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MINISTRIES

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Answering Atheists: Does God Exist? – The Beginning of the Universe

If you start reading the Bible from the very beginning of Genesis, you can't even get four words in without being confronted with two profound truth claims: First, there was a beginning. Second, God exists.

Genesis 1:1

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

But is there a way to know if these claims are actually true? Are there good reasons to believe that God exists and that He created the universe?

First we'll look at whether or not there was, in fact, a beginning of the universe. The answer to that will inform us as to whether or not there is any truth to the second claim that God exists.

To begin, have you ever wondered why there is a universe? Why is there something rather than nothing?

Philosopher, Dr. William Lane Craig, gives an interesting analogy in this regard: Imagine that you are hiking through the woods and you come across a fascinating ball on the side of the road, and it really catches your attention and curiosity. No one who comes across such a ball would assume that it just exists inexplicably. Everybody would naturally wonder how it came to be there.

Now increase the size of that ball so that it is the same size as a house. That would do nothing to remove the need for an explanation. Now suppose it were the size of a planet. Same problem. Now suppose it were the size of the entire universe. Same problem. There is still a need for an explanation of how this ball came to be.

Well, the same can be said for the existence of the universe. Where did it come from? What is the explanation of the universe's existence? Why does something exist rather than nothing?

Atheists have traditionally argued that the universe is just uncaused and eternal. According to atheist

philosopher Bertrand Russell:

“The universe is just there, and that’s all.”

-Bertrand Russell, 1948 BBC Radio Debate on the Existence of God

This non-explanation is not only intellectually unsatisfying; it’s incoherent and absurd. It entails that the universe never began to exist—that it’s infinite in the past. But reason and evidence demands that we reject that idea.

First, if the universe never *began* to exist, that would entail that the number of past events in history is infinite. But the idea of an actual infinite number of things is self-contradictory. For example, what is infinity minus infinity? Mathematically, you get self-contradictory answers.

To further demonstrate the absurdity of an actual infinite number of past events, William Lane Craig gives a few analogies.

First, suppose that for every one orbit that Saturn completes around the sun, Jupiter completes two. The longer they both orbit, the further Saturn falls behind. If they continue to orbit forever, they will approach a limit at which Saturn is infinitely far behind Jupiter. Of course, they would never actually arrive at this limit.

But now suppose that Jupiter and Saturn have been orbiting the sun from eternity past. Which planet will have completed the most orbits? The answer is that the number of their orbits would be exactly the same: infinity. But obviously that is absurd since the longer they orbit, the greater the disparity grows. Thus, an actual infinity is self-contradictory.

How about this: Compare the number of past events to a sequence of dominoes falling down one after another until the final domino—that is, today—falls down. But that would mean that the last domino could never fall since an infinite number of dominoes would have to have fallen first. Therefore, today could never be reached. And yet, here we are. This shows that the number of past events must be finite. In other words, there must have been a beginning of the sequence.

The great mathematician, David Hilbert, once wrote:

The infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature, nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought. The role that remains for the infinite to play is solely that of an idea.

-David Hilbert, Philosophy of Mathematics: On the Infinite

So since an actual infinite number of things cannot exist in reality, the number of past events in history must be finite. Why? Because past events aren’t just ideas. They really happened. Therefore, since the series of past events can’t go back forever, there must have been a beginning. That is to say, the universe must have begun to exist.

But wait! There’s more! The idea of the universe being infinite in the past not only has philosophical problems, but science also flies in the face of that idea. Discoveries in astronomy and astrophysics further substantiate the fact that the universe had a beginning.

Working with Albert Einstein’s general theory of relativity, physicist Alexander Friedman and the

Belgian astronomer Georges Lemaître predicted that the universe was expanding. In 1929, their theory was empirically confirmed by Edwin Hubble, whose findings showed that the expanding universe sprang into existence at some point in the past.

In 2003, three leading scientists, Arvind Borde, Alan Guth, and Alexander Vilenkin, proved that any universe that has, on average, been expanding throughout its history cannot be infinite in the past but must have a past space-time boundary.

Physicist and cosmologist, Alexander Vilenkin, said this in 2006:

It is said that an argument is what convinces reasonable men and a proof is what it takes to convince even an unreasonable man. With the proof now in place, cosmologists can no longer hide behind the possibility of a past-eternal universe. There is no escape: they have to face the problem of a cosmic beginning.

-Alexander Vilenkin, "Many Worlds in One," p. 176

While other theories have been proposed to try to avoid this uncomfortable fact, they've all failed. Within the scientific mainstream, there is really no question where the evidence points: the universe began to exist.

So given that premise, we are inclined to ask: What caused the universe to come into existence?

The atheist is forced to believe that the universe must have popped into existence from literally nothing. But that's absurd. Things don't just pop unto existence without a cause.

Think about it. When was the last time you observed a house, or a tree, or a person, or a computer, or *any* object just pop into existence without an explanation of its existence? It doesn't happen. Everything that begins to exist has a cause. Why should we assume that universes are excluded from that basic observable fact?

So given this information, here is how we can frame our argument. This is what has come to be called the Kalam Cosmological Argument, and it goes like this:

1. Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore, the universe has a cause.

If both premises of the argument are true, the conclusion logically follows. And what have we already determined? Everything that we observe in our everyday experience, in addition to logical reasoning and scientific evidence, all confirm the truth of the two premises. Therefore, the universe has a cause.

Given our conclusion, we are inclined to ask: What or who caused the universe to come into existence?

Some atheists have suggested that the universe just caused itself. But this idea is incoherent. In order for the universe to cause itself to exist, it would already have exist before it existed. That's simply impossible.

So what's the answer?

Well, since space and time themselves came into existence at the beginning of the universe, whatever caused it must therefore, by definition, be beyond space and time. Moreover, since all matter came into existence at the beginning, the cause must also be immaterial. That is to say, whatever caused the universe cannot be part of the universe. So, the only type of being capable of causing the universe to come into existence would, by necessity, be a non-physical, intelligent mind with immense power who is independent of space-time. This being is what believers call God.

In response to this argument, a common objection you'll often hear from atheists on the Internet is that in order for God to exist, He must likewise need something or someone to cause His existence.

Richard Dawkins writes:

“...invoking a supernatural Designer is to explain precisely nothing—for it leaves unexplained the origin of the Designer”

-Richard Dawkins, “The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design,” p. 141

But this type of “argument” hasn't really been thought through, and professional philosophers—including atheist philosophers—have rejected it.

Here's what atheist philosopher Michael Ruse wrote in regard to the new atheists, like Richard Dawkins, and their use of this overly simplistic objection to the Kalam Cosmological Argument.

“Unlike the new atheists, I take scholarship seriously. I have written that The God Delusion made me ashamed to be an atheist and I meant it. Trying to understand how God could need no cause, Christians claim that God exists necessarily. I have taken the effort to try to understand what that means. Dawkins and company are ignorant of such claims and positively contemptuous of those who even try to understand them, let alone believe them. Thus, like a first-year undergraduate, he can happily go around asking loudly, “What caused God?” as though he had made some monumentous philosophical discovery [...] There are a lot of very bright and well informed Christians theologians. We atheists should demand no less.”

-Michael Ruse, “Dawkins et al bring us into disrepute,” www.theguardian.com

So how would we address the question, “What caused God?” Well, the Kalam Cosmological Argument does not assert that whatever exists has a cause; rather, whatever *begins to exist* has a cause.

The fact that the universe must have an external cause does not entail that *everything* that exists must have an external cause. Only those things that *begin* to exist require a cause—like the universe.

So God, *by definition*, does not need an external cause. God exists by necessity of His own nature. It's impossible for Him *not* to exist.

Think about it. Logically, since the number of past events cannot go back forever, a First Cause must precede all else. That First Cause must be uncaused since an infinite series of causes is impossible. Since God is that First Cause, He never was caused by definition. Therefore, asking, “Who designed the designer?” is like asking, “What caused an uncaused thing?”

Someone might reply, “Well if God doesn’t need a cause, why then does the universe? Why can’t we just say the universe is necessarily existent?”

The answer is that this possibility has been refuted by reason and scientific evidence, as we’ve already covered. Everything points to the fact that the universe began to exist, and therefore it cannot be necessarily existent. Moreover, there’s nothing about the nature of the universe that entails it *must* exist. It’s logically possible that the universe could have failed to exist. Given that fact, the universe exists *contingently* and therefore requires an external cause to explain why it exists.

In conclusion, as believers, we can feel confident in accepting these two truth claims found in the first four words of the Bible. There was a beginning and God does exist.

[Special thanks to William Lane Craig. His work in “On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision” was extremely helpful in the development of this teaching]

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

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