

The Cosmological Argument and the Existence of God

A Socratic Dialogue

By BRENT SILBY

I have spent many years engaging thoughtful people in dialogue. This morning I happened, quite by accident I assure you, to visit a small Bible discussion group. The discussion was being led by a wonderful young man by the name of Joshua. Because I arrived late, I sat near the back and listened for a few minutes until the group took a break for coffee and cakes. The food was tempting, but not nearly as tempting as the opportunity to meet Joshua. He seemed like he could use some help in properly formulating his argument for the existence of God. The following is my recollection of our dialogue.

- *Socrates*

SOCRATES: What is it you are doing here?

JOSHUA: I help people interpret The Bible so that they may learn how to live according to God's plan.

SOCRATES: Ah, I see. Back in Athens we had many gods, some of whom spoke to us. In fact, my life mission was directed by the god Apollo who spoke through the Oracle at Delphi—a point I tried to make clear during my trial.

JOSHUA: Back in Athens? Apollo? A trial? Who are you pretending to be?

SOCRATES: I am no actor. I pretend to be no-one. I am myself.

JOSHUA: Hmmm. I see. Who are you then?

SOCRATES: Do you not know?

JOSHUA: If I knew, I wouldn't ask.

SOCRATES: I believe you have studied philosophy during your training. Do you not recognize me?

JOSHUA: How do you know I studied philosophy?

SOCRATES: I watch and learn about people. And I visit when needed.

JOSHUA: You are strange. You aren't trying to be Socrates, are you?

SOCRATES: I try only to be who I am. Can we talk about your God?

JOSHUA: Okay, I'll take the bait. What would you like to know?

SOCRATES: You said that you help people live according to God's plan. Tell me, does your god guide you to do this?

JOSHUA: Yes, I believe that I receive guidance from God.

SOCRATES: As a stranger to your world I am ignorant, but I am seeking knowledge. Can you please enlighten this old man. What form does God's guidance take?

JOSHUA: It can be difficult to express in words. But often the guidance presents itself as a feeling. At times it may present itself as words. When I read The Bible, God's guidance is implicit in the interpretation of the text.

SOCRATES: How do you know this guidance comes from God and not from your own thoughts?

JOSHUA: It is a matter of faith, Socrates.

SOCRATES: I have read many of your books and I understand the role that faith plays in your religion. But I am seeking more. I do not know whether the god of your faith exists, so I am interested in your reasons for believing that you receive guidance from God.

JOSHUA: Believing in God is a matter of faith, not reason. This is not the sort of thing we should be arguing about. Nor is it the sort of thing that requires evidence.

SOCRATES: Are you suggesting that faith and reason must be opposed?

JOSHUA: I am suggesting that one finds God through faith, not reason.

SOCRATES: I see. Tell me, when you help people interpret The Bible, what method do you use?

JOSHUA: It is a complex process, Socrates. We identify selections of text that jointly provide a message which helps people understand how to live according to God's will. The word of God is revealed through the books of The Bible.

SOCRATES: So, based upon your interpretation of selected text you draw conclusions about the word of God?

JOSHUA: I suppose you could put it that way.

SOCRATES: This certainly seems like a process that involves reason. You analyze your object of faith in order to gain a deeper understanding. Perhaps faith and reason are not as opposed as you think.

JOSHUA: Perhaps. But there is a difference between reasoning about the word of God and having faith that God exists. I maintain that belief in God is a matter of faith.

SOCRATES: Tell me, my wise friend, have you ever encountered a non-believer?

JOSHUA: Yes, often. It seems that as the years pass, fewer people believe. Atheism is on the rise. But it is part of our Christian mission to spread the word, so we continue to do whatever we can to help people find their way to God.

SOCRATES: How do you convince an atheist that God exists?

JOSHUA: Through friendly dialogue.

SOCRATES: Ah, music to my ears. I have always argued that the best route to knowledge is through dialogue. May I ask, what do you talk about when you engage an atheist in dialogue?

JOSHUA: We discuss a range of things. It depends on the interests of the person I'm talking to. Sometimes we discuss the apparent design in the natural world. Sometimes we talk about miracles. But the most popular topic is the origin of the universe. Why does the universe exist? Or as the philosopher Leibniz put it, *why is there something rather than nothing?*

SOCRATES: And what do you hope to accomplish by talking through such questions?

JOSHUA: Isn't it obvious? I have already said that I do this to help people find their way to God.

SOCRATES: Tell me good sir, would I be interested in finding my way to the city of Western Heights if I didn't think Western Heights exists?

JOSHUA: Of course not.

SOCRATES: It seems to me, then, that in order for an atheist to find his way to God, he must first accept that God exists.

JOSHUA: That is true.

SOCRATES: So in discussing the fascinating topics you just mentioned, you are really seeking to demonstrate that God exists. Am I right?

JOSHUA: Sure. That is an important part of the process.

SOCRATES: And if you are seeking to demonstrate that God exists, you are making a reasoned case to support that conclusion, right?

JOSHUA: Of course.

SOCRATES: Reasoned argument to demonstrate God's existence? Again, it seems that faith and reason are not opposed. For the atheist it would appear that God's existence is not merely a matter of faith. Rather, it is a matter of reason.

JOSHUA: If it leads them to God, then the method is surely justified.

SOCRATES: My friend, I am the sort of person who loves wisdom, even though I have little of it myself. And I think that you are the sort of person who is eager to share your wisdom. So would you spare me some time? I am interested in understanding how the question: *why is there something rather than nothing?* can lead to an argument for God's existence. Do you have time to carry out your Christian mission with this old man who knows nothing?

JOSHUA: Certainly. Helping people find God is my life's calling.

SOCRATES: Then please teach me. How does the question *why is there something rather than nothing?* lead to an argument for God's existence?

JOSHUA: Well, the question seeks an explanation for the existence of the universe. Now, all events have a cause, right? And the creation of the universe was an event, which means there was a cause of the universe. So, to answer the question *why is there something rather than nothing?* we need to look to the cause of the universe. The name of the cause of the Universe is God, therefore God exists. This was beautifully expressed by Saint Thomas Aquinas in his grand work *Summa Theologica*.

SOCRATES: Ah, Saint Thomas Aquinas. A worthy Theologian. Is this his argument? It seems thin on details. Can you please help me learn more? The argument concludes that the universe had a cause, which is God. Have I understood you correctly?

JOSHUA: That is correct.

SOCRATES: And this conclusion is based on the premise that *everything* has a cause, am I right?

JOSHUA: Exactly.

SOCRATES: How do you defend that claim?

JOSHUA: Just look at the world. All events are caused by something. That is a basic truth in science, is it not?

SOCRATES: I am not a scientist, so I do not know whether or not that is a basic truth. But let us assume it is true. You seem to be suggesting that because everything has a cause, the universe must have had a cause, and that the cause is God. Is that what you are saying?

JOSHUA: That's what I just said, Socrates.

SOCRATES: I must be unwise because I have a foolish question. Could not the universe have been its own cause? If so, your conclusion that God caused it would not follow from your premises and you would need another argument to convince your atheist friends that God exists.

JOSHUA: You can't be serious, Socrates. How can something cause itself?

SOCRATES: I don't know. But judging by your response you appear to believe something is wrong with my suggestion. Perhaps we should explore this in more detail. Can you tell me why something can't cause itself?

JOHSUA: It's common sense, Socrates. Things don't cause themselves.

SOCRATES: You are saying that things don't cause themselves because there is a commonsense belief that things don't cause themselves. Forgive me, but I do not find this convincing. Can you offer more?

JOSHUA: I'm not sure how to put it into words, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Shall we work together and defend your claim that things don't cause themselves?

JOSHUA: Now I *know* you're not the real Socrates. I've read the dialogues. You always refute arguments and confuse people. And here you are, wanting to help me. You can't be the real Socrates.

SOCRATES: I am an explorer and a lover of wisdom. And I am as real as I have ever been. If helping you construct an argument leads to wisdom, then I am at your service. Let us work on defending your claim. What does it mean for one event to cause another?

JOSHUA: I'm not sure how to put it into words, Socrates. But it seems to me that for an event to cause another event, the first event must trigger something that makes the second event follow.

SOCRATES: When you refer to a first event followed by a second event, you seem to be placing these events in sequence. Is that correct?

JOSHUA: Yes, it is.

SOCRATES: And can this sequence be such that the first event occurs *after* the second event?

JOSHUA: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: Can an event be caused by an event that has not yet happened?

JOSHUA: Of course not. An event cannot be caused by an event that has not yet happened.

SOCRATES: I wonder if that is true. Let us suppose that it is. We shall assume that the cause of an event must exist prior to the event itself. Does this sound reasonable to you?

JOSHUA: Well, yes.

SOCRATES: Let's consider how this connects to the point I raised about the universe causing itself. If causes of events exist prior to those events, what can we say about the universe causing itself?

JOSHUA: Thanks Socrates. You have helped me find the words. For something to cause itself, it would have to exist prior to itself. But something can't exist before it is caused to exist—in other words, nothing can exist before it exists. So, nothing can be the cause of itself. This includes the universe.

SOCRATES: Well put my wise friend. You have made an argument that is clear and easy to follow. Allow me to restate it in premise / conclusion form:

1. (premise) If something were the cause of itself, it would exist prior to itself
2. (premise) Nothing can exist prior to itself
3. (conclusion) Therefore, nothing is the cause of itself (from 1, 2)

Now, can you please show me how this sweet little syllogism can be used to demonstrate God's existence?

JOSHUA: You are a forgetful fellow. As I said before, because everything has a cause the universe must have had a cause. And since it can't cause itself, it must have been caused by something else, namely God.

SOCRATES: Yes, I am forgetful. Sometimes when I read through a lengthy article or listen to a long winded speech, I get to the end and find that I have forgotten what was said at the start.

Because I do not have your wisdom you will need to be patient with me. I still do not understand how you conclude that the cause of the universe is God. We have agreed that nothing can be the cause of itself—including the universe—but could it not be that the universe was caused by some natural event, perhaps another universe?

JOSHUA: If that were the case, we would simply be pushing the problem back a step. We would need to explain the cause of that universe.

SOCRATES: Why is that a problem? Perhaps it was caused by yet another universe.

JOSHUA: No, that doesn't work, Socrates, because we would end up with an infinite chain of universes.

SOCRATES: Are you saying that there cannot be an infinite chain of universes?

JOSHUA: That's right. There cannot be an infinite chain of causes.

SOCRATES: How do you defend this statement?

JOSHUA: Well, it just seems nonsensical. It's like that old story where the child tells her teacher that the Earth sits on the back of a giant turtle, and when the teacher asks: *what is the turtle sitting on?* the child replies: *it's turtles all the way down.*

SOCRATES: What's wrong with that?

JOSHUA: It is a cluttered, messy model of reality.

SOCRATES: Is there a rule that reality must be uncluttered? Whoever made that rule has never visited my house.

JOSHUA: That's funny.

SOCRATES: Let us explore this and see if we can figure out why you don't like the idea of an infinite chain of universes.

JOSHUA: Okay. I am certain that there can't be an infinite number of universes, but I'm not sure how to explain why I hold this belief.

SOCRATES: We shall work together. Suppose you set out on a journey and you need to travel for an infinite amount of time to reach your destination. Would you ever get there?

JOSHUA: Maybe. Uh, maybe not. I'm not sure.

SOCRATES: Think about how long it would take. How long does it take to travel for an infinite amount of time?

JOSHUA: Forever.

SOCRATES: Can we connect this idea to the notion of a chain of universes stretching infinitely into the past? How much time would have to pass before we find ourselves sitting together having this wonderful conversation?

JOSHUA: Ah, an infinite amount of time, which would mean we'd never be able to have this conversation. We'd never get here. If the chain of causes went infinitely into the past, an infinite amount of time would need to pass to get to the present. It would take literally *forever*. But we clearly exist in the present, so only a finite amount of time has occurred prior to this point in history. So, the chain of causes cannot be infinite.

SOCRATES: Bravo. Well said. Now, if the chain of causes cannot be infinite, and if nothing is the cause of itself, what follows?

JOSHUA: That there must be one original cause?

SOCRATES: A first cause? Yes, that would seem to follow. Well done my friend. You have provided a reasonable defense and you are helping me learn. Shall we insert our additional premise and conclusion into the argument, and perhaps return to it for further examination if needed?

JOSHUA: Go ahead.

SOCRATES: Our argument may now be constructed as follows:

1. (premise) If something were the cause of itself, it would exist prior to itself
2. (premise) Nothing can exist prior to itself
3. (conclusion) Therefore, nothing is the cause of itself (from 1, 2)
4. (premise) A chain of causes cannot be infinite
5. (conclusion) Therefore, there is a first cause (from 3, 4)

Are you happy with this formulation of our argument?

JOSHUA: Uh, yes. I think so. I'm still not sure whether you are trying to refute me or help me.

SOCRATES: I am simply following the argument where it leads. During our journey we may find a premise that requires refutation. If so, we shall refute it. If not, we shall leave it be.

JOSHUA: That sounds like a reasonable approach. Yes, I am happy with the argument so far. As it stands we can now conclude that the first cause is God. Short and sweet.

SOCRATES: It is short indeed, but perhaps not as sweet as you think. Let me ask you this, my wise friend: Can you imagine a universe in which things exist but do not have any causal influence on other things?

JOSHUA: I don't know what you mean, Socrates.

SOCRATES: I'm thinking of a universe in which nothing ever causes anything. In such a universe our premises would be true, because nothing would ever be the cause of

anything, including itself. And there would be no infinite causal chains because there would be no causal chains at all. But in such a universe, our conclusion would be false because in a universe with no causes there is no first cause. An argument with true premises and a false conclusion is invalid, so it seems that we have a problem. How do you propose we solve this problem?

JOSHUA: We need another premise, don't we? I recall that in his *Second Way*—that's the argument we are talking about—Aquinas stated that there is an order of causes. So, he suggests that there are in fact causes. And we observe this in the real universe, do we not?

SOCRATES: That is what the natural philosophers tell us. So, we should include a premise to indicate that causes exist—at least *one* cause, anyway. Do you agree?

JOSHUA: Yes.

SOCRATES: Let us do so and re-examine the argument. This is our new argument (I will emphasize the new premise).

1. (premise) If something were the cause of itself, it would exist prior to itself
2. (premise) Nothing can exist prior to itself
3. (conclusion) Therefore, nothing is the cause of itself (from 1, 2)
- 4. (premise) At least one thing has a cause**
5. (premise) A chain of causes cannot be infinite
6. (conclusion) Therefore, there is a first cause (from 3, 4, 5)

Does this formulation accurately express our argument?

JOSHUA: It looks good to me, Socrates. We have fixed the argument and can now conclude that God exists. He must be the first cause, after all.

SOCRATES: *Must* he? We shall see. First, we have more work to do.

JOSHUA: What work? Haven't we finished?

SOCRATES: Not quite. We have not yet considered causal loops such as A causes B, which causes C, which causes A. In such a case, nothing is the cause of itself since each event is caused by another event. And the loop isn't infinite since it has a finite number of cause effects, 3 of each, A, B, C. But because the loop is circular, there would be no first cause. So a causal loop is an example of a situation in which the premises are true and the conclusion is false. That makes the argument invalid.

JOSHUA: So you are suggesting that the cycle of universe creation and destruction could go on forever? Didn't we already refute that possibility?

SOCRATES: Not quite. Not in a linear fashion, but perhaps in a circular fashion. It is important to represent the thought accurately.

JOSHUA: I understand what you mean, but that would mean that something *can* cause itself, in a roundabout way. Is there a way to get around this?

SOCRATES: I am unsure, my friend. I have no knowledge other than knowledge of my own ignorance. What do you think Aquinas really meant when he concluded that nothing is the cause of itself?

JOSHUA: He meant what he said. I don't know how else to express it.

SOCRATES: In a causal loop where A causes B, which causes C, which causes A, does it not appear that A is somehow responsible for itself?

JOSHUA: Yes, that follows.

SOCRATES: Then is it not reasonable to suggest that Aquinas would want to rule out that possibility?

JOSHUA: Of course.

SOCRATES: I agree. But that is not what his argument is doing is it? At least not in the way we have represented it. In the first deduction we have moved from the premises:

1. (premise) If something were the cause of itself, it would exist prior to itself
2. (premise) Nothing can exist prior to itself

To the conclusion:

3. (conclusion) Therefore, nothing is the cause of itself (from 1, 2)

which we have shown to be invalid because of the possibility of causal loops. So would you agree that we may have misrepresented the first two premises?

JOSHUA: Okay, so how can we fix the argument?

SOCRATES: We need to reconstruct the syllogism with better premises. What do you think Aquinas really wants to say?

JOSHUA: That there is a first cause.

SOCRATES: We know that is his conclusion. But how can he best reach this conclusion. What does he want to say in his premises? What types of causal relations does he need to consider?

JOSHUA: The normal linear cause effect chain as well as circular ones, right?

SOCRATES: That sounds correct. We are making good progress. And in terms of linear chains, what options does he consider?

JOSHUA: Chains that have a first cause and chains with no cause, that go on forever.

SOCRATES: And in terms of accounting for causal loops in which it seems that an event can bring about its own cause, what premise do we need?

JOSHUA: We need to rule out the possibility that something can be responsible for itself, even if not immediately so.

SOCRATES: Nicely put, my friend. Let us adjust our argument accordingly (I will emphasize the modified premises):

- 1. (premise) Every causal chain must be EITHER circular, OR infinite, OR have a first cause**
- 2. (premise) If something were the cause of itself, or causally responsible for itself, it would be prior to itself**
3. (premise) Nothing can be prior to itself
- 4. (conclusion) Therefore, nothing is either the cause of itself or is causally responsible for itself (from 2, 3)**
5. (premise) At least one thing has a cause
6. (premise) A chain of causes cannot be infinite
7. (conclusion) Therefore, there is a first cause (from 1, 4, 5, 6)

Notice how Premise #1 establishes the possibilities; the deduction #4 (from 2, 3) rules out circular chains; and Premise #6 rules out infinite chains. This leaves us with the possibility of a first cause, which can then be validly deduced because Premise #5 states that at least one thing has a cause.

JOSHUA: It looks like we are now finished. Thank you Socrates.

SOCRATES: It may *look* as if we are finished, but in this case looks may be deceiving my friend.

JOSHUA: I am starting to tire, and my reading group are starting to return.

SOCRATES: We are nearly there. Can you remind me, why are we analyzing the Aquinas's Second Way?

JOSHUA: It is an example of an argument for the existence of God.

SOCRATES: Ah yes, I recall. But I am foolish and perhaps blind. Can you please tell me how has this established the existence of God?

JOSHUA: Well, it's simple, Socrates. We have shown that there must have been a cause of the universe. This is exactly what Aquinas set out to do. He says in his writing that "*Therefore, it is necessary to admit a first cause to which everyone gives the name 'God'*"

SOCRATES: Suppose I change that statement to read: "*Therefore, it is necessary to admit a first cause to which everyone gives the name 'Fred'*". Would that tell us anything meaningful?

JOSHUA: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: Let me rephrase my question. Would naming the first cause "Fred" tell us anything about the nature of the first cause?

JOSHUA: Other than its name, no.

SOCRATES: It seems to me, then, that merely naming the first cause "God" does not tell us anything about the nature of the first cause. Aquinas falls short of establishing the existence of the omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent being that people usually think of when they use the term "God". He effectively established the existence of a first cause, and then gave it the name "God", but any other name could have been used. He hasn't told us anything useful about the nature of the first cause. Am I wrong? Refute me!

JOSHUA: I cannot refute you Socrates. But I still believe God exists. How else can we explain the existence of the universe?

SOCRATES: Can Aquinas offer further assistance?

JOSHUA: He has another argument known as the *Third Way*. Perhaps that would lead us to a better conclusion.

SOCRATES: Well, let us not waste any time. Let's examine the Third Way.

JOSHUA: I fear that I am growing tired, Socrates. I cannot manage any more analysis at this time. Besides, the Bible discussion group will soon be back from their break and I must give them my remaining energy.

SOCRATES: I need you in your most able state, and I certainly do not want to steal any more of your time from your Bible readers. Let us adjourn then. We shall return tomorrow and start on Aquinas's Third Way.

JOSHUA: Thank you Socrates.

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