

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.")
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 it 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.

One More Objection

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 was 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 up the universe seems to exist necessarily, whether we are talking about planets, intergalactic dust, radiation, stars, or galaxies. None of these things seems to exist necessarily. They all seem to be contingent. They could all fail to exist. In fact, at some 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. So it would seem the universe doesn’t exist necessarily. Therefore 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 out of which they are made? Maybe the matter itself exists necessarily, and it just takes on these different contingent configurations. All of these different configurations of matter – like stars, and planets, and galaxies – are contingent, but the matter itself is necessarily existent. According to contemporary physics even so-called fundamental particles like electrons and quarks are not truly fundamental but are excitations of a more fundamental reality, namely, quantum fields. Could these quantum fields be metaphysically necessary, even though the particles and, ultimately, macroscopic objects constituted of them are contingent?

The problem with this suggestion is that the fields themselves seem to be contingent. There are numerous such fields, such as six fields for the quarks, three for the electron and its siblings, three for the neutrinos, and so on; in all seventeen different fields according to the standard model of particle physics. Cosmologist Luke Barnes summarizes the situation:

“There is no known theory in physics that dictates:

- The total number of fields
- The mix of different types of free field (scalar, complex, vector, spinor, etc.).
- The mathematical form of the interactions between the fields.
- The constants that describe the free properties of the fields.

- The constants that describe the interaction properties of the fields.”¹

The idea that these different fields, their interactions, and their constants could all be metaphysically necessary seems no more plausible than the claim that the universe is metaphysically necessary.

Most decisively, even if all of the above features I just listed were metaphysically necessary, we still might wonder why *this* theory holds. For example, string theory is an alternative to quantum field theory. Yet no one would think that string theory is *metaphysically* impossible; it needs to be assessed scientifically. Even if you say that the laws of nature are metaphysically necessary, that this is the only way that quantum fields could have behaved, nevertheless the laws of nature could still have been different because there could have been different substances than those that exist, endowed with different dispositions and different properties, so that you would have a whole different set of laws of nature. I think it would be utterly implausible to say that such a universe would be our 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. It 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 the universe doesn't exist metaphysically necessarily. That is probably why

¹ Luke Barnes to William Lane Craig, August 19, 2022.

very few, if any, contemporary atheists take this route to try to escape from the argument.

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 if they are independent of each other, the probabilities of these independent arguments in favor of God's existence accumulate. 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. 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. An eternal universe would still exist contingently even though it exists eternally, but for the universe to exist contingently and have a beginning makes it doubly clear that it does not exist necessarily

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 saying, “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. If the universe had a beginning, then that just makes its contingency all the more obvious, and the need for an explanation 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 commit the taxicab fallacy and say the principle of sufficient reason applies to everything in the universe but doesn't apply to the universe itself. The universe just exists without any explanation, a response which I think is arbitrary and ad hoc.

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 exists with a metaphysical necessity of its own nature. This is an exalted concept of God.