

36 Arguments for the Existence of God: Goldstein on the Cosmological Argument

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SUMMARY

Rebecca Goldstein's novel presents and refutes three dozen "arguments" for God's existence. The arguments, however, are straw men of her own construction, bearing only passing resemblance to the classical arguments. Moreover, at least in the case of the cosmological argument, the straw man appears to be winning! Her criticisms are easily defeated, making her critique a nice exercise for beginners in apologetics.

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I must confess that I don't have the patience to read books like this nor do I find them entertaining. As a philosopher I want premises and supporting arguments without having to sift the philosophical wheat from the chaff of a popular fictional narrative. Fortunately, the book carries an appendix of the 36 theistic arguments which clearly labels them and exhibits their premisses and supporting arguments. Thus I was able to cut to the chase and see what Rebecca Goldstein has to say about my favorite argument, the cosmological argument (#1 on her list). I was appalled.

You see, I had just written a popular level article on "The World's Ten Worst Objections to the *Kalam* Cosmological Argument" collected off You Tube and the internet. I should have read Goldstein's book first. I have never seen anywhere on the internet or You Tube a caricature of the cosmological argument so ridiculous as Goldstein's. She makes the teenagers posting on the internet look like Gifford lecturers by comparison.

Now Goldstein has provided herself with some cover for her sophomoric arguments. For the appendix is alleged to be the 36 arguments formulated by the novel's new atheist protagonist Cass Seltzer and featured in his best-seller. Goldstein could claim with some plausibility that the appendix's arguments are a fair representation of the new atheist arguments out there today—"So don't blame me!" Still, the dust jacket of her book declares, "On purely intellectual grounds the skeptics would seem to have everything on their side. Yet people refuse to accept their seemingly irrefutable arguments and continue to embrace faith in God as their source of meaning, purpose, and comfort."

Just how laughable such posturing is becomes evident by a look at the arguments. Goldstein first misrepresents them and then presents lame refutations of them. For example, here's her statement of the cosmological argument:

1. Everything that exists must have a cause.
2. The universe must have a cause (from 1).
3. Nothing can be the cause of itself.
4. The universe cannot be the cause of itself (from 3).
5. Something outside the universe must have caused the universe (from 2 and 4).
6. God is the only thing outside the universe.
7. God caused the universe (from 5 and 6).
8. God exists.

What's funny is that Goldstein proceeds to point out two "flaws" in this conglomeration of statements masquerading as the cosmological argument. She doesn't even pause to note that it's not only logically invalid, but question-begging, since (8) follows from (6) alone, so that all the remaining premisses are just window-dressing. This straw man argument has never been defended by any philosopher in the history of thought.

So what flaws does Goldstein espy in this argument? You guessed it, of course: "Who caused God?" The proponent of the cosmological argument, she says, must say either that God has no cause, which contradicts (1), or that God is self-caused, which contradicts (3).

The problem with this refutation is that no version of the cosmological argument found in the works of its chief proponents affirms Goldstein's premiss (1). Rather the premiss featured in their arguments will be something like

1'. Everything that begins to exist has a cause.

or

1''. Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence (either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause).

Versions of the cosmological argument featuring (1') claim that anything that comes into being must have a cause (something doesn't just come from nothing). But if something has existed from

eternity, then it obviously never came into being and so there is no need for a cause. This version of the argument will then feature a premiss stating that the universe began to exist, a premiss conspicuously missing in Goldstein's formulation.

Other versions of the cosmological argument featuring (1'') instead claim that anything that exists, even an eternal universe, must have an explanation why it exists. This explanation can be one of two types: either the thing exists by the necessity of its own nature, so that it is a metaphysically necessary being, or else it has an external cause, in which case it is a contingent being. This version of the argument will then feature a premiss to the effect that the universe does not exist by necessity and so must have an external cause in a being which exists by a necessity of its own nature and is the cause of every contingent thing.

Goldstein comes up with her premiss (1) by confusing these two versions of the cosmological argument. By running together (1') and (1'') she comes up with a premiss that no proponent of the argument affirms, that "everything that exists"—taken from (1'')—"has a cause"—taken from (1').

Curiously, Goldstein doesn't fault the cosmological argument for having a false premiss. Rather the problem she sees is "explaining why God must be the unique exception" rather than the universe itself. If she had faithfully reproduced the cosmological argument instead of this caricature, she'd know the answer to the question. Proponents of the first version go on to argue that the universe began to exist and so must have a cause, while proponents of the second version proceed to argue that the universe does not exist by a necessity of its own nature and so must be contingent. These are important and controversial claims; but they will not be discussed if the argument is so misrepresented that these premisses don't even appear.

Now in argument #4 "The Argument from the Big Bang," Goldstein does address briefly the evidence of physical cosmology for the universe's beginning. The "flaw" she sees in this argument is: "Cosmologists themselves do not all agree that the Big Bang is a singularity. . . . The Big Bang may represent the lawful emergence of a new universe from a previously existing one." This is a flaw? Since when is universal consensus required for physical evidence to confirm a hypothesis? Moreover, the mention of a singularity is a red herring, since models of the universe with a finite past, like that of Stephen Hawking and James Hartle, may feature a non-singular beginning. In 2003 Arvind Borde, Alan Guth, and Alexander Vilenkin proved that any universe which is on average in a state of cosmic expansion cannot be eternal in the past but must have an absolute beginning. The fact is, there is no mathematically and physically tenable model of the universe

which is extrapolable to past infinity. If Goldstein thinks otherwise, let her tell us the model. The bottom line is: physics doesn't deal in possibilities. Possibilities come cheap. What we want to know is where the evidence points.

The second flaw in the cosmological argument Goldstein spots is that our best definition of cause is "a relation that holds between events that are connected by physical laws." "To apply this concept to the universe itself is to misuse the concept of cause, extending it into a realm in which we have no idea how to use it." Here Goldstein is confused. The relevant question is not a *definition* of "cause;" to find that look up the word in the dictionary. (Certainly Goldstein's definition won't do: for example, simultaneity is "a relation that holds between events that are connected by physical laws;" but obviously "being simultaneous with" does not mean or imply "being caused by.") *Webster's* defines "cause" as "a person or thing acting voluntarily or involuntarily as the agent that brings about an effect or result." No problem there!

The relevant question rather is whether we can provide a philosophical *analysis* of the causal relation in more primitive or basic terms, or whether causality is itself a bedrock idea. For example, some philosophers have thought to analyze the causal relation in the following way:

For any entities x and y , x is the cause of y if and only if

- (i) If x were not to exist, y would not exist, and
- (ii) If y were not to exist, x would still exist.

If we let x be God and y be the universe, then according to this analysis God meets the conditions for being the cause of the universe, since if God were not to exist, the universe would not exist; but if the universe were not to exist, God would still exist. So contrary to Goldstein, causality *is* extendible beyond the universe, and we *do* have a clear idea how to use it. Now I don't pretend that this analysis of causality is adequate for every case. The correct analysis of causation is a matter of great controversy among philosophers, and many would say that it's just a basic, irreducible concept. But notice that the adequacy of such analyses will be assessed by how well they mesh with our pre-philosophical, intuitive understanding of the cause-effect relation. You don't need to have a philosophical analysis to recognize that things that begin to exist have causes. There's a great deal more that could be said here of a technical nature (for example, why think, as she claims, that causation must be a relation only between *events* and why must the events be connected by *physical laws*?), but let that pass. It is no more objectionable to say that God is the cause of the universe than that Tolstoy is the cause of *War and Peace*.

Finally, Goldstein comments that the cosmological argument is an expression of our befuddlement at the question, why is there something rather than nothing?—to which she recommends the retort: “And if there were nothing? You’d still be complaining!” This is supposed to be cute, I guess, because if there were nothing, you wouldn’t be there to do any complaining. But isn’t that just the point? Nothingness neither needs nor can have an explanation (there isn’t anything to explain or be explained!); but the fact that something exists is a positive fact that does cry out for explanation. Thoughtful non-theists recognize the weightiness of this question. The naturalist philosopher Derek Parfit, for example, muses, “No question is more sublime than why there is a Universe: why there is anything rather than nothing.”

It is tragic that in a day and age in which a veritable renaissance of Christian philosophy is in full bloom, it is the sort of pabulum found in Goldstein’s book that is fed to the waiting public.