

In Defense of the Principle of Causality

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“Whatever begins to exist has a cause”! This is the principle of causality based upon the intuitive recognition of *ex nihilo nihil fit*, “out of nothing, nothing comes”. For most of us it is a matter of common sense that something just cannot pop into existence out of nothing, but some atheists want to deny this principle since by believing it something like the existence of God may be demonstrated to follow from it. Such Humean arguments are based on what can be called the “principle of conceivability”, viz., that if something can be conceived without contradiction then it is possible. But of course there are numerous counterexamples to the principle of conceivability, one can *conceive* of a jar full of jelly beans without thinking of any particular number, but that does not mean that such a jar of jelly beans could *exist* without being a particular number. Likewise, one can *conceive* of “walking” or the color “red” without thinking of any particular subject that walks or that is colored red, but of course that does not mean these things can *exist* without their subjects.

All of this is fine and good, but counterexamples only show a claim to admit of exceptions and so at best to be only possible in particular instances. In other words, counterexamples to the conceivability principle show that it is not universal, that the Humean has not made his case, but they do not positively show the principle of causality to be universally true.

Now I think the principle of causality is universally true and I also think it is a subprinciple of another universally true and larger *principle of sufficient reason*. If the principle of sufficient reason is true, then so too will be the principle of causality, since they are both based on the notion that being cannot spring from nothing. Stated succinctly, the principle of sufficient reason says:

In order to have X, a thing must have what is sufficient for having X, either from itself or from another

The first half of the principle is self evident, for any property a thing has, it must have what is sufficient for having that property, that is, the sufficient reason is the sum total of necessary conditions which must be met for having that property. If any necessary condition is left out, the property will not exist. The second half of the principle is the “source” portion; namely, the set of necessary conditions can only come from the thing itself or another. There is no tertium quid. A necessary condition cannot pop into existence out of nothing, and so all necessary conditions must be found in either the thing itself or another.

When we are talking about the property of existing, and when that property is not found in the thing itself, then the sufficient reason for that thing’s existence must be found in another. Herein lies the principle of causality. If the reason for a thing’s existence is not found in itself, it must be found in another *being*. “Nothing” is not a possible source for the existence of anything. Again this is obviously true for most, but some want to object to it because this principle is the basis for cosmological arguments that demonstrate the existence of God. Self-evident statements contain their own evidence, and so to try and demonstrate them is next to impossible since it would be an attempt to clarify by the more obscure, and so this would be unwise especially at the rhetorical level. At the philosophical level the best one can do is to demonstrate the principle indirectly by *reductio ad absurdum*.

I offer four arguments in support of this principle.

The Argument from the Principle of Identity¹

It is self evident that a thing must be *really* distinct from its contradictory. There must be a real difference between X and not-X. This is because everything is itself and not something else, which is known as the principle of identity (A is A). To deny the principle of identity results in contradiction, for it is to say that A is not-A.

By the same token a being must be really distinct from non-being. To deny this is to say that being is non-being, a contradiction. A being is quite simply that which is distinct from nothing, a thing that has existence. If we ask what makes this being a being (that is what makes it distinct from nothing) to reply by saying “nothing” is tantamount to saying there is nothing that makes this being distinct from non-being, in other words, to say “nothing” is what makes being distinct from non-being means being is identifiable with non-being – a contradiction. The principle of identity requires a real distinction between being and non-being, and this applies to both a currently existing being as well as any being that comes into existence at some point in time. At the point of the being’s existence, there must be an element of distinction between being and non-being, and “nothing” cannot serve as a real element of distinction.

Any existing thing must have that which makes it distinct from nothing, or else it would *not be* distinct from nothing. To say “there is nothing that makes this thing distinct from nothing” is for “it” to be nothing at all. If a thing lacked a sufficient reason for its existence, its existence would be insufficient. In a similar way, statements like “this red wagon does not have what is sufficient for it to be red” or “this man who is a PhD does not have what is sufficient for being a PhD” are nonsensical contradictions.

Thus, if a being is not the source of its own existence, the only other source is some other being, indicating that the being in question is contingent or *caused*. There is no such thing as an uncaused being that springs from nothing.

The Argument from Possibles²

In order for something to come into existence it must at least be the case that prior to that occasion, the being’s existence was at least possible. Not only must it be said that the being’s existence was possible, but that it was eternally possible. Moreover, this possibility must also be *real*. To say that a being came into existence when it wasn’t really possible is a contradiction. So it is *necessarily* the case that being’s existence was *really* and *eternally* possible.

But the real possibility cannot be “nothing”. To say real possibility is nothing is to say there is no real possibility, hence the being’s existence would be impossible. Real possibility is an actuality of sorts and quite distinct from no-possibility (the impossible).

But even more is required than mere possibility, because it is quite apparent that not every possible thing exists. Some possibilities are actualized and some are not. Thus, over and above the possible is needed a principle that determines the difference, and this principle cannot be nothing (for the reasons already given) nor could it be another possible (for then we are on an

¹ This was the preferred argument of both Reginald Garrigou Lagrange (*De Revelatione* (Romae: Libreria Editrice Religiosa, 1945) p. 122) and Jacques Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics* (New York: Sheed and Ward 1958, p. 99-101)

² This argument is a slightly altered version of Arthur Little’s in *The Platonic Heritage of Thomism* (Dublin: Golden Eagle Books, 1950)

infinite regress). Thus the only available option is that the determining principle of possibilities must be real being.

The Argument from Common Experience

One can even make an inductive case for the principle of sufficient reason that amounts to *physical certitude*. Propositions such as “I will die someday”, “fire is hot”, and “if I drop a rock it will fall,” “the sun will rise tomorrow”, etc., are exceptionless occurrences in our world, and that something cannot spring into being from nothing is equally held as physically impossible. Denying the principle of sufficient reason would equally avail against these other physical certitudes. The principle of sufficient reason is every bit as certain as any law of physics, and so it would be entirely arbitrary and *ad hoc* to deny this principle. As William Lane Craig strappingly states:

That something should spring into existence out of nothing is so counter-intuitive that to attack Maimonides and Aquinas at this point seems to color one’s intellectual integrity. The old principle that *ex nihilo nihil fit* appears to be so manifestly true that a sincere denial of this axiom is well-nigh impossible...The causal proposition [affirming *ex nihilo nihil fit*] could be defended as an empirical generalization based on the widest sampling of experience. The empirical evidence in support of the proposition is absolutely overwhelming, so much so that Humean empiricists could demand no stronger evidence in support of any synthetic statement. To reject the causal principle is therefore completely arbitrary...it is completely confirmed in our experience. Constantly verified and never falsified, the causal proposition may be taken as an empirical generalization enjoying the strongest support experience affords.³

Can the Humean provide *one single example* of a being in the natural world of which it can be said that it clearly has no sufficient reason for its existence? Given the necessity and ubiquity of the principle of sufficient reason, denying it with no good reason is an instance of the *ad ignorantiam* fallacy, a “brute fact fallacy”.

The Argument from Intuition and Burden of Proof

Even if none of the above are successful, there is at least this. We see it as intuitively true that something cannot just pop into existence out of nothing. This is a first principle of reasoning for all causes, whether physical or metaphysical. Now it’s clear that reason demands that counterintuitive claims be substantiated. Thus, if the Humean wants to deny this principle, they must shoulder the burden of proof in the same way that a man who says all human experiences might be the result of their brains being in the vat of an evil scientist. Just because something is logically *possible* does not mean it is *plausible*. To make an implausible claim and then ask the opposition to disprove it epitomizes the *ad ignorantiam* fallacy.

Conclusion

Finally, mention should be made of the arbitrary, unfalsifiable and unreasonable shell in which the atheist encases himself. The presumption of atheism first appeals to Ockham’s razor – the burden of proof to go beyond the material universe lies with the theist. Hence, the atheist claims that the theist must show how naturalism is insufficient. However, when evidence is brought forth by say with the cosmological argument, the atheist will reply with something like the Humean, “Well that doesn’t show my worldview as insufficient, it is possible that something came out of nothing”. So in the end we have a bizarre marriage of Ockham’s razor and a denial of *ex nihilo*

³ William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2000) p. 143 - 145
Even Bertrand Russell argued the causal principle was as certain as any other physical law (*The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press 1979) p. 68-9)

nihil fit. What the atheist basically says in the same breath is don't multiply causes without necessity and oh by the way, don't bother in trying to show any necessity because *there can never be any* given that "nothing" might sufficiently explain whatever seems to be lacking in the atheistic worldview.

Given that this unfalsifiable materialistic fortress mentality is entirely unreasonable, and given the four arguments above in support of the principle of sufficient reason and the principle of causality, it seems to me that there is no good reason to deny these two principles, and every good reason to accept them.