is illusory, not that it is necessary. But I could imagine a pantheist saying something like this. But you won't find this among your typical Western naturalistic atheist. The response, I think, would be exactly what I have given. I think given the fact that the universe is made up of this collection of fundamental particles it would just seem utterly implausible to say each and every quark in the universe exists by a metaphysical necessity of its own nature. That just, to me, is utterly implausible.

Student: I was having an issue with what you were saying at the beginning as you were reintroducing the stuff – I am sorry to bring it up again, I don't know if you already moved past it – but the personal part of what you are saying that the Creator of the universe must be. I didn't get that in the previous weeks.

Dr. Craig: The argument there was we get to a being which is beyond space and time, beyond matter and energy, because it is the cause or explanation of the existence of the universe. So this has to be an immaterial, spaceless, timeless, metaphysically necessary being. If you ask yourself – what could possibly fill that description (something that is spaceless, timeless, immaterial, metaphysically necessary) – it seems to me there are only two things that I could think of that could possibly fit that description: either an abstract object (like a number or other mathematical object) or else an unembodied mind or consciousness. An unembodied mind could be immaterial, timeless, spaceless, and metaphysically necessary. But here is the rub. Abstract objects don't stand in causal relations. It is definitive of what it is to be an abstract object – it is causally effete, causally impotent, and has no causal powers. So the cause of the universe cannot be an abstract object, and therefore by logic it follows that it must be an unembodied mind or consciousness or person.

Student: What do you mean by “person?” You mean it has the traits of a person, or do you mean it actually has personal interaction?

Dr. Craig: By a “person” I mean “a mind” - a self-conscious individual endowed with intellect, self-consciousness, and will. There is actually another really nice argument for the personhood of this first cause that maybe I will go ahead and share with you that was suggested by one of my students at Talbot in class.³ He pointed out, “How do you get from a necessarily existing cause to a contingent object like the universe?” If the cause is an impersonal, sort of mechanically operating set of necessary and sufficient conditions, then if the cause is necessarily there and is sufficient for its effect, the effect should be there necessarily as well. If you have a necessary being as your cause, you are going to

have the effect existing necessarily though dependent upon the cause. How do you get a contingent effect from a necessary cause? I think the answer is: if the cause is a personal agent endowed with freedom of the will who can freely choose to create a contingent effect. Getting back to a personal agent and appealing to agent causation will enable you to explain how you get a contingent effect like the universe from a necessarily existing cause. I think this is a great argument. I really like this argument for the personhood of the first cause. That gives us two independent arguments for the personhood of the first cause; namely, the argument from the properties that it must have as being immaterial, spaceless, timeless, etc, and then the other argument from how you get from a necessary cause to a contingent effect. I think there are good reasons to think that that second premise is true wholly apart from the fact that, as I say, it is virtually synonymous to what the atheist himself says. Remember there we talked about how the atheist typically says that if atheism is true the universe has no explanation of its existence, which is logically equivalent to saying that if the universe has an explanation of its existence then atheism is not true. That is to say, God exists. So I think this makes the second premise very plausible indeed.

Student: I want to ask an antagonistic view, and that is if matter and energy are interchangeable can we not think of this necessity as an energy which is converted back into matter in that relationship?

Dr. Craig: I think that perhaps what the non-theist could do here would be to say that these fundamental quarks or these fundamental particles are different configurations of underlying quantum physical fields, and that that is what underlies these particles that appear in different ways. That would be an interesting, I think, response. But then it would require you to say these quantum fields exist necessarily, and again that just doesn't seem to be true that these things have metaphysical necessity. They seem to be contingent. I will reinforce that in just one more moment with my next point.

Student: Would you classify energy as the timeless, immaterial . . .

Dr. Craig: Oh, no, no. That is clearly something that exists in space and in time, and as you say can be converted into matter and matter back into energy. That is Einstein's famous equation $E=mc^2$. So energy and matter would be convertible quantities.

Student: If you had a consciousness as necessary like they do in pantheism, it doesn't reflect itself except in other deities and manifestations. It doesn't show itself causally either. You would reject some kind of universal consciousness.

Dr. Craig: Right. In Hinduism, for example, these gods are not ultimate reality. Ultimate reality is impersonal, propertyless, can't be characterized. So these gods like Shiva and Vishnu and so forth are just, in a sense, illusory manifestations of this impersonal absolute – they are not the ultimate reality.

END DISCUSSION

What I've argued here is that it is implausible to think that the universe exists necessarily.⁴ Why? Because it is made up of stuff which is obviously contingent – things like quarks and electrons.

The claim that I'm making here, I think, becomes all the more obvious when we reflect on the fact that it seems entirely possible that the fundamental building blocks of nature could have been substances quite different from quarks and electrons, and so characterized by a whole different set of laws of nature. Even if you say that the laws of nature are metaphysically necessary, that this is the only way that quarks and electrons could have behaved, nevertheless the laws of nature could still have been different because there could have been different substances than quarks that exist endowed with different dispositions and different properties so that you would have a whole different set of laws of nature. There is no reason to think that only quarks are possible and that there couldn't have been other kinds of particles instead of quarks, and that therefore there could have been a quite different universe. I think it would be utterly implausible to say that that would be the same universe. That would be like saying that a pane of glass could retain its identity if it had been made of steel instead. That seems obviously absurd. That would not be the same window if it were made of steel instead of made of glass. So I think we have quite good grounds for thinking that in virtue of its composition or constitution that the universe doesn't exist metaphysically necessarily. That is probably why very few, if any, contemporary atheists appeals to this to try to escape from the argument.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I have a question about past-eternity and necessity. Carl Sagan, in the opening sentence of *Cosmos* which is pretty famous, essentially substituted John 1:1 with “The Cosmos is all that ever was, all that ever is, and all that ever will be.” I am just wondering if an atheist makes the claim that the universe has a state of past-eternity, is that essentially claiming necessity for it?

Dr. Craig: We talked about that a couple of times in the class. I tried to point out that merely making the universe past-eternal doesn't make it necessary. I think the easiest way to see that is to imagine the universe is past-eternal. OK? Imagine that the universe never began to exist. Wouldn't it be logically possible for our universe to exist instead? Of course it would because we know this universe is logically possible. We exist in it. It is real. If, in an eternal universe, it is logically possible that there could have been our universe instead, it follows that that eternal universe doesn't exist necessarily. It exists contingently and there could have been a different universe instead. Leibniz's argument

is wholly independent of whether the past of the universe is eternal or had a beginning.

END DISCUSSION

Your point does make a very nice segue to the next point that I wanted to make, and that is a second reason for thinking that the universe does not exist by a necessity of its own nature is the fact that it appears to have begun to exist. If something exists necessarily then it must exist eternally because if it begins to exist that shows that its non-existence is possible. It came into being. So an essential property of a necessarily existing being will be its eternality – being without beginning or end. We have now pretty strong evidence that the universe is not past eternal but had a beginning which would show its contingency.

This takes us into the next argument that we are going to talk about – the *kalam* cosmological argument – which is based upon the beginning of the universe. As I've said, I want to try to keep the arguments as independent from one another as we can because then if they are independent of each other you multiply the probabilities by accumulating these independent arguments in favor of God's existence.⁵ I think we've got good grounds for thinking the universe doesn't exist necessarily quite independent of its beginning. But nevertheless this does show how the arguments kind of dovetail into each other and reinforce one another. Because if the universe does have a beginning, that reveals the contingency of the universe. Not only that, but it reveals that the universe is contingent in a very special way, namely, it came into being out of nothing. On the existence of an eternal universe, it would still exist contingently even though it exists eternally, but for the universe to exist contingently and have a beginning seems to be just doubly absurd because now it comes into existence without any explanation whatsoever out of nothing. I can imagine giving the atheist a run for his money and say, yes, if the universe is eternal, if it has always been there, it doesn't have a cause. But once you say the universe had a beginning and came into being then it just seems to be completely implausible to think that there is no explanation of the existence of the universe. The *kalam* cosmological argument powerfully reinforces the argument from contingency by showing or underlining the contingency of the universe in a very special way. Even if the universe is past-eternal, it is contingent – but if it had a beginning then that just makes its contingency all the more obvious, and the need for an explanation just cries out all the more.

As I say, atheists have not been eager to affirm that the universe exists with any sort of metaphysical necessity. Instead, the typical response to this argument is to just commit the taxicab fallacy and say the principle of sufficient reason applies to everything in the universe but don't apply it to the universe itself. The universe just exists without any explanation, which I think is arbitrary and ad hoc.

⁵ 25:12

START DISCUSSION

Student: I talked to my brother yesterday a little bit and just kind of generated some thoughts. I was just thinking through this whole thing. I remember the debate you had with Lawrence Krauss. It kind of hits me saying that he is probably the best atheist that ever existed, because he wants to prove that everything just came out of nothing. The reason I want to say that is because my brother was saying what is the opposite of God? The thought that I want to say is it is the devil. But it is not the opposite of God because God created him and he gives him abilities and all that. The way Christianity looks at God is that God is everything – all-powerful, and so on and so forth.

Dr. Craig: Christianity doesn't think God is everything, right? That is pantheism.

Student: God created everything.

Dr. Craig: Right, that is very different!

Student: A maximal being. The opposite of God, he was saying, is nothing. That is why I believe that is where the atheist has to stand – that things came out of nothing.

Dr. Craig: Let me just say that it is difficult to know what a person means when they talk about the opposite of a being. I think your example of the devil shows that a person might be thinking opposite in terms of its moral qualities. In one sense, contingent beings are the opposite of God because he exists necessarily and independently; we exist contingently and dependently. So in one sense that is the opposite of God. But in the sense that God exists, I can see why he would say the opposite of that is nothing exists.

Student: The atheist can't take that approach saying contingency is the opposite of God. The atheist has to stick with nothing. That is their whole beginning, I guess.

Dr. Craig: OK, I think maybe I am understanding more what you are saying. When you say the opposite of God, you mean what is the alternative explanation to God, in a sense. Right? I think that is what you are saying.⁶ What is the alternative? And, right, the alternative seems to be to say that there is no explanation of the existence of the universe. In the case of someone who thinks the universe began to exist (like Krauss) that would mean the universe just came out of nothing, which is what he asserts. But I have to say he doesn't really mean it. He knows that in physics the vacuum state, or these states that don't have classical space-time in them, are physical states described by the laws of nature. Krauss will say things like “nothing actually weighs something,” “everything is almost nothing.” He makes all sorts of self-contradictory statements. He is using the word “nothing” there in a way that is scientifically misrepresentative of the physics. It is a kind of colloquial way of speaking that isn't accurate. He is talking about states in which our general relativistic space-time doesn't exist, but it is still a state of the universe. It will be

⁶ 30:06

a very early state of the universe in which these sorts of structures haven't yet emerged. But it is not nothing in the sense of non-being or “not anything.” So it is really a gross misuse of language, and I, frankly, think a deliberate misrepresentation of science.

Student: For further study in looking up Leibniz's work, he wrote in German and French and Latin (unfortunately not English). He wrote on dozens if not hundreds of subjects. He wrote thousands and thousands of pages. It doesn't seem like for this kind of discussion that there is a single representative work that I could pinpoint to say it would be fun to go back and read what he wrote about it. Is there a certain edition? What we really need is the William Lane Craig-simplified Leibniz.

Dr. Craig: There already are such books. I am glad you asked the question. There is a very nice volume called *Leibniz Selections* which includes all of these selected works that we've been talking about. I am not exactly sure, but I think it is edited by Philip Wiener. It will include all of these. Now, you say, where am I going to get a copy of *Leibniz Selections*? You go to the East Cobb library and order it on inter-library loan. This is an untapped treasure trove of stuff. I rarely buy books. I go to inter-library loan and get all of the stuff here in the little East Cobb library. For example, this past week I've been reading the three volume systematic theology of Francis Turretin, who was a Swiss 17th century Reformed theologian, called *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. And they got me that at East Cobb library on inter-library loan! The week before they got me a book by L. W. Grensted called *A Short History of the Atonement* which was published back in 1905 or something like that. They will get you all of this stuff free! It is free! So there is just no excuse. Use your local library. This is an untapped resource that most people don't know about. So thank you for that question because this is how you can get this stuff.

Student: There is also (I just looked on Amazon) a copy for 41 cents with 3.99 shipping!

Dr. Craig: Go for it! Was it Wiener who edited it?

Student: Yes.

Dr. Craig: Excellent!

END DISCUSSION

Let me just say, by way of conclusion for this argument, given the truth of the three premises the conclusion follows logically: *God is the explanation of the existence of the universe*. This argument gives us a very rich concept of God: an uncaused, unembodied mind who transcends the physical universe and even space and time themselves and exists with a metaphysical necessity of its own nature. This is an exalted concept of God.⁷

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