



The Recent Revival of Cosmological Arguments

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Abstract

Cosmological arguments have received more attention in the past ten years. One reason for this is that versions with restricted or even no reliance on the principle of sufficient reason (PSR) have been formulated. By not relying on PSR – what many consider to be a necessary falsehood – philosophers have been able to escape many of the old criticisms of cosmological arguments. In this essay I survey two recent attempts at presenting a sound version of a cosmological argument. I spend more time on Robert Koons' since his has not yet received the kind of quality attention that the other has.

In 1988 Brian Leftow noted that while ontological arguments for God's existence were at the time receiving a great deal of philosophical attention, the same could not be said of cosmological arguments. In 1993 John O'Leary-Hawthorne and Andrew Cortens noted that 'Cosmological Arguments had fallen on hard times of late' (60). Perhaps the single most important reason for the lack of interest in cosmological arguments was due to traditional cosmological arguments' dependence of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). Peter van Inwagen, *inter alia*, produced what many took to be a knock-down argument against PSR. Let PSR be the claim that necessarily, every contingently true proposition is entailed by another true proposition. Now consider the conjunction of all contingently true propositions and call it P. P is contingent. Thus, according to PSR, P is entailed by either a contingently or necessarily true proposition. P cannot be entailed by a contingently true proposition, since it would be a conjunct of P and thus P would be a self-explaining contingently true proposition which is taken to be absurd. P cannot be entailed by a necessary proposition since the class of necessary propositions is closed under deduction thus making P necessary. Thus, P cannot be entailed by either a contingently true proposition or a necessarily true proposition. Thus, P cannot be entailed by anything. PSR, it is concluded, is necessarily false (202–4). Having apparently shown that PSR is necessarily false philosophers attempting to construct cosmological arguments had to do so either without PSR or restrict or weaken PSR in such a way that absurdity did not result. Leftow's modal cosmological argument attempts

to do the former,¹ while Hawthorne and Cortens argument is an attempt at the latter.

Two very recent versions of a cosmological argument follow what might now be called the tradition of either rejecting PSR or restricting it. In what follows I will briefly discuss the new cosmological argument presented by Richard M. Gale and Alexander M. Pruss ('New Cosmological Argument'). Next, I will present Robert C. Koons's new look at cosmological arguments. I'll spend more time on Koons's argument since it has not received the same quality of attention that Gale and Pruss' has.

Gale and Pruss' New Cosmological Argument

The new cosmological argument of Gale and Pruss replaces what they term the strong principle of sufficient reason (SPSR – necessarily, for any true proposition p , p has an explanation²) with the weak principle of sufficient reason (WPSR).

WPSR: For any contingently true proposition, it is logically or conceptually possible that it has an explanation. (Pruss and Gale 66)

W-PSR is supposed to be appealing even to the atheist who rejects PSR on the grounds rehearsed above. Gale and Pruss write, 'Our new cosmological argument far outstrips traditional cosmological arguments in that it can make do with Duns Scotus' very weak version of PSR' (463). Now the argument:³

1. @ is the actual world and p is the BCCF of @.

BCCF stands for Big Contingent Conjunctive Fact. A world's BCCF individuates that world. Thus if W and W' have identical BCCFs then $W = W'$.

2. Thus there is a possible W' that has the proposition that $(\exists q)(q \text{ explains } p)$ as one of its conjuncts.

This premise obviously relies on WPSR.

3. The proposition that q explains p is a conjunct of W' .
4. Propositions q and p are conjuncts in W' .
5. For any worlds, W and W' , $W = W'$ if, and only if, W 's BCCF is a conjunct in W' BCCF.
6. @ = W' .
7. q explains p , q and p are all conjuncts of @.
8. Thus, there actually is a true explanation of @'s BCCF.

Gale and Pruss have clearly advanced the discussion. WPSR initially looks far less demanding than SPSR and thus WPSR has more intuitive appeal. The objections to this new cosmological argument have focused on WPSR. Two objections stand out as the most interesting and perhaps the most devastating.

The first objection to consider was raised by Graham Oppy (“On “A New Look””). Oppy argues that Gale and Pruss beg the question since he shows that WPSR implies SPSR. Gale and Pruss agree that WPSR implies SPSR but respond by claiming that since the derivation of SPSR from WPSR is not obvious the charge of begging the question can not stick (‘Response to Oppy’). Gale and Pruss write:

What counts as obvious or trivial is relative to the epistemic powers of an individual. An omniscient being would find every valid deductive argument to be such. We were negligent in not stating that our argument is not directed at such a reader, as well as those who have an Oppy-level understanding of logic. (91)

So Oppy has good reason not to be convinced by the new argument, but others not as smart as Oppy should still buy it? If the non-theist is warranted in denying SPSR and learns of the derivation of SPSR from W-PSR isn't the non-theist warranted in denying WPSR? That is, the non-theist is perfectly rational in rejecting one of the premises of the argument.

The second objection to consider was raised by Kevin Davey and Rob Clifton. Davey and Clifton agree that W-PSR has initial intuitive appeal. But so does the claim that it is possible that some contingently true proposition has no explanation. Since W-PSR entails S-PSR this latter intuition is incompatible with W-PSR. Gale and Pruss reply by arguing that W-PSR is ‘more deeply entrenched than the [Davey and Clifton] claim that it is possible that a given contingent proposition has no explanation’ (‘Response to Oppy’ 96).

While Gale and Pruss do an admirable job in defending their new cosmological argument it must be conceded that the overall initial plausibility of the W-PSR has been weakened by the objections presented by Oppy, and Davey and Clifton.

Koons's New Look

Robert Koons's ‘A New Look at the Cosmological Argument’ takes advantage of recent developments in philosophy. Koons argues that due to the recent reliance on modal realism and causation along with developments in non-monotonic or defeasible logic the cosmological argument is no longer susceptible to what once were standard criticisms. Graham Oppy, while apparently not wishing to question the value of these recent developments, argues that Koons's spin on the cosmological argument is far from making the argument rationally compelling. In this paper I will present the cosmological argument Koons gives, and the Koons-Oppy exchange. I will attempt to respond to Oppy's newest version of his objection, thus once and for all freeing Koons's ‘new look’ from the same confusion. Once this is accomplished I will briefly raise a couple of worries (confusions?) of my own. None of these worries are decisive. What they will show is that the

non-theist, although perhaps backed into a corner by Koons's presentation of the cosmological argument, still has enough room to remain reasonably unconvinced.

The Argument

Oppy re-presents Koons's argument in his 'Koons' Cosmological Argument'. With two corrections⁴ to be discussed in greater detail below, I can do no better:

1. There are contingent facts or situations. (Premise)
2. If there are contingent facts or situations, then there is a fact or situation which is the sum of all contingent facts or situations. (Premise)
3. (Hence) there is a fact or situation C which is the sum of all contingent facts or situations.
4. C is a wholly contingent fact or situation. (Premise)⁵
5. Every wholly contingent fact or situation normally has a cause. (Premise)
6. (Hence) C has a cause. (From 4, 5)
7. Causes and effects must not overlap. (Premise)
8. (Hence) C has a cause which is a necessary fact or situation. (From 6, 7, definition of 'wholly contingent').

A few comments are in order. Koons defends premise 2 by appeal to a mereological fusion principle. Roughly, it states that if there are any facts of some type then there is a fusion of facts of that type.⁶ Premise 4 introduces the notion of a wholly contingent fact. 'A wholly contingent fact is an actual fact none of whose parts are necessary' ('New Look' 195).⁷ Premise 5 expresses a defeasible rule.⁸ Finally premise 7 respects a Humean intuition that causes and effects must be separate existences. The things doing the causing cannot be a part of the effect.⁹ This should suffice as an initial presentation of the argument. Oppy's criticism will allow us to probe it deeper.

Oppy's Objection

One of the novelties of Koons's cosmological argument is its use of a defeasible rule, rather than an exceptionless generalization. According to Koons this thrusts the burden of proof back onto non-theists. If non-theists wish to restrict the principle, then they must provide evidence for doing so. Koons writes,

[Premise 5] means that, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, we may infer about any particular wholly contingent fact, that it has a cause. This is, however, all that is needed for the cosmological argument to be rationally compelling. The burden will be shifted to the agnostic, who must garner evidence of a positive sort for the proposition that the cosmos is an exception to the rule. Merely pointing out the defeasible nature of the inference does not constitute a cogent rebuttal. ('New Look' 6)

Obviously, non-theists will be reluctant to accept premise 5, in either its defeasible or non-defeasible form. Hence, Oppy rightly singles out this premise for attack. In place of 5 Oppy puts the following:

5*: Every wholly contingent non-first event has a cause.¹⁰

In its favor he writes, 'Plainly all of the evidence which supports Koons' favored version of the causal principle supports this version of the principle equally well' ('Koons' Cosmological Argument' 381).

Apparently, the point Oppy is attempting to make is that since the non-theist can come up with a causal principle that is just as supported as any the theist comes up with, both versions of the causal principle are on the same level, with respect to rationality or reasonability. This seems to be his point when he states

Since Koons knows perfectly well that non-theists will prefer the kinds of causal principles which I have sketched to the kinds which feature in his argument, it is hard to resist the conclusion that his 'new look' at arguments from contingency amounts to nothing more than the argumentative equivalent of stamping your foot. (381)

Koons's Response

A less natural version of some defeasible generalization is always, absent evidence to the contrary, unreasonable. Clearly Oppy's restriction to the defeasible causal principle expressed in premise 5 is less natural. Equally clearly, Oppy has provided no positive evidence for restricting the defeasible causal principle. Hence, thus far in the dialectic, Oppy's restriction is unreasonable.

Koons points out that Oppy's restriction, absent evidence for it, is as reasonable as restricting the causal principle to all events before some future date. Although the same evidence supporting the defeasible causal principle in premise 5 equally supports the restricted version to all times before, say, tomorrow, the unnaturalness of the restriction calls for further evidence (other than the bare possibility of the principle) to support it. Without further evidence in its favor, the restricted principle is without rational support and the unrestricted defeasible principle remains rationally compelling.

Both in Koons original presentation of the argument and in his reply to Oppy Koons does consider a line of objection similar to that proposed by Oppy. According to this objection the causal principle should be restricted to something like the following:

Premise 5***: Every wholly contingent fact normally has a wholly contingent cause.

Like Oppy's restricted principle, 5*** is less natural than 5. However, Koons does think that reasons can be given for 5***. For example,

contingent facts typically do have contingent causes with finite attributes and these causes are located in space and time. According to Koons's argument there is at least one contingent fact that has a necessary cause and this cause is not located in space and time, nor does it have finite attributes. So, although 5** is less natural than 5 there are reasons for it.

Koons responds to this objection by arguing that the unique features present in the necessary fact can be explained by 'extrapolating from tendencies already observable in ordinary cases of causation' ('New Look' 205). Koons argues for a principle of relative necessity, according to which the causes of a fact are always more necessary than the fact itself.¹¹ The cosmos is the least contingent fact. Anything less contingent than the cosmos is necessary. Thus, whatever causes the cosmos is necessary.

Oppy's Rebuttal

Oppy remains unconvinced. Koons's challenge to him to provide positive evidence in favor of his restricted version of the causal principle is, according to Oppy, without warrant. The mere fact that they disagree and can come up with a causal principle of their own that is supported by the same evidence as Koons's is enough to put in doubt Koons's version of the causal principle. In defense of these claims Oppy offers two analogies.

Oppy's First Analogy and My Diagnosis

In the first analogy two people are discussing the color of some object. Person A says it is yellow. Person B disagrees. A offers as evidence for his claim the following defeasible rule: When some object looks some color it is that color. B remains unconvinced. B claims that these are special circumstances. Thus, the defeasible rule does not apply in this case. The defeasible rule provides no reason for B to change his opinion; using it to attempt to convince B 'is completely worthless' (Oppy, 'Faulty Reasoning' 243).

There is no doubt that [A's argument] is a worthless failure. . . . The mere fact that we disagree on some matters does not give me a reason to revise my beliefs, any more than it gives you a reason to revise yours. (243)

Something is odd here. The situation as described by Oppy does not appear to be one in which A is simply stomping his foot. Person A has provided some grounds for thinking that he is correct. He has not simply asserted that he is correct. He has provided a defeasible rule that, according to my lights at least, sounds pretty reasonable. Furthermore, person B appears to accept the defeasible rule, claiming only that the particular circumstances they are presently in somehow provides warrant for believing that the rule is not, at this moment and in these circumstances, applicable. But isn't B rationally required to provide more than this. How, given B's apparent acceptance of the rule, is claiming that they are in special excepting

circumstances, sufficient for B's claim to pass rational or reasonable muster. A has provided evidence for his claim. B disagrees with the conclusion, but has provided absolutely no reason for denying the rule.

It should be noted that B has provided no reason to abandon the conclusion that the object is yellow for both A and himself. If B reasons to himself that although the object does look yellow and it is true that normally if an object looks some color it is that color, nevertheless the object is not yellow because these are special circumstance, then B is not within his rational rights any more than A would be if he abandoned his conclusion for the reasons given by B. The reason for this is simple. Why think these circumstances are special in such a way that they constitute a reason for withholding assent to the conclusion? B has provided no evidence for his claim that the circumstances are in fact special. Simply asserting that they are is not enough given B's acceptance of the defeasible rule. B is the only one doing the foot stamping.

Consider another case. John asserts defeasibly that lying is wrong. Steve agrees with John. Now suppose that John and Steve are in circumstance C and Steve lies. Perplexed, John demands of Steve to provide justification for his lying, given the fact that Steve accepts the defeasible rule. Steve replies by noting that C is a special circumstance, such that lying is permissible. What should we make of Steve's reply?

Given Steve's acceptance of the defeasible rule that lying is wrong, it is Steve not John who needs to provide evidence for the claim that C is special and thus lying-permissible. Acceptance of the defeasible rule means that the burden has shifted to Steve in order to account for the exception.

Had Steve not accepted the defeasible rule in the first place then the situation would be somewhat different. The lying analogy is meant simply to capture the oddity of the example provided by Oppy where A and B both accept the defeasible rule that when some object looks some color it is that color.

Based on these considerations it seems that Oppy does not understand the nature of the debate. The theist (or the person A) is not simply groping around for a premise sufficient to warrant the claim that there is a necessary being. The theist has provided reasons for believing the premise. Simply reporting one's disagreement with the premise (and replacing it with something else) is not enough.

In this analogy as well as in his first reply to Koons, Oppy has yet to provide any evidence for his restriction. The fact that non-theists believe the causal principle to be false is, of course, not enough. The advocate of the principle has provided reasons for thinking that it is true.

Oppy's Second Analogy and My Diagnosis

A and B are arguing over the color of a swan, unseen by both, in the next room. Both A and B have seen only white swans. Both have heard reports

of there being non-white swans. A does not, while B does believe the reports. A accepts as a defeasible rule that all swans are white. B does not accept this defeasible rule. Hence, A does not believe that the swan in the other room is non-white. B thinks it easily could be non-white. A and B appear to be at a stand-off. According to Oppy this situation parallels the situation between him and Koons.

It is interesting how Oppy presents this analogy. Both A and B have heard the same reports and yet A does not believe them. First, note how different we would react to the situation if both A and B heard the reports and both believed them but nevertheless A accepted the defeasible rule that all swans are white. In order to avoid obvious incoherence perhaps A restricts the defeasible rule a bit by claiming that all swans are white in special circumstances and these are special circumstance. If A leaves it at that, we would no doubt conclude that neither B nor A would be reasonable in accepting this restriction without some evidence in its favor. Apparently Oppy thinks not.

Second, it is important to see that part of the analogy rests on another defeasible principle, namely, the principle of testimony. This principle states that 'the experience of others are [defeasibly] as they report them' (322). Assuming the truth of this defeasible rule we must ask why A did not while B did believe the reports. Absent positive evidence for A to disbelieve the reports we must conclude that A's beliefs are not reasonable.

Thus, one strategy for furthering the debate between A and B is to look for other defeasible rules to see if any of them have been unreasonably jettisoned. In this analogy, there is and it has.

Oppy does go on to give reasons for restricting the causal principle, despite the fact that he does not believe doing this is necessary. Since, I have effectively rebutted the heart of Oppy's objection I will not spend time on what he takes to be peripheral matters.¹²

Two New Challenges

The first challenge is perhaps better thought of as a request for clarification. In Oppy's 1999 article he claims that Koons's indifference to the causal relata is a problem since Koons appeals to mereology and some candidates for the causal relata such as facts or states of affairs do not obey mereological principles ('Koons' Cosmological Argument' 397). In place of facts, or states of affairs Oppy insists on events. Assuming that Oppy is correct then it seems that presentists have a reason to reject Koons's argument.

With events as the causal relata, Koons's argument clearly commits him to some kind of four-dimensionalism. Michael C. Rea characterizes four-dimensionalism as the thesis

that there are past or future objects (or both); and in saying this [the four-dimensionalist] mean[s] to put such things ontologically on a par with present

objects. According to the four-dimensionalist, non-present objects are like spatially distant objects: they exist, just not here, where we are. (246)

Koons's generalization on origin essentialism states that a token effect necessitates the *existence* of its token causes. Hence, one way to avoid the force of Koons's 'new look' is to be a presentist.¹³

The second challenge is that the principle that a token effect necessitates the existence of its token causes makes the token causes of a thing part of the thing. But this seems to violate premise 7 – causes and effects must not overlap. Hence, if the principle is right then the premise is false or if the premise is true then the principle is false. Either way the argument is in some trouble. This implication also has bearing on premise 4, which states that the sum of all contingent facts is itself wholly contingent. If the generalization on origin essentialism does indeed imply that the origin of a thing is a part of it, then the necessary fact that causes the wholly contingent fact is a part of the wholly contingent fact. 'A wholly contingent fact is an actual fact none of whose parts are necessary'. Thus, if this second challenge is on track there is no such thing as a wholly contingent fact.

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Short Biography

David Alexander's interests include philosophy of religion, metaphysics, and ethics. He is currently completing his dissertation, which, by building on the work of Peter Geach, attempts to provide the semantic and metaphysical foundation for a new version of moral realism. Current research also involves investigating connections between various theses in essentialism, perception, and semantics. Alexander holds a B.A. in Philosophy from Arizona State University and an M.A. in Philosophy from Baylor University.

Notes

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¹ As do Kalam cosmological arguments. Due to space considerations I do not discuss Kalam arguments.

² Note that Gale and Pruss' SPSR is not equivalent to PSR as it figures in van Inwagen's argument.

³ This way of putting the argument is taken from Pruss and Gale.

⁴ In Oppy's reconstruction of Koons's argument Oppy uses events as the relata for the causal relation whereas Koons uses facts or situations. As I will argue below this is not a moot point. Since Oppy is reformulating Koons's argument I replaced 'event' with 'fact or situation'. Also, since much of the force of Koons's argument rests on defeasible reasoning I added 'normally' to premise 5 simply to make this reliance clear.

⁵ It should be noted that the formulation Oppy gives, while adequate for our purposes, does not reflect the structure or the reasoning involved in Koons's original and subsequent presentations.

⁶ Formally: $\exists x \phi(x) \rightarrow \exists y (z)(zOy \leftrightarrow \exists u (\phi(u) \& uOz))$. See Koons, 'New Look' 195.

⁷ Formally: $\mathbf{W}x \leftrightarrow (\mathbf{A}x \& (y)(yPx \rightarrow \sim \Box \mathbf{A}y))$.

⁸ The character of a defeasible rule plays a crucial role in Koons's argument and in the objection brought against it by Oppy. I will discuss it in some detail below. Formally: $(x)(\mathbf{W}x > \exists y(y \Rightarrow x))$. See Koons, 'New Look' 195.

⁹ Formally: $(x \Rightarrow y) \rightarrow \sim(xOy)$. As Koons points out the relevant notion of part of is the mereological one ('New Look' 195).

¹⁰ I assume that Oppy's principle is to be read defeasibly as well. An event is a first event iff 'there are no spatiotemporal events which are temporally prior to them' ('Koons' Cosmological Argument' 380).

¹¹ Formally: a is more necessary than $b \leftrightarrow {}_{df}(x) \mathbf{P}b [\Box(\mathbf{A}x \rightarrow \mathbf{A}a) \& \Diamond(\mathbf{A}a \& \sim \mathbf{A}x)]$.

¹² It should be noted that non-theists have other reasons for rejecting the conclusion that the universe has a cause. Due to space considerations I cannot canvass these other reasons. Thanks to Graham Oppy for pointing this out to me.

¹³ Assuming of course that Oppy is correct and events have to be the relata since the other possible causal relata are not well behaved enough for mereology.

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