

Oppy and Pruss on Cosmological Arguments

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1 Oppy's Taxonomy: Totality, Chain and First

I think this is a useful taxonomy, although as Oppy draws the three categories, there seems to be a significant overlap between Totality and Chain. If Chain is based simply on the denial of the possibility of infinite regresses, then it can be clearly distinguished from Totality. However, if Chain is taken, as Oppy does take it, to include the principle that infinite regresses must themselves have causes, then the boundary between Chain and Totality is obscured. First, because the only reason for thinking that infinite regresses must themselves be caused would be some appeal to a principle of universal aggregation. Second, because it is natural for Totality to apply aggregation to parts of the universe, as Oppy observes, – for example, to those parts of the universe that do not have human free actions among their causes.

Consider the following sort of argument. Suppose that there is some wholly contingent state of affairs a . Now consider the mereological sum of a , together with all of a 's wholly contingent causes (whether immediate or remote). Call this sum S . S is itself a wholly contingent state of affairs, so it must have a cause. This cause must be necessary, since by definition S includes all of the wholly contingent causes of one of its parts, namely, a . This sort of argument would count as an instance of Chain, yet it is exactly isomorphic to a typical Totality argument, and it is subject to exactly the same problems and objections.

2 The Need for an Evident and Neutral Restriction of the Causal Principle

Oppy is right to focus in section 1 on the problem of finding a restriction of the causal principle that reason itself demands of both theists and non-theists. We should, however, take the time to recognize that this is a problem for everyone, and not just for defenders of the cosmological argument. As Pruss points out, the use of the causal principle is ubiquitous. It would be difficult to find any claim to knowledge that would make sense if the truth of an appropriate causal

principle could not be taken for granted. If, for example, any of my beliefs or sensory states might occur in an utterly uncaused way, how could I be justified in taking them to be veridical? The laws of nature are unable to undergird the regularity of the world without the help of a causal principle.

I'm not denying the reasonableness of a Moorean or Reidian thesis, according to which we are entitled to trust in our native cognitive faculties, unless given good reason not to. However, our common sense view includes the presupposition that our perceptual and memory states are reliable *because* they have been caused in the appropriate way. If we do not have the right to presume, defeasibly, that each such state has a cause, then we would have a global defeater for all our empirical beliefs. Therefore, we must be justified in operating with a principle of causality with a very wide scope of applicability.

It is impossible that this causal principle be absolutely unrestricted, since that would entail that reality, the sum of all actual states of affairs, has a cause, which would contradict the non-circularity of causation, the requirement, mentioned by Hume, that cause and effect be *separate existences*/

So, we all need to find a restricted causal principle. I think we can all agree that the restriction should be both minimal and well motivated. Here are ten possible candidates:

1. All non-first states of affairs have causes. A state of affairs has *non-firstness* just in case there is an actual state of affairs wholly located at an earlier time than it is.
2. All states of affairs that don't occur at a first moment of time have causes.
3. All states of affairs that don't include infinite causal regresses have causes.
4. All states of affairs that aren't extremely simple (very low entropy) have causes.
5. All states of affairs that aren't both extremely simply and occurring at a first moment of time have causes.
6. All wholly contingent states of affairs have causes.
7. All states of affairs that don't include one or more causal nexus have causes.
8. All wholly contingent states of affairs, except for those involving the exercise of libertarian free will or some other essentially indeterministic process, have causes.
9. All states of affairs that could, de re, have causes do in fact have causes.
10. Every state of affairs has a cause, provided that it is possible (de dicto) that an intrinsic duplicate of it have a cause (that is, provided that its internal character is compatible with its having a cause).

The first proposal was made by Oppy in an earlier paper. A couple observations. First, it is hardly a minimal restriction. It is in fact quite severe in its scope. Second, it can't be independently motivated. I can think of only two reasons for the restriction:

11. Causes must precede their effects in time, so first states of affairs could not (de re) have causes. We would then have to appeal to option 8 in order to exclude these states of affairs from the causal principle.
12. First states of affairs either include an infinite causal regress or include a state of affairs occurring at a first moment of time. On this reading, option 1 consists of the combination of options 2 and 3.

Thus, if we can rule out options 2, 3 and 8, we will have disposed of all of the possible grounds for option 1.

Let's consider the others one by one.

2.1 Options 2 and 3: Beginnings and Regresses

I don't think option 2 makes a great deal of sense. First, if causation can be simultaneous, then there would be no bar to a thing's having a cause, even if that thing occurs at a first moment of time, since the cause might occur at the same time. Second, if time itself has a beginning, and the states of affairs holding at that time are otherwise ordinary, contingent ones, this combination of facts would give us good reason to believe that causal connections can transcend the temporal order. In any case, in *Realism Regained*, I give seven independent reasons for believing that causes need not have temporal location.

In addition, option 2 fails to do all the epistemological work that we require from a causal principle. In particular, it cannot explain how do we know that *this* isn't the first moment of time? Memories and other traces represent the past as inhabited by highly improbable (low entropy) states of affairs. Without a causal principle, the most likely hypothesis, given a proposition about the state of our evidence at just the present moment, would be that this is the very beginning of time. We would be forced into a kind of solipsism of the present moment.

Option 3 relies on what Pruss has called the Humes-Edward principle, and I think Pruss's counterexamples to that principle, including the flight of the cannonball, are devastating.

2.2 Options 4 and 5: Extremely Simple Beginnings

We could try to solve the problem of skepticism about the past by moving from option 2 to option 4. According to option 4, only very simple states, like that of the early Big Bang, can happen causelessly. The world at the present moment obviously isn't like that, so it must have a cause.

However, option 4 permits simple states of affairs to occur causelessly anywhere at any time. The complex states of affairs we see around us could be the immediate result of a large number of such causeless occurrences. Once again, we couldn't count on sufficient natural regularity to ground our empirical knowledge.

Moving to option 5 solves this problem, by simply combining the conditions required of uncaused states by options 2 and 4. A causal principle following option 5 will do the epistemological work that we need. We could run a cosmological argument using option 5, but the only characteristics of the First Cause that we could infer would be its thermodynamic simplicity and its lacking a past. This would be too thin a result to support much in the way of natural theology.

Thus, I would recommend option 5 to the agnostic. However, option 5 is relatively unmotivated. First, it imposes two, independent restrictions on the causal principle. Second, neither of these restrictions is itself independently grounded.

2.3 Option 6: Partly Necessary States of Affairs

This is the option I've defended in two articles and in my book. Oppy's objection, in section 1.3, is that God's causing the world is a further state of affairs, and a wholly contingent one at that. Thus, option 4 doesn't seem to work: if the First Cause $*$ causes every wholly contingent state of affairs, then it must cause $* \Rightarrow N$, where N is the sum of all wholly contingent states of affairs. Call this state of affairs C . Since C is itself a wholly contingent state of affairs, it must be part of N . Since it is a part of N , this means that $*$, the First Cause, must cause C itself. This state of affairs, C' , must also be part of N , and so must also be caused by $*$, thus leading to an infinite regress:

- $C : * \Rightarrow N$
- $C' : * \Rightarrow C$
- $C'' : * \Rightarrow C'$
- ad infinitum

I addressed this objection (originally due to William Rowe) in my original *American Philosophical Quarterly* paper in 1996. I argued that, in the case of states of affairs, as opposed to truths or facts, there is in fact no real distinction between the sum of $*$ and N , on the one hand, and $* \Rightarrow N$, on the other. This means that $* \Rightarrow N$ is not *wholly contingent*. It's only wholly contingent part is N itself, and so the infinite regress is blocked. Here is my crucial claim:

$$* \sqcup N = [* \Rightarrow N]$$

In *Realism Regained*, I argued that the causal nexus is reducible to a set of facts about the essences of the cause and effect, More specifically:

$$(x \Rightarrow y) \leftrightarrow_{df} [\text{Actual}(x) \& \text{Actual}(y) \& \Box(\text{Actual}(y) \rightarrow \text{Actual}(x)) \& \Diamond(\text{Actual}(x) \& \neg \text{Actual}(y)) \& Pr(\text{Actual}(y)/\text{Actual}(x)) > 0]$$

That is, the state of affairs of one state's causing another consists simply in: (a) the actual obtaining of the two states, (b) the asymmetric entailing of the cause by the effect, and (c) the causes's having an objective propensity, with a finite probability, of being accompanied by the effect. These three facts supervene entirely on the actual obtaining of the two states of affairs, together with their internal essences. There is no need for a real, external relation or nexus of causation between the two, and hence no need for a third state of affairs of the first's causing the second.

To apply this idea to the present case, the state of affairs of $* \Rightarrow N$ just is the sum of $*$ and N . The actuality of God's causing the world just consists in the actuality of God's existence and the actuality of the World, together with the essences of these two states of affairs. The individual essence of the World entails that the World could not be actual unless God existed, whereas the essence of God's existence entails that He could have existed in the absence of the actuality of the World. So, the asymmetric necessitation is simply grounded in the two states of affairs. The finite propensity of God to be accompanied by a creation of a certain kind is wholly intrinsic to God's nature.

My claim is analogous to one made in the context of action theory by Elizabeth Anscombe, G. von Wright, and others. For example, Oswald's killing of Kennedy is simply the death of Kennedy, given the presupposition that this death was caused by Oswald's shooting. Oswald's killing of Kennedy is not a state of affairs that includes a causal nexus between Oswald and Kennedy. It is simply the particular death that Kennedy died. This is why Oswald's killing of Kennedy can straightforwardly have causes itself: anything that is a cause of Kennedy's actual death is a cause of Oswald's killing of Kennedy. Similarly, whatever is a cause of the world is thereby a cause of God's causing of the world. Thus, we can say that God caused His causing of the world, and this statement is simply a convoluted way of saying that God caused the world.

2.4 Option 7: States including Causal Nexus

If there are, contrary to my assumption above, states of affairs that contain a primitive causal nexus as a constituent, then we would have an eminently good reason for excluding such states of affairs from the scope of the causality principle. Including them within the scope of the principle would clearly lead to an infinite regress, a causal analogue of the Bradley regress.

Further, I think we would have good reason to exclude such states of affairs from both the class of possible causes and the class of possible effects, by a kind of symmetry principle.

Such a restricted causal principle would support a successful cosmological argument. Let U be the sum of all the wholly contingent states of affairs that don't include a causal nexus. Then, U must have a cause $*$, and $*$ must itself contain no causal nexus. Thus, $*$ must be a necessary state of affairs.

2.5 Option 8: Exercises of Free Will and other Essentially Indeterministic Processes

Oppy correctly points out (on pages 13-14 in section 1.2) that libertarian free will is controversial. Some non-theists have believed in free will, however, so if it turns out that the existence of libertarian free will entails the existence of God, this would be a significant accomplishment for natural theology, especially since it is arguably unreasonable to deny the existence of free will. Could we three reach a consensus on the following two claims?

13. If one were warranted in believing in libertarian free will, then one would be unwarranted in denying the soundness of some cosmological argument.
14. If one were warranted in denying the existence of libertarian free will, then one would be unwarranted in accepting the soundness of any cosmological argument.

Given what Oppy and Pruss have written, I would hazard a guess that both might well accept both theses, in which case we would have made real progress. We could treat the conditional warrant of the cosmological argument as a settled matter and turn all of our attention to the question of free will.

However, I'm not inclined to join this potential consensus, since I think that what really matters is the possibility of essentially indeterministic processes. If a process, such as quantum decay, is essentially indeterministic, then one has fully explained any actual result simply by describing the process and its potential to resolve itself as it did. We don't need to speak of *self-explanatory* facts here, but of *complete explanation* in the absence of necessitation or determinism. Suppose $*$, the First Cause, is an essentially indeterministic process, capable of producing no world at all, as well as an infinite array of possible universes. Suppose that in fact the First Cause produced N , the actual universe. This is enough to ground the truth that $* \Rightarrow N$, even though $*$ is necessary and N is contingent.

On pages 17 and 18 of his paper in section 1.5, Oppy simply assumes that \Rightarrow is a species of necessitation. In the context of the explanation of truths, he asserts that it "it is plausible that the explanation that is required will involve entailment." I don't see the plausibility. To demand entailment when dealing with an essentially indeterministic cause is just perverse.

Nonetheless, I'll grant for the sake of argument that \Rightarrow is a species of necessitation. In that case, option 7 seems principled and well supported. Of course the results of essentially indeterministic processes will be exceptions to the Principle of Sufficient Reason, construed in a necessitarian way. As Pruss has pointed out, it is possible to use the option 7 causal principle to mount a successful version of the cosmological argument: simply take U to be the sum of the states of the existing of contingent entities. The cause of U will have to involve the exercise of some essentially indeterministic process involving a necessarily existing entity.

2.6 Option 9: The De Re Impossibility of a Cause

Pruss identifies correctly the central problem with this option: on Kripkean grounds, it is plausible to think that *any* uncaused event is de re necessarily uncaused. If the origin of a thing is essential to it, then the absence of a cause should be essential to anything that is uncaused. Consequently, this restriction of the causal principle results in a law that is utterly toothless: every state of affairs has a cause, unless it doesn't. Such a toothless principle of causation couldn't do the sort of metaphysical and epistemological work we need it to do.

2.7 Option 10: The De Dicto Impossibility of a Cause

Pruss recommends that we repair the defect in option 9 by moving to the level of types rather than tokens, de dicto rather than de re impossibility. This is what my option 10 does.

Option 10 is, arguably, the most fundamental and well motivated restriction on the causal principle. Options 6, 7 and 8 are corollaries of 10, given the following plausible assumptions:

15. If state of affairs a is wholly contingent, then it is possible for a duplicate of a to be caused.
16. If a is a wholly contingent state of affairs that does not include a causal nexus, then it is possible for some duplicate of a to be caused.
17. If a is a wholly contingent state of affairs that does not include an exercise of an essentially indeterministic process, then it is possible that a duplicate of a has a cause.

Thus, option 10 needn't be considered separately. We should think of it instead as the common ground beneath options 6, 7 and 8.

3 Handicapping the Ad Hoc Sweepstakes

In summary, here is my assessment of the options:

Capable of supporting common-sense empirical epistemology: 5, 6, 7, 8.

Capable of enabling a successful cosmological argument of theological interest: 6, 7, 8.

Thus, the crucial question is this: is option 5 more or less ad hoc than options 6, 7, and 8? In my opinion, it is clearly more ad hoc, less independently supportable, than the other three options, grounded as they are in option 10 and the plausible assumptions 15, 16 or 17. Consequently, any reasonable metaphysician should accept the soundness of a cosmological argument that is, at least potentially, useful for natural theology.