Cosmological Arguments

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Abstract: This Element discusses the structure, content, and evaluation of cosmological arguments. The introductory section investigates features essential to cosmological arguments. Traditionally, cosmological arguments are distinguished by their appeal to change, causation, contingency, or objective becoming in the world. But none of these is in fact essential to the formulation of cosmological arguments. Sections 1–3 present a critical discussion of traditional Thomistic, kalam, and Leibnizian cosmological arguments, noting various advantages and disadvantages of these approaches. Section 4 offers an entirely new approach to the cosmological argument—the approach of theistic modal realism. The proper explananda of cosmological arguments on this approach are not change, causation, contingency, or objective becoming in the world. The proper explananda are the totality of metaphysical reality—all actualia and all possibilia. The result is the most compelling and least objectionable version of the cosmological argument.

Keywords: cosmological argument, kalam, Aquinas, modal realism, theistic modal realism, actual infinite, modal fatalism, Five Ways, Leibniz, temporal beginning, creation

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1 Categorizing Cosmological Arguments

The standard way to categorize cosmological arguments is taxonomically. We begin with a number of theistic arguments that have traditionally been listed under the genus “cosmological.” The speciation of cosmological arguments is a function of salient variation in those
traditional arguments. William Lane Craig offers one typology of cosmological arguments based on variation in the role of the infinite regress.

During the historical survey of the argument, my attention was drawn to one very important feature of the cosmological proof: the role of the infinite regress in the argument. . . . The first type embraces the kalām proofs for a beginning of [the] world and the existence of a Creator. The second type enfolds all of the proofs in Aquinas's first three ways. . . . The third type is Leibniz's (and Spinoza's) version of the proof. (Craig, 2001: 282ff.)

The Thomistic, kalām, and Leibnizian formulations are undoubtedly among the most impressive and powerful species of cosmological arguments. But the taxonomical approach to categorizing these arguments is largely a matter of practical convenience. The approach aims to provide some order among an otherwise disorderly collection of arguments.

The Thomistic, kalām, and Leibnizian cosmological arguments all offer some explananda – whether they are change or motion or coming to be or contingency – and each argues that the absolute explanation for these observable features of the universe is an unmoved mover, a necessary being, an unchanging being, God. Cosmological arguments do feature essentially some absolute explanans and some explananda. It’s an intriguing metaphysical question whether cosmological arguments exemplify any other essential features, or at least whether successful cosmological arguments exemplify any other essential features.

The ontological argument is sometimes categorized as the only a priori argument for the existence of God. William Rowe makes this the fundamental distinction between cosmological arguments and ontological arguments.

Arguments for the existence of God are commonly divided into a posteriori arguments and a priori arguments. . . . Of the three major arguments for the existence of God – the Cosmological, the Teleological, and the Ontological – only the last of these is entirely a priori. In the Cosmological Argument one starts from some simple fact about the world such as that it contains things which are caused
Rowe’s epistemological basis for distinguishing ontological arguments and cosmological arguments has some historical justification. But must cosmological arguments, or successful cosmological arguments, include a posteriori premises? It is perhaps surprising that facts about change, causation, contingency, and objective becoming that figure so prominently in traditional cosmological arguments are not usefully characterized as a posteriori facts. Cosmological arguments do not necessarily include any a posteriori premises at all. There are indeed cosmological arguments that do not include a single a posteriori premise or assumption.

The proposition that I am here now is knowable a priori and so is the proposition that I exist (Kaplan, 1979). But surely a cosmological argument could start from simple a priori facts such as I am here now or I exist (Kripke, 1980: 54–56). A cosmological argument might begin with the fact that I am here now and note that this simple a priori fact requires some explanation, as indeed it does. There must be some explanation why I am here now and I am not there now. There must be some explanation why I exist rather than not exist. The facts that I am here now and that I exist require an explanation because it is a contingent fact that I am here now and a contingent fact that I exist. Some contingent facts that are eligible for explanation are knowable a priori.

Must the explananda of cosmological arguments be the set of contingent facts? Our commitment to contingent explananda depends on larger – more or less appealing – ontological commitments. We do observe that objects seem to undergo change and that objects seem to come into existence and go out of existence. G. E. Moore existed in 1920, but he does not exist now. The statue existed yesterday, but does not exist today. Things sure seem to be coming into existence and going out of existence. The cat was sleeping this morning, but the cat is awake now. It was raining yesterday and it is not raining today. Surely something very much like change is occurring.

But it is a mistake to conclude from these observations that it’s a contingent fact that it rained or a contingent fact that G. E. Moore existed. It is true that cosmological arguments typically infer from
the observation of facts like these that there are contingent expla-
nanda. But, strictly speaking, we cannot infer from these observa-
tions that there are any contingent explananda at all. In fact, obser-
vations like these are neither necessary nor sufficient to estab-
lish the existence of contingent explananda.

Benedict de Spinoza famously argued that every object, fact, and event that we observe in the actual world exists, obtains, and occurs as a matter of extrinsic necessity (Griffin, 2013). The observation of impermanence in the world – insofar as we actually observe imper-
manence – does not entail that there are any contingent facts at all.

Necessitists are not automatically permanentists. . . . For a fatalist might be a necessitist by denying all contingency whatsoever, yet still hold that what there is changes on a necessary schedule. (Williamson, 2013: 4)

The observation of objects coming into existence and going out of existence does not entail that any object is contingent (Williamson, 2002, 2013). And the observation that actual objects exemplify a property – say, the color blue – at one time and exemplify another property – say, the color green – at another time does not entail that there are any mutable or changing properties.

In spite of our observations, every property is immutable in Spinozistic worlds. An immutable property is one that an object cannot cease to exemplify and also one that an object cannot begin to exemplify (Morris, 1987).\(^1\) The very same object that we observe to be blue at t and green at t’ is, in fact, at all times, essentially blue-at-t and essentially green-at-t’. The very same object that we observe to exist at t and observe not to exist at t’ in fact essentially exists-at-t and essentially fails to exist-at-t’.

It is worth noting that our epistemological data not only under-
determine the existence of contingent facts. They also underdeter-
mine the existence of impermanence in the world. We cannot

\(^1\) An enduring property is a property that an object exemplifies at some temporal point but could not cease to exemplify at a later temporal point. In addition to enduring properties, there are immemorial properties. These are properties that an object exemplifies and could not have begun, at some temporal point, to exemplify.
determine observationally whether our world is a permanentist world or an impermanentist world. Permanentism is the view that it is always the case that everything is always something (Deasy, 2015). Everything unrestrictedly always exists. According to permanentism, there is no time at which anything comes into, or goes out of, existence. For all our epistemological data can deliver, the world we inhabit is a permanentist Spinozistic world – there is no contingency and objects never come into existence or go out of existence (Linsky and Zalta, 1994; Williamson, 2013). The only explananda for cosmological arguments in permanentist Spinozistic worlds are necessary and permanent objects, events, or facts.

But could necessarily existing, occurring, or obtaining objects, events, or facts be explananda for cosmological arguments? For a contemporary example, we need only consider the many multiverse accounts of creation. The theistic multiverse is a collection of all on-balance good universes and God necessarily actualizes the theistic multiverse. Donald Turner offers the following explanation.

But if a wholly good and omnipotent God exists, then the fact that it would be best if created reality were a certain way does explain why created reality would be that way. The source of selection from among the possible universe ensembles would be the possible universe ensemble that would be the best. *Thus I claim that God ought to actualize that complex possible world which contains cosmoi corresponding to every simple possible world above some cut-off line* – for example, every simple possible world with a favorable balance of good over evil. (Turner, 2003)

The explanandum of cosmological arguments on this account of metaphysical reality is a necessarily existing object – the totality of all on-balance good universes. The explanandum is a necessarily existing object since, according to Turner, God necessarily actualizes the theistic multiverse (Munitz, 1951).²

² Many philosophers have defended various versions of the multiverse. For a historical survey of many-universe hypotheses, see Munitz (1951). Those who take seriously the idea that theism suggests the multiverse include McHarry (1978), Turner (2003), Draper (2004), Hudson (2006), Kraay (2010),
Our observations underdetermine the explananda of cosmological arguments. Our observations are in fact compatible with a wide range of ontological commitments and so a wide range of explananda. It is a consequence of our everyday conceptual scheme that we take ourselves to be observing genuine change, causation, motion, contingency, and objective becoming. And ontological conservatism certainly recommends the deliverances of common sense.

But these everyday ontological commitments are in fact the source of intractable problems for the cosmological argument. These problems range from modal fatalism – sometimes called the problem of necessitarianism – to lawless worlds. It is a result of our everyday ontological commitments that the best types of explanation – explanations that really leave nothing unexplained – entail the collapse of all modal distinctions. That is the problem of modal fatalism. It is a result of our everyday commitments that the best explanations entail the impossibility of libertarian freedom and the impossibility of indeterministic quantum effects. It is a result of our commonsense ontology that there are no possible worlds where objects “pop” into existence without causal explanation. But modal imagination informs us that lawless worlds, and many other worlds that are purportedly incompatible with the best explanations, are indeed genuinely possible. Since our naive ontological commitments are the source of such trouble for the cosmological argument, we have at least some reason to reconsider our commitment to commonsense ontology.

Most cosmological arguments assume – implicitly in most cases – that some form of actualist realism is true. That conclusion is a consequence of our commonsense conceptual scheme. Traditional cosmological arguments – Thomistic, Leibnizian, Spinozistic, and kalām – are all committed to some form of actualist realism. The ontological benefits of actualist realism include an intuitive “safe and sane” ontology, ontological economy, and

and O’Connor (2012). For discussion of the difficulties with this view, see Almeida (2008, 2010).
metaphysical conservatism. But the main difficulties with traditional cosmological arguments are in fact traceable to the commonsense commitment to actualist ontologies. It is in fact actualist explananda that generate the problems for absolute explanation, the Bennett–van Inwagen problem of modal fatalism, the problem of modal imagination, the problem of libertarian free will, the problem of lawless worlds, and the problem of indeterministic quantum effects.\(^3\)

There are of course alternative views on the nature of metaphysical reality. Genuine modal realism — more specifically theistic modal realism — is a less well-understood, and less well-received, view on the nature of metaphysical reality. According to theistic modal realism, the totality of metaphysical reality is a concrete pluriverse. The concrete pluriverse includes every possible world – all actualia and all possibilia. Possible worlds are spatio-temporally isolated aggregates of world-bound individuals. The explanada of genuine modal realism is far more expansive than the Explanada of actualist realism. The explanada of genuine modal realism includes every possible world and every part of every possible world.

According to theistic modal realism, there is an absolute explanation of the entire pluriverse. Every possible world and everything in every possible world is absolutely explicable. Theistic modal realism does not generate the problems of modal fatalism, modal imagination, libertarian free will, lawless worlds, or indeterministic quantum effects. Theistic modal realism in fact provides us with the most powerful and least objectionable version of the cosmological argument available.

2 Absolute Explanations

Our ontological commitments determine the explananda for which cosmological arguments require an absolute explanation.

\(^3\) Details about the exact nature of these problems are forthcoming in the sections to follow.
Indeed, it is essential to cosmological arguments to require an absolute explanation. Absolute explanations might better be called genuine total explanations, since absolute explanations are incompatible with the existence of any brute facts. Here is Richard Swinburne.

Other explanations cite brute facts that form the starting points of explanations; there are no brute facts in absolute explanations – here everything really is explained. (Swinburne, 2004)

There is of course some historical reason to believe that the cosmological argument characteristically depends on some version of the principle of sufficient reason. The principle of sufficient reason is of course an explanatory principle. William Rowe defends such a view.

It should be clear that no single argument can lay claim to being the Cosmological Argument. The Cosmological Argument represents a family of arguments, arguments that generally start from some relatively simple fact about the world and, by appealing to the Principle of Sufficient Reason or some principle governing causality, endeavor to establish the existence of a being that has the properties of the theistic God.

... Criticisms that may be definitive against one version of the argument may turn out to be utterly irrelevant to some other important version. On the other hand ... all versions of the argument rely on some form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. (Rowe, 1988)

Rowe assimilates the principle of causality to the principle of sufficient reason – Leibniz makes the same assimilation – and claims that all versions of the cosmological argument are based on the principle of sufficient reason.

4 This is a controversial claim since philosophers have offered versions of the ‘cosmological arguments’ with explanatory principles weaker (even much weaker) than absolute explanation. But on these cosmological arguments not everything is explained. We could instead say that it is essential to successful cosmological arguments to require an absolute explanation. On successful cosmological arguments, everything really is explained.
The general principle of causality simply states that, necessarily, for every fact, event, or object there is some causal explanation. It is the denial of the thesis that, possibly, for some existing object there is no causal explanation at all. Some objects rather come into existence causelessly and perhaps causelessly ex nihilo. The general causal principle requires some causal explanation for each particular fact, event, and object. The principle implausibly entails that there are no possible worlds in which there are no causal laws, and so no causal explanations for the existence, occurrence, or obtaining of anything.

Causal principles do not in general require absolute explanations. Causal principles require explanations that terminate in an uncaused cause, or a necessarily existing cause, or an infinite series of causes. Here’s a partial analysis of full explanations.

F is a full explanation of E if F includes both a cause, C, and a reason, R, which together necessitate the occurrence of E’. . . . If C and R together provide a full explanation of E, then nothing else logically contingent beside C and R needed to be so in order for the occurrence of E to be guaranteed. (Swinburne, 2004)

A full explanation is one in which the explanans F entails the explanandum E. But F might itself be contingent and unexplained. In a full explanation that is also a “complete explanation,” every aspect of the explanandum and explanans at the time of the occurrence is accounted for; nothing explanatorily puzzling remains.

A complete explanation of the occurrence of E is a full explanation of its occurrence in which all the factors cited are such that there is no [further] explanation (either full or partial) of their existence or operation in terms of factors operative at the time of their existence or operation. (Swinburne, 2004)

So, for example, it might be that high tide is completely explained by the locations of the earth, moon, sun, and water acting in accordance with general relativity. If there is nothing at the time of the high tide that explains the locations of the earth, moon, and sun, or the operations of general relativity, then the explanation is complete. Obviously, there is some explanation for the locations of
those bodies and the operations of general relativity, but the explanation is some time before the occurrence of high tide.

A complete explanation for an event, state of affairs, or proposition E at t is such that there is no other explanation E’ at t for (some or all of) the explanans F of E at t. It is an odd sort of explanation for E. Nonetheless, Alexander Pruss and Richard Swinburne argue that the explanatory principles suitable for the cosmological argument are those that satisfy the conditions of complete explanations.

For Pruss, it is complete explanation that makes possible an acceptable – let’s say, a good enough – explanation for libertarian free actions.

My explanatory hypothesis, then, is that x freely chooses A because x is making a free choice between A and B while impressed by the reasons in S.

On my hypothesis, further, had the agent chosen B, the agent would still have been impressed by the reasons in S, but the choice of B would have been explained by x’s freely choosing between A and B while impressed by the reasons in T, where T is a set of reasons that favor B over A. Moreover, in the actual world where A is chosen, the agent is also impressed by T. However, in the actual world, the agent does not act on the impressive reasons in T, but on the reasons in S. (Pruss, 2006)

What explains why x does A? The explanation is that x is impressed by the reasons in S for A. What explains why x is actually impressed by S but possibly impressed by T? Nothing does. Reasons S are actually present and known to x, and reasons T are actually present and known to x. x just happens to be impressed by the reasons in S. In other words, it’s just a brute fact that x is so impressed. That’s all there is to say on this form of explanation.

Pruss recognizes that complete explanations are not the best sorts of explanations. But the best sorts of explanations are, in his view, incompatible with libertarian free choice. According to both Pruss and Swinburne, the best sorts of explanations – explanations on which “everything really is explained” – are incompatible with any contingency existing at all.