

The Infinite Regress and Paul Edwards

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Imagine this scenario: “Excuse me John, can I borrow a hammer?” “Sure, Steve no problem, but I first need to borrow one myself from Bill.” “Bill, can I borrow a hammer?” “Oh of course, but I have to go and borrow it from Sam first.” “Hey Sam...”

Now with a little thought, this cannot go on literally to infinity and still Steve be able to actually borrow and use a hammer. You can’t give what you don’t have. Somebody has to actually have the hammer before anyone else can borrow it. In other words, there has to be a first “hammer-lender” if you will, before anything else in this hammer lending series can receive it. So whenever we see a man actually using a hammer, we now know there cannot have been an infinite number of steps prerequisite to him acquiring that tool.

Now imagine if existence were like that hammer. A being such as yourself could never exist at all if your existence presupposed an infinite number of causes like the above. An infinite number of steps cannot be completed and so in philosophical terms, any infinite series is *untraversable*. Secondly, just like hammers just can’t pop into existence from nothing, neither can any existent. And these are the main principles behind the classical “cosmological argument from contingency” for the existence of God. The cosmological argument can be formulated succinctly as:

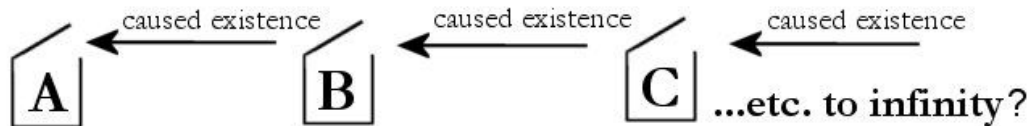
1. Dependent beings exist
2. Either dependent beings exist because of an infinite series of other dependent beings or because of an independent being.
3. Not because of infinite series of other dependent beings
4. Therefore because of an independent being which theists call God

The first premise should be obvious. We are surrounded by things whose existence depends on other things. Human beings are dependent upon parents, food, sunlight, air, and a whole host of other things for their existence. A plant depends upon carbon dioxide and sunlight for its existence. Chemical compounds depend upon their elements, which in turn depend upon subatomic particles, the strong and weak force, etc. We call these beings *dependent* because they rely on something other than themselves for their existence. It is clear that dependent beings are everywhere; so much so, that we find from the outset difficulty in naming anything that does not depend on something else for its existence. This dependency is just another way of saying that these beings are *effects* from *causes*. Every effect (dependent being) needs a cause. Take away the cause and there will be no effect. Take away the causes of human existence like food and water and that person will soon cease to exist.

Now the second premise is clear too. The causes of dependent beings must themselves either be dependent, or not dependent. There is no third alternative. If we continually add dependent beings, we must proceed to infinity because we cannot stop with a dependent being. Dependent beings, by their nature, require another being and such beings cannot have the “last word” of a series. The only alternative to stopping an infinite regress is stop the series with an independent being whose existence it makes no sense to inquire as to upon what it depends, for an independent being simply depends upon nothing.

So the first two premises are obviously true, but what about the third? We already have answered this with the borrowing hammer analogy. Remember, the infinite is untraversable. Just like with the hammers, if anything exists (has a hammer), it must be the case that there was not an infinite number of prerequisite steps to this dependent being having existence. To look at it another way, suppose we use boxes to symbolize dependence in existence:

The Dependent Series



Dependent being A exists now, if and only if B exists. But B exists if and only if C exists. If the series of "if and only if" dependency progresses infinitely, the existence of A will *never be satisfied*. But obviously the existence of A is satisfied, because it exists right now. Therefore, the dependent series must end. But the series cannot end with another dependent being (for this being would need another) so the series must end with an independent being, a first that is dependent on no other.

So any dependent being existing around you right now is like a man who has received a hammer from someone else. Its existence is received by another, and since it exists it cannot be because of an infinite number of other dependent things, but must ultimately be because of a first being completely independent and needing nothing whatsoever for its existence.

But Paul Edwards disagrees with premise 3. He wonders why can't there be an infinite number of dependent beings - each one in the series fully explains the one that depends on it - and to show this he offers the example of a goods train made up of an infinite series of individual *engines* [sic] that are each capable of moving the one behind it – where “every member is genuinely the cause of the one that follows it”.¹

But Edwards entirely misses the point. In a dependent series, every member cannot be a “genuine cause” if “genuine” is to mean complete without any other needed, for a dependent cause exerts causality conditionally, viz., if and only if it too is caused. Each dependent being in a dependent series cannot even adequately account for itself, let alone account for another. An “engine” in his example would be equivalent to an independent being, capable of moving itself, and would not need to be pulled by any other. So Edwards’ example of a series of train engines is disanalogous to a series of dependent beings. Train engines are not dependent on other cars and in the same way; dependent beings cannot be little existential “engines” because they derive their existential “movement” from another. A series of independent beings is not a series of dependent beings, and a series of train engines is not the same as a series of train cars. The only way for Edwards’ analogy to work is to change it back to a series of train *cars*, and then the regress problem arises for him. Anything that is both caused, and in turn causes, has the nature of an instrument.² The

¹ “The Cosmological Argument” in *Critiques of God*, ed. Peter Angeles; Amherst, Prometheus Books 1997, p. 50)

² “The instrument by which the mover moves must both move and be moved (for it is moved by the principle mover, and it moves the ultimate being moved). Hence everything which both moves and is moved has the nature of an instrument.” Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics* (Notre Dame, Dumb Ox Books, 1999) Book VIII Ch 5 p. 553

regress here is vicious. If an explanation for a dependent being is only another dependent being, the original question arises and hence it is no explanation at all. The purported solution only becomes part of the problem. It cannot be the case that a dependent being is completely dependent, and not completely dependent, on another being. Joseph Bobik writes:

If A *depends completely* on some extrinsic source, B, it makes no difference whether there is but one B in existence, or more than one. Nor does it matter whether the number of B's is finite or infinite; and if infinite, it doesn't matter if there is a last member or not. In any of these cases B must of itself be capable for accounting for the existence of A...If B is, like A, something *completely dependent* on another, then it is self contradictory to assert that A *depends completely* on B. And to suggest that there may be an infinite series of B's without a last member is but to suggest an infinite number of self-contradictions.³

To say for any member of a dependent series that the said member depends only on the prior is a contradiction.⁴ If A depends on B, which in turn depends upon C, etc., A would have to completely depend upon B and not completely depend upon B, because A would also depend upon B and C. And again, to say A depends completely upon B and C, but not completely on B and C, because A depends upon D too. Ergo, this objection results in a potentially infinite number of self-contradictions.

Thus Edward's objection is either irrelevant or, *mutatis mutandis*, contradictory.

³ Joseph Bobik, *Aquinas on Being and Essence: A Translation and Interpretation* (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1965) 179

⁴ "It is just as difficult for any supporting member to exist as the member it supports. This brings back the question of how any member can do any causing unless it first exists. B cannot cause A until D brings it into existence. What is true of D is equally true of E and F without end. Since each condition for the existence of A requires the fulfillment of a prior condition, it follows that none of them can ever be fulfilled. In each case what is offered as part of the solution turns out instead to be part of the problem" James Sadowsky "The Cosmological Argument and the Endless Regress", *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 20 (1980), 465ff, quoted in Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1982) 90. Sadowsky argues that to suggest a dependent infinite regress is possible is like commanding 'No one may do anything (including asking for permission) without permission'.