

# The Cosmological Argument

**(a)** Outline the Cosmological Argument for the existence of God. (20 marks)

**(b)** What are the main criticisms of the Cosmological Argument? To what extent is it fair to say that the strengths of the argument outweigh its weaknesses? (20 marks)

- (a)** The Cosmological Argument is based on the view that the universe was caused by a Supreme Being external to the universe itself. The universe is contingent, which means that everything exists because it is dependent on being caused by something else. In turn, that thing was itself caused by something else in a series of causes and effects. However, something must have started this chain of cause — something that did not itself need to be caused. The Cosmological Argument concludes that God started the chain — the necessary being who is not dependent on other beings but who is self-causing and self-sustaining.

The Cosmological Argument is an *a posteriori* proof based on logical interpretation of experience of the universe. It is principally associated in its Christian form with Aquinas, who incorporated it within his famous Five Ways to prove the existence of God. In the First Way, Aquinas used the concept of motion, which he called 'the reduction of something from potentiality to actuality'. Aquinas argued that God is the primary cause or first mover, the initiator of change and motion in all things: 'In the world some things are in motion. Now whatever is moved is moved by another. But this cannot go on to infinity...Therefore it is necessary to arrive at a first mover, moved by no other; and this everyone understands to be God.'


In the Second Way, Aquinas observed that, although all other beings are caused by something prior to themselves, God is not. There is no infinite chain of causes. God is the first cause, the beginning of the chain of causes and the one upon which all the other causes depend: 'In the world of sensible things we find there is an order of efficient causes. There is no case known in which a thing is found to be the efficient cause of itself; for so it would be prior to itself, which is impossible...Therefore it is necessary to admit to a first efficient cause, to which everyone gives the name of God.'

In the Third Way, Aquinas considered the matter of necessity and contingency. All beings in the universe seem to be capable of existing or not existing. Yet, if this is right, it would be possible, in theory at least, for all beings to cease suddenly to exist. If this happened, they could not come into existence again. Hence, there must have been a time when they did not exist at all. There must, therefore, exist a being that is outside this — a being that is necessary rather than contingent and depends on nothing else

to come into existence: 'Therefore we cannot but admit the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another, but rather causing in others their necessity. This all men speak of as God.'

Gottfried Leibniz developed the thinking of the Cosmological Argument with the Principle of Sufficient Reason. He argued that the universe needs an explanation, or a sufficient reason for its existence, if we are to establish why there is something rather than nothing. By going backwards in time for ever, we will never arrive at such a complete explanation; since there is nothing within the universe to show why it exists, the reason for its existence must lie outside of it.

In recent times, Richard Swinburne argued that the fact that there is something rather than nothing suggests a creator: 'If we can explain the many bits of the universe by one simple being which keeps them in existence, we should do so — even if inevitably we cannot explain the existence of that simple being.' The Cosmological Argument requires that God is the ultimate, complete and adequate explanation for the universe, and possesses in himself all the necessary characteristics to be that complete explanation. In this way, although the argument is essentially *a posteriori*, it does depend on proving that God is a necessary being. For Swinburne, as for Aquinas before him, the principle of Ockham's Razor applies — God is the simplest explanation: 'There could in this respect be no simpler explanation than one which postulated only one cause.'

 This kind of question requires proper preparation as it is easy to get confused about parts (a) and (b). The candidate has successfully avoided this pitfall. Part (a) is a comprehensive outline of the arguments, highlighting the particular views of Aquinas, supported by useful quotations and textual evidence. This is then amplified and expanded by the precise references made to the views of other scholars, which clarify the argument and offer a range of viewpoints. The candidate clearly identifies the most important features and expresses them accurately and fluently.

- (b)** Critics of the Cosmological Argument, most notably David Hume, claim the argument is faulty as it depends on the acceptance of the existence of a necessary being and the principle that nothing causes itself. However, Hume, and later Bertrand Russell, argued that the notion of a necessary being is an inconsistent one as there is no being the non-existence of which is inconceivable. Even if there were such a being, why should it be God?

Critics claim that Aquinas was guilty of an inductive leap of logic in moving from the need for a first mover to identifying it as God when nothing in the argument led logically to that conclusion. Moreover, why should God be a self-explanatory, necessary being? What is it about God that means he has no cause other than himself? Hume observed: 'Why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent being, according to this pretended explication of necessity? We dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and for ought we can determine, it may contain some

qualities which, were they known, would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five.'

Hume observed that the argument began with a familiar concept — the universe — but then reached conclusions about things that were outside our experience. He argued that, like all arguments from natural theology, it failed because it tried to argue from some aspect of human experience, which we understand, to God, which we do not. Hume maintained that we do not need to find a cause for the chain of causes if we can explain each item in the chain. For him, partial explanations were enough — we do not require an explanation for the whole if we have an explanation for the parts. Linking together individual causes into one whole is unnecessary and would make no difference to the nature of things. Hume wrote: 'Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable should you afterwards ask me what was the cause of the whole twenty?. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.'

More recently Bertrand Russell, in his famous dialogue with F. C. Copleston, argued that even if specific instances of things in the universe require an explanation, there is no need to provide an explanation for the universe as a whole as we cannot work from the specific to the general: 'Every man who exists has a mother, and it seems to me your argument is that therefore the human race must have a mother, but obviously the human race hasn't a mother — that's a different logical sphere.' Russell observed that there was no need to seek an explanation for the universe at all on the grounds that it was simply a 'brute fact'.

However, despite the many criticisms that have been raised against the Cosmological Argument, it has the great strength that it uses evidence that is universally available and that cannot be challenged. This gives the argument lasting appeal. Swinburne observed: 'God is simpler than anything we can imagine and gives a simple explanation for the system.'

Furthermore, several of the criticisms raised against the argument can be resolved. Although Hume objected that it was unreasonable to ask for an explanation of the whole if it was possible to explore the parts, Robert Gardener-Sharpe observed that there are some things that are more reasonably explained as a whole rather than in parts — a cake cut into 20 slices, for example, is more reasonably explained in terms of the whole cake rather than the individual slices.

Key to Aquinas's argument is his rejection of infinite regress as a reasonable explanation for the universe. Critics have asked why an infinite series may not be reasonable, eliminating the need for a final, first cause. However, William Lane Craig has revived the Kalam Form of the argument, explaining that an actual infinite series cannot exist. This is because it is logically unsound to propose an infinite series because to have arrived at the present moment we would have had to have travelled an infinite length of time and so we would still not be at the present time.

Bertrand Russell dismissed the need for an ultimate explanation as 'gratuitous'. However, F. C. Copleston argued that without an ultimate explanation for contingent beings, there is no reason for them to exist, commenting: 'I don't believe that the infinity of the series of the events — I mean a horizontal series, so to speak — if such an infinity could be proved, would be in the slightest degree relevant to the situation...if you add up contingent beings to infinity you still get contingent beings, not a necessary being. An infinite series of contingent beings will be, to my way of thinking, as unable to cause itself as one contingent being.'

However, the argument cannot explain God, only offer God as an explanation for the existence of the universe. If we are not satisfied with this idea of God, then the argument fails. Nevertheless, as Herbert McCabe observed: 'The question is: is there an unanswered question about the existence of the world? Can we be puzzled by the existence of the world instead of nothing? I can be and am; and this is to be puzzled about God.'

The candidate gives an accurate account of the main weaknesses of the argument, with critical analysis offered through a range of alternative scholarly viewpoints and balanced reason using a wide range of technical vocabulary. The conclusion ties everything together well, referring to both sides of the argument even in the final sentence. Being able to evaluate until the end — without repeating material from earlier in the answer — is a sign of a strong candidate. Overall, this is a convincing, well-structured and thoughtful response — an excellent A-grade answer to a popular question.

**This is such a popular topic that it is worth standing out from other candidates by making sure you are able to discuss more than Aquinas's versions of the Cosmological Argument.**