Phil Religion: Hume on the Cosmological Argument

Demea’s Cosmological Argument

Whatever exists must have a cause or reason of its existence, it being absolutely impossible for anything to produce itself or be the cause of its own existence. In mounting up, therefore, from effects to causes, we must either go on in tracing an infinite succession, without any ultimate cause at all, or must at last have recourse to some ultimate cause that is necessarily existent. Now, that the first supposition is absurd may be thus proved. In the infinite chain or succession of causes and effects, each single effect is determined to exist by the power and efficacy of that cause which immediately preceded; but the whole eternal chain or succession, taken together, is not determined or caused by anything. And yet it is evident that it requires a cause or reason, as much as any particular object which begins to exist in time. The question is still reasonable why this particular succession of causes existed from eternity, and not any other succession or no succession at all. … What was it, then, which determined something to exist rather than nothing, and bestowed being on a particular possibility, exclusive of the rest? External causes, there are supposed to be none. Chance is a word without a meaning. Was it nothing? But that can never produce anything. We must, therefore, have recourse to a necessarily existent Being who carries the reason of his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist, without an express contradiction. There is, consequently, such a Being—that is, there is a Deity.

(David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, Chapter IX, pp. 54–55)

Argument Analysis

1. Either there is an infinite succession of causes with no ultimate cause, or there is an ultimate cause that is necessarily existent.
2. There is no infinite succession of causes with no ultimate cause.
3. So there is an ultimate cause that is necessarily existent.
4. (If there is a necessarily existent ultimate cause, it is a Deity.)
5. So there is a Deity.

Subargument for Premise 2.

1. If there is an infinite succession of causes with no ultimate cause, then there must be a cause for the whole succession taken together.
2. If there is an infinite succession of causes with no ultimate cause, then it is not caused by anything external to that succession.
3. (If anything causes a succession of causes, it must be external to that succession.)
4. Therefore, there is no infinite succession of causes with no ultimate cause.

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Cleanthes’ Replies

- No *a priori* reasoning can establish any existence claims. So there is no necessary being.

  [T]here is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*. (1) Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction. (2) Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction. (3) Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. (4) There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. (5) Consequently there is no being whose existence is demonstrable. (Hume, p. 55)

- If there *could* be a necessary being, then the material universe might be necessarily existent.

  But further, why may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being, according to this pretended explication of necessity? (Hume, p. 56)

- It’s impossible for an infinite succession to have a cause.

  Add to this that in tracing an eternal succession of objects it seems absurd to inquire for a general cause or first author. How can anything that exists from eternity have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time and a beginning of existence? (Hume, p. 56)

- To explain an infinite succession, it’s enough to explain each member.

  In such a chain, too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes that which succeeds it. Where then is the difficulty? But the whole, you say, wants a cause. I answer that the uniting of these parts into a whole, like the uniting of several distinct countries into one kingdom, or several distinct members into one body, is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind, and has no influence on the nature of things. 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. (Hume, p. 56)

Philo’s Reply

- Maybe all natural facts are necessary!

  Is it not probable, I ask, that the whole economy of the universe is conducted by a like necessity, though no human algebra can furnish a key which solves the difficulty? And instead of admiring the order of natural beings, may it not happen that, could we penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies, we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible they could ever admit of any other disposition? (Hume, p. 57)