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Atheism and Theism in relation to the Cosmological Argument

The religious question is a yet unsolved part of Philosophy that finds itself involved in many areas of study. There areas include the Philosophy of Politics, the Philosophy of Ethics, the Philosophy of Science, and many more enumerated philosophies and other -ologies that would take too much time to enumerate. The extent of religion doesn't merely go into the rational and theoretical side of humanity though, but also finds its way into everyday life and the people's praxis. Many people center their lives, voting habits, ethics, and economics around their preferred deity or community formed around said deity. This massive amount of influence upon niche intellectualism and everyday activities gives religion massive sway on the praxis of a nation and the course of its people. Due to these factors, the question of if there is a God, gods, or no gods in this world being a particularly important one. To find out if these actions and beliefs held by a substantial amount of people has some form of central justification would be paramount to advances in human well-being, psychology, philosophy, ethics, and other sciences. Though, the first steps to addressing an unresolved problem is to define and divide the ideas at play as to better understand them. There are two positions one can take when it comes to a stance on God: Theism or Atheism. Theism being the belief there is a God (or gods) and Atheism being the rejection of what the Theist believes. One may claim there is an undecided side of the Agnostic, but the Agnostic position is not a position in itself, instead the Agnostic stance is an adjective to one of the two positions. Someone who claims to be Agnostic, doesn't follow religious tenants, and doesn't act as if there is a God would practically be an Atheist, but since that person is making no claim to knowledge, they are an Agnostic Atheist. This can be true too of the Theist as someone acting as if there was a God, praying as if there was a God, and serving God as if he was real, but providing nothing in terms of rational arguments for God would be an Agnostic Theist, but the term Fideism is more apt at explaining this form of Theism (Amesbury). With an introduction of the two religious stances out of the way, one can commence into the two position's arguments:

To start, the cosmological argument and the tenants of it will be enumerated. This cosmological argument is an argument for God (specifically the 1200s Catholic perception of God) presented by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. The arguments enumerated are found in Article 3 of Question 2 and are commonly known as his "five ways" for proving God. These five ways are a mixed bag of multiple different arguments. Some are teleological and some are cosmological, but the main focus will be the first two arguments as those are cosmological and are critiqued directly by the Atheistic position from Paul Edwards. The first argument derives itself from motion. To summarize the argument: "There are things in motion, whatever is in motion is put in motion by another, nothing can be both

moved and the mover of itself at the same time, and such a scenario could not go to infinity as there would be no first mover to cause the chain”(Aquinas). To offer a memorable one-liner for the argument: one must have a first, unmoved causer to cause a chain reaction and God is the best capable of being that first, unmoved causer. According to Aquinas (based on other arguments) the most likely candidate for such a position would be God. The second argument Aquinas purposes is a similar argument to the first, but instead of the justification being that there is a thing in motion it is instead about causes and effects. The first and second argument are, for the most part, structurally identical. To summarize this second argument: ”There is no case in where a thing can be caused by itself, the first cause cannot have a cause to it as then it would be an intermediary cause, to have no first cause at all would be to nullify the effect of causes, from there we must conclude there is a first cause due to the fact that there not being a first cause is impossible, and that first cause is what people know as God due to the fact that God would fit the criteria of being in this position”(Aquinas). To give another memorable one-liner: For a chain of cause and effect to occur it must have a beginning and God is that beginning. This position of theistic justification for God is far from fallacious or poorly structured in its nature. These arguments on its own commit no fallacies that have to do with the type or structure of the claims. Although this is the case, there are some very heavy critiques levied against it due to the multiple predicates of it. One of the main problem predicates would be the claim that without a first-cause beginning, there would be no end. (Aquinas).

The set of critiques in question is from Paul Edwards in his book *The Rational Animal*. Although this is apart of a greater piece, the over all critique of the cosmological argument has been extracted, edited, and republished by Hector Hawton. From here, it has made its way into the tenth edition of ”*Philosophy : the quest for truth*”, a common textbook centered around philosophy. There are multiple arguments and concerns with the cosmological argument that Edwards will be purposing. To contrast Edward’s stance with that of Aquinas, Edwards is taking the stance that the Universe is an infinite chain of cause and effect that has no beginning or end. He has not totally comitted to this way of belief though, but does believe it is the best given the circumstances. Judging too by Edward’s critique of theism for needing a brute fact(Edwards), it is relatively safe to say that he taking an Atheistic stance. His arguments tackle two different types of cosmological arguments: *in fieri* and *in esse* arguments. To summarize briefly what these two terms mean, *in fieri* is the cause of something in relation to its effect (i.e my parents caused me to exist by procreation) and *in esse* arguments would be the cause of something in relation to what sustains it (i.e water is an *in esse* cause to me by sustaining my life). *In esse* is the main focus of Edward’s most critical and relevant areas. Many of the critiques and issues made to work *in esse* can also be made to work *in fieri* due to the sheer similarity between a causer and a sustainer in terms of practical application.(Edwards) Edwards even mentions that ”the restatement of the argument in terms of causes in esse in no way avoids the main difficulty which was previously mentioned.”(Edwards). In layman’s terms, this means that Aquinas’ first and second argument is structurally identical to an argument that claims that God is sustaining all things and therefore falls to the same flaws. So while bearing in

mind that these two arguments are essentially identical (only differing in allegory), one must take that all critiques of either and *in esse* arguments (and critiques of those critiques) would easily apply to *in fieri*. Vice-versa applies to this rule too. With the similarities introduced, one can start on the flaws enumerated against the *in fieri* cosmological argument: Edwards, as said before, claims that the Universe is an infinite causal chain. This is in direct opposition to many theologians who assert what Aquinas says: "Now to take away the cause is to take away the effect." (Aquinas) due to the fact that Edwards denies a first causer. Edwards justifies his belief with the assertion that "the believer in the infinite series is not 'taking A [, the first causer,] away.' He is taking away the privileged status of A; he is taking away its "first causiness." He does not deny the existence of A or of any particular member of the series. He denies that A or anything else is the first member of the series. Since he is not taking A away, he is not taking B away, and thus he is also not taking X, Y, or Z away. His view, then, does not commit him to the absurdity that nothing exists." (Edwards). This assertion allows for A (the first cause) to exist, B (the intermediary cause) to exist, and C (the ultimate cause or the final effect of a series) to exist without harming the chain at all. In fact, it allows for A to become a permanent intermediary cause that could have another cause behind it (such as cause *alpha*, *beta*, *gamma*, or *delta*). None of these assertions take away from the end result. Thus, according to Edwards, "defenders of the causal argument would contend that at least some of these criticisms rest on a misunderstanding ... They would ... distinguish between two types of causes – ... "causes *in fieri*" and ... "causes *in esse*". (Edwards). To summarize the move: the theist is claiming that God may not have caused the world, but he actively sustains it instead. (Edwards). This, as stated before, is not a good move due to the structurally identical nature of this form of argument and the *in fieri* argument. Such a move proves fatal for the Theist in rationalizing the cosmological argument and also serves as a marker for Edward's strongest claims for his view of the universe (an infinite chain of cause and effect) being plausible. To prove the *In esse* argument is flawed, Edwards claims "...A believer in the infinite series would insist that his position was just as much misrepresented now as before. He is no more removing the member of the series which is supposed to be the first cause *in esse* than he was removing the member which had been declared to be the first cause *in fieri*. He is again merely denying a privileged status to it. He is not denying the reality of the cause *in esse* labeled "A." He is not even necessarily denying that it possesses supernatural attributes. He is again merely taking away its "first causiness." (Edwards). To push this point forward, Edwards hammers in on a carpentering analogy supposed by Father Joyce. Said carpentering analogy is meant to be a visualization and proof of Aquinas' claims about a necessary first causer. The analogy goes as follows: A Carpenter when working has a series of efficient causes that are limited and are needed to do some form of work. In this case, it would be the fastening of a nail. The hammer is moved by the arm, the arm by the muscle, and the muscle by the brain. This sequence of events has a first causer, the brain, and allows for a carpenter to fasten a nail. If the causes were unlimited in regression (so that hammering in the nail would have no beginning cause), the nail would never be hammered due to the lack of a first cause. (Edwards). Such a notion is countered by Edwards as follows: "It is true that a carpenter would not, in a finite time-span, succeed

in driving a nail if he had to carry out an infinite number of movements. ... However, to make the illustrations relevant we must suppose that he has infinite time at his disposal. In that case he would succeed in driving in the nail even if he required an infinite number of movements for this purpose.” His action is simply saying that given infinite time and infinite movements, a finite conclusion or goal could be brought about. This being the case dismantles Father Joyce’s analogy by allowing for an infinite chain of cause and effect to actually produce. Much of the critiques Edwards says are harsh on the Cosmological argument (some would even say that the Cosmological argument is totally dead). The layers upon layers of critique that, in the end, support Edward’s view of an infinitely sustained world are too great for the cosmological argument to bare. This would seem to make the theist have no way to prove a God from a cosmological position.

Though, with the knowledge that the cosmological argument itself is not necessarily salvageable, one must consider an alternative: Even in an infinite Universe there is a guarantee of God due to the nature of the infinite series and the cause and effect relation that exists in it. Edward claims, and arguably succeeds to prove that, it is completely possible for the Universe to sustain itself by mere cause and effect infinitely going. This infinite cause-and-effect chain has no beginning and no end; so long as there was a cause, there is an effect. If one applies the fact that when a series is given infinite time and slight variations, anything logically possible will occur due to the infinite amount of mutations that can occur from any set of given causes. The infinite Universe will iterate between infinite causes and infinite effects so long there is also infinite time for all of said things to happen. Given these facts, there is a logically possible set of causes and effects from the infinite chain of cause and effect that will eventually create God as the Christians know him (Omnipresent, Omnipowerful, Omnibenevolent). I can imagine the Universe clobbering together a perfect set of matter, energy, and other forces yet understood that creates a God, this isn’t something impossible to imagine and thus it can happen. In fact, if this infinite cause-and-effect chain theory is the case, this process would have already happened due to the fact that the Universe is as backwardly infinite as it is forwardly infinite. This means the universe has already clobbered together that set of forces, matter, and other entities to create a God. Thus, even in a scenario of the Universe having an infinite cause-and-effect chain, we will find God.

Some would tackle this assertion by saying such a God is not nomologically (by the laws of nature) possible due to the way our universe’s laws function. Though this may be the case that no omnipresent, omnipowerful, and totally benevolent God could exist in our current understanding of the laws of our reality, There’s no guarantee that we are totally knowledgeable of the laws of nature. We have no good justification to prove that these laws are totally accurate or the end-all-be-all of laws. We could find a law that would prove the possibility of God in a scientific light. Though, even in a scenario where we had total knowledge that the laws of nature forbid the existence of such a God, we would still have no proof that said laws of nature apply anywhere outside of our region in the Universe. We have never tested the laws of nature and how they work in places like Andromeda or Malin 1. Even if we could test these laws there, there is still no guarantee that these laws are true unless we test a significant amount of the Universe. This

brings trouble for those supporting this critique though as, at least how we currently understand the Universe, the Universe is seemingly infinite and expanding. If this is the case (and we aren't merely wrong about that fact too), we'd be totally and utterly unable to prove the laws of nature are consistent across the Universe, allowing for unknown sections in where God could come into being. Finally, let us say that we can completely and totally prove the laws of nature disallow a God and that we have checked everywhere in the Universe, we would also need to somehow prove that in both the infinite past and the infinite future that such a God could not exist. This would entail proving that not only the laws of nature don't apply in an infinite Universe, but also that the laws of nature don't apply in both the infinite past and the infinite future. Even in the case where we could perform some form of super-task to measure the Universe totally and utterly in all of its infinite nature and have all knowledge of all laws of nature, we'd still have to somehow give justification to the methodology we used to measure the Universe. This would likely involve solving the problem of induction. As it stands currently, we use induction to figure out most of the natural laws. We would somehow need to provide good reasoning for induction or use deductive reasoning to justify the laws of nature. Only once we have all of that knowledge we could substantially state that there is no nomologically possible way for a God to exist in such an infinite cause-and-effect chain. This means that any argument from the laws of nature cannot function as we do not possess enough knowledge about the laws of nature to make a conclusive claim, leaving the idea of God being created by the universe by cause-and-effect a still rational conclusion. One might claim that this claim is unfalsifiable and therefore invalid as one could always harken back to a point in where we don't have knowledge, but this sort of critique misses the point of this counter-argument. Its not to justify God through the areas of human blindness, but instead to call upon anyone making a claim that this is nomologically impossible to give absolute justification for their claims to refute this argument. If one cannot conjure up absolute justifications, then one must admit the critique hinges on unsubstantiated, "what if" scenarios that may or may not be the case. Such a scenario, if true, would be damning for this argument, but, as it stands, the mountain of evidence or faithful assumptions one would need to be able to substantiate such a claim is simply out of human reach or out of a zone of reasonability for the thinking person to have faith in.¹

One may also claim that there is no guarantee at all that that this would be the case, to that, I have a question. If one were to enter a magical casino that has a random number generator (meaning that it could generate any number at all, including imaginary, real, irrational, or fractions of numbers in a non-predictable fashion) and said person chose the number '10' as his bet on the machine. Would he, assuming infinite level pulls on said machine, be guaranteed to eventually hit 10? I would say so. Given that one can generate numbers infinite times, has infinite time to generate those numbers, and the goal of this one number stays the same, eventually, despite the odds, one would hit that number due to the fact that the number of tries from starting to end is finite. To go further into detail on this, one

¹This is not to say that faith in a concept is inherently bad, infact its quite practical at times for both philosophies and sciences alike, but there is a line in the sand that one must draw to prevent an escalation of faithful justification from taking over an argument and thus providing nothing useful. This is what I mean by a "zone of reasonability".

may pull the lever 20 quadrillion times and finally land on ten, but that 20 quadrillion times is a finite number that can easily be achieved given infinite tries, in fact, one would only need a finite amount of tries to reach that number. Thus, since an infinite amount of tries is much bigger than a finite amount of tries and all we need is a finite amount of tries, then one can conclude that reaching '10' is a guarantee. Even in a scenario where this can be proven wrong and that there is no guarantee, it is still very much likely that an infinite set with infinite iterations upon that set will eventually provide the number '10' as to have a one in an infinite chance of something happening repetitively not happen over an infinite span of iterations is so fundamentally unlikely that one would be safe betting on the fact there is some form of God rather than not if we have already solved the nomological issue. Even more damning than this, Edwards makes an argument that supports this line of reasoning that justifies the analogy of the magical casino: "...It is true that a carpenter would not, in a finite time-span, succeed in driving in a nail if he had to carry out an infinite number of movements. For that matter, he would not accomplish this goal in a finite time if he broke an infinite number of hammers. However, to make the illustrations relevant we must suppose that he has infinite time at his disposal. In that case he would succeed in driving in the nail even if he required an infinite number of movements for this purpose." (Edwards). In essence, Edwards confirms what I believe: A finite goal (hammering in a nail or landing on 10) is totally possible given an infinite amount of time when iterating over an infinite set (infinite movements or infinite numbers). Unless there is something deeply problematic with this interpretation of what Edwards claims, one can assert that to accept that the infinite chain of cause-and-effect is possible, one would also need to accept that given infinite iterations and infinite time, one can arrive at a finite goal due to the response to the carpenter problem Edwards offers. Of course, this is far from an impenetrable defense as another argument that doesn't allow for my infinite interactions to be a requirement to accept the infinite chain of cause and effect is possible, but I am not aware of any that exist. To summarize this: If one is to accept the infinite cause-and-effect chain as a plausible way the Universe is to be and if there is no better response to Father Joyce's Carpenter problem, then one must accept that God is, without taking into account the laws of nature, a guaranteed outcome.

Another issue is the logical issues of God (Is God as a concept logically possible?). Of course, one could easily deprive the being of one of the three essential qualities and solve the problem (Omnibenevolent seems to be the easiest one to remove as a factor as it solves the problem of evil), but this move fundamentally changes what is meant by God and instead makes this God character more akin to a Grand Architect or a powerful being rather than the God that most religions harken to proper. If one wished to assert that God has all the traits of God and yet is possible, one would need to find solutions in Theodicy or some how rationalize many of the logical problems that exist with God (such as the paradoxes of inescapable rooms or immovable stones). Although I am far from solving this problem myself, I would say the theist's best move is to some how prove that God can exist in such a fashion that sidesteps or outright nullifies logic in its application to God. Of course, such an entity is significantly less intelligible than an entity that follows the same rules as we do, but it is perfectly possible to imagine the fact that God can sidestep logic.

One may claim that such an entity is impossible to imagine due to the fact that it can sidestep logic and us humans, being beings of rationality and logic, have no good way to decipher what this entity would be. This is true that us humans cannot decipher the entity itself, but we are completely capable of understanding the traits of it as those work fine inside our logic. We can understand that an entity doesn't follow our own rules in concept the same way a color-blind man can understand what color is in concept, but, akin to the color blind man, we can never observe or understand the concept in a full or meaningful way. To summarize, we can say that God can create things like circular-squares, brown-pinks, or successful communist nations, but we can never ascertain what those actually are due to our fundamental logic-adhering way of our thinking, however, we can ascertain that God is capable of making things that we humans cannot understand.

Finally, one may claim that, given this information, there could be a possibility of a causal chain that could destroy, or otherwise nullify, God or his powers. While this is true that such a situation could happen, the only thing that could do this would be a being more powerful than God. This would mean the dethroned entity wasn't God and could never have been God due to the fact that they didn't hold the traits of being all powerful, all knowing, and all loving.

To conclude, the Cosmological argument and the critique of it have deep, structural flaws in them that, when further examined, reveal a Godly possibility. Although this seems to be big trouble for the atheist, one should not draw any conclusions about this being an endorsement of a certain religion or the nullification of an imperfect grand architect being the case (after all, there are some very problematic issues with God as a concept when it comes to self-contradicting and the nature of an illogical being). All that is being stated here is that the argument for an infinite chain of cause-and-effect still allows a God (or at least God like) entity to exist, and depending on the interpretation of what God means, one could come to a theistic conclusion. This is greatly worrying for an Atheist who hinges on this argument as a counter for the cosmological argument's theistic assertions. With such a concept now in the wild, it is uncertain if Edward and his critiques are valuable to the Atheist anymore.

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