Mackie: Objections to the Cosmological Argument

Apr. 23, 2014
Overview 1

Background

Overview

Objections

1 Against the argument from sufficient reason
2 Against the Third Way

Summary
John L. Mackie

- 1917–1981, Australia
- British Academy
- ethics: moral skepticism (no objective “right” or “wrong”)
- metaphysics: nature of causation (Humean)
- philosophy of religion: arguing against God’s existence (argument from evil)
# The Five Ways

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Observation premise</th>
<th>Conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>There are things in motion</td>
<td>There exists a first mover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Everything natural has an efficient cause</td>
<td>There exists a cause of the universe</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Some things are generated and perish</td>
<td>There exists a first necessary being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Some things are more or less good</td>
<td>There exists something which is maximally good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Some things act with regularity</td>
<td>There exists an ultimate end of all things</td>
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</tbody>
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Objection 1: Sufficient Reason

- The objection is addressed directly against Leibniz’s argument
- (G.W. Leibniz: German philosopher and mathematician, 1646–1716)

**Principle of sufficient reason**

According to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), nothing is without explanation; there must be a sufficient reason for the existence of every object, or for the occurrence of every event.

- Leibniz’s cosmological argument: there must be a sufficient reason why the world exists; we call this God. Therefore, God exists.
- In Aquinas: second way
The Second Way

\[ P_1 \] Everything natural has an efficient cause. [Observ. p.]

\[ P_2 \] The universe is something natural. [Assumption]

\[ \therefore C_3 \] The universe has an efficient cause. [MP: 1,2]

\[ P_4 \] Nothing can be the efficient cause of itself. [Assumption]

\[ P_5 \] No part of a thing can be the efficient cause of the thing. [Assumption]

\[ \therefore C_6 \] The cause of the universe cannot be the universe itself nor anything in the universe. [3,4,5]

\[ \therefore C_7 \] Something exists, which is the cause of the universe, but is not the universe itself nor part of it. [3,6]

\[ P_8 \] We call such a thing God.

\[ \therefore \] Therefore, God exists. [7,8]
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Mackie Against the PSF

2 main objections:

1. How do we know that everything must have a sufficient reason (efficient cause)?

2. How can there be a being that does not need a sufficient reason (efficient cause)?

Our reasons for believing in the PSF:

- Are not a priori
- Thus, it must be a posteriori
- However, merely on the basis of observing it in particular instances, we cannot extrapolate and say that the world itself needs a sufficient reason.
Could Aquinas Give a Response?

- We know that everything has an efficient cause by experience. Since we have never encountered any counter-examples, it is reasonable to suppose that the world itself is no exception.

- For God as not having an efficient cause: God is not part of the natural world ($P_1$ does not apply to him), but is something transcendent, who exists necessarily.
The Third Way (from Mackie, p.218)

(I) If everything were able-not-to-be, then at some time there would have been nothing (because what is able-not-to-be, at some time is not); and then (since what does not exist cannot begin to be except through something which is) even now there would be nothing. It is plainly not true that there is nothing now; so it cannot be true that everything is able-not-to-be. That is, there must be at least one thing that is necessary.

(II) Everything that is necessary either has a cause of its necessity outside itself, or it does not. But it is not possible to go to infinity in a series of necessary things each of which has a cause of its necessity outside itself. . . . Therefore we must assume something which is necessary through itself, which does not have a cause of its necessity outside itself, but which is the cause of the necessity of the other things; and this men all call God.
The Third Way: Argument From Possibility and Necessity

\[ P_1 \] Some things are able to exist and not to exist.

\[ P_2 \] Things able not to exist, at some point aren’t.

\[ \therefore C_3 \] If everything is of this kind, then either things would have come from nothing, or nothing would exist now.

\[ P_4 \] Nothing can come from nothing.

\[ P_5 \] There do exist things right now. [From 3,4]

\[ \therefore C_6 \] There must be a thing that is not able not to exist.

\[ P_7 \] Such a thing either has a cause for its necessity in itself or in something external to it.

\[ P_8 \] We cannot go into an infinite regress with the series of such external causes.

\[ \therefore \] There must be a necessary being that does not have an external cause.
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Mackie Against the Third Way 1

1 Against the first stage:

- Why is $P_2$ true? (= Things that are able not to exist, at some point do not exist.) — Possible response: there would be nothing to keep up the infinite chain.
- Why is $P_4$ true? (= Nothing can come from nothing.) — Possible response: seems to be constantly confirmed by experience.

“Altogether, then, the first stage of Aquinas’s argument falls short of watertight demonstration, but it gives some lower degree of support to the conclusion that there is at least one thing that is necessary (= it is not able-not-to-be).” (p.219)
2 Against the second stage:

- The impossibility of an infinite regress only stands when there is an order of dependence: e.g., in a train case, where the motion of the cars are completely dependent and determined by that of the previous car.
- However, we have no reason to suppose that there is actually such an order of dependence between cause and effect in case of necessary beings.
- Even if the argument succeeds, “why should God, rather than anything else, be taken as the only satisfactory termination of the regress?” (Aquinas’s reply: this is just what we mean by the term ‘God’.)

According to Mackie, none of the Five Ways work: they either depend on some untenable medieval physical principle, or just fail to establish the conclusion.

Even if the arguments work, that would have nothing to do with the existence of God (as we know it).