

## OVERVIEW OF AL GHAZALI'S ARGUMENT

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

### PREMISE 1: EVERYTHING THAT BEGINS TO EXIST HAS A CAUSE.

Al Ghazali himself explains this premise by saying that “the existence in time of every temporal thing has a cause” (p. 123). He then goes on to define what he means by a temporal thing as follows: “by ‘temporal thing’ we mean that which was nonexistent and which then became existent” (p. 125). So, his idea of a temporal thing is just something that has a beginning to its existence. For example, you and I are temporal things as there was a beginning to our existence. 100 years ago neither of us existed but sometime between then and now we were born or, as Ghazali puts it, ‘became existent.’

Now that we understand what the premise says, we need to ask: what reasons can be given for thinking that it is true?

- Traditionally there have been two different methods people have used to try to provide reasons for believing this premise (IMPORTANT NOTE: Al Ghazali does NOT give an empirical defense of premise 1. His own development of the argument gives the *a priori* defense of premise 1):
  - AN EMPIRICAL DEFENSE: an empirical defense of a claim amounts to an attempt to show how we can know the premise is true by appealing to our observations using our various senses.
    - *An example*: to know that it is raining outside you must appeal to observations we have made. We might appeal to either a direct observation using your own eyes of the relevant location, or maybe by making observations of a weather report on the internet.
    - *Application to Premise 1*: one might similarly try to argue for premise one by appealing to the observations we have made of various things that have begun to exist. Individual people, cars, computers, and tables are examples of things both that have beginnings and that we have observed. In every case that we have observed these things began to exist due to a cause. None of these things popped into existence randomly or spontaneously. Since everything we have observed with a beginning has also had a cause, we might conclude that everything with a beginning (even those things with beginnings that we have not observed) has a cause.

PROBLEM: Applying this reasoning to the case at hand seems to commit the fallacy of composition.

*THE FALLACY OF COMPOSITION* =<sub>df</sub> a mistake in reasoning when one inappropriately uses features of the parts to infer that the whole also has that feature, or vice versa.

Example: LeBron James' body is entirely composed of atoms. Every single atom making up his body is tiny. It would, however, be a mistake to infer that because the atoms making up LeBron James' body (i.e. the parts of his body) are tiny that his body (i.e. the whole of his body) is also tiny.

Application: Similarly, many think that it is a fallacy to infer that because everything *inside* the universe with a beginning like you, me, computers, chairs, etc. (i.e. the parts of the universe) have a cause that the universe itself (the whole) would have a cause for its beginning.

- AN A PRIORI DEFENSE: an a priori defense of a claim amounts to an attempt to show how we can know the premise is true by appealing solely to our understanding of what that claim says *WITHOUT appealing to any sense observations as evidence.*
  - *An example:* I can know that all bachelors are unmarried without needing to appeal to any of my observations as evidence. I *understand* what it means to be a bachelor. A bachelor is, by definition, an adult unmarried male. So, I know that all bachelors are unmarried just by understanding what this claim says.

NOTE: My ability to know this truth about bachelors is very different than my ability to know whether it is raining outside. I cannot know whether it is raining outside simply by understanding what this claim means. At this exact moment, I understand perfectly well what it means to say “it is raining in Minneapolis” but I don’t know whether it is true or false (since I haven’t checked any weather report or asked my family that live there).

- *Application to Premise 1:* The idea here is that if we understand what it means for something to “begin to exist” and if we understand what “a cause” is, then we will immediately see that it must be true that “everything that begins to exist has a cause” without needing to make any observations. According to Al Ghazali, if we understand these words, then it will be apparent to us that the very idea that something pops into existence spontaneously/randomly without a cause is just as non-sensical as the claim that there exists a married bachelor.
  - In Ghazali’s own words, “Once he has understood the signification of those terms, his intellect will necessarily affirm that ‘every temporal thing has a cause,’” (p. 125).
  - For those that might not have a full understanding of what the premise says he attempts to explain that something that begins to exist is such that there is a time where it did not exist and a later time where it does exist. If there is an earlier time where the thing did not exist, then “its existence would require a deciding factor for its existence over nonexistence so that it nonexistence would change to existence... In short, that nonexistent being which continues in nonexistence—its nonexistence will never be supplanted by existence so long as a deciding factor that renders existence over continuing nonexistence is not realized” (p. 126).
  - Ghazali seems to be appealing to an idea analogous to Newton on motion. According to Newton, objects at rest tend to stay at rest *unless something acts upon that object*. Ghazali seems to be saying that objects with *nonexistence* (i.e. does not exist) tend to stay in nonexistence unless some force acts upon it and brings it into existence. He explains, however, that the idea that it will stay in nonexistence unless some force or deciding factor brings it into existence is equivalent to saying that it must have a cause.

A WORRY TO THINK ABOUT: To talk about a married bachelor is a contradiction. It literally amounts to saying that there is something that is both

married and not married. It isn't clear however that we can unpack the definitions of "temporal being" and "cause" in a way that will lead to an explicit contradiction like this. So, maybe it isn't really a nonsensical contradiction to say that something spontaneously pops into existence without a cause. Maybe it is just a psychological bias of humans leads us to mistakenly think things always need causes.

## PREMISE 2: THE UNIVERSE BEGAN TO EXIST

There are three main kinds of defenses that have been given for the claim that the universe has a beginning:

- *A Traditional Empirical Defense*
  - Every physical thing that we have observed inside the universe (such as you, me, tables, chairs, computers, etc.) has a beginning. Since, the universe is just composed of all these physical things that each have a beginning, the universe itself must have a beginning as well.
    - Al Ghazali does seem to present his kind of argument when he argues that the universe is a body (physical thing) and "that no body is devoid of temporal things; whatever is not devoid of temporal things is temporal; from this it necessarily follows that every body [including the universe itself] is temporal" (p. 127).
  - **WORRY:** One of the main worries here is that this reasoning again seems to commit the fallacy of composition. Critics of Ghazali's reasoning (the *falsaijah*) believe that the universe is eternal and has an infinite past, but that the universe is constantly changing from one moment to the next. At each new moment of time, something new might pop into existence (enter the universe) or something old might pop out of existence (exit the universe). This constant changing or evolution of the universe would thereby allow that the pieces inside the universe all have a beginning even if the universe itself is eternal and infinite.
- *A Philosophical or A Priori Defense*
  - Al Ghazali suggests that if we have a full understanding of what it would be like for there to be an infinite past then we will see that this leads to absurd conclusions. As such, we must reject the hypothesis that the past is infinite to avoid these absurdities.
    - **Absurdity 1:** Leads to the claim that an infinite passage of time has already elapsed (or completed or finished). The block of time in the past that was leading up to 10:53am on 9/10/2018 has already finished. If the past is infinite, then that block of time that has passed is infinite. However, to suppose that an infinite or endless passage of time has actually completed is absurd. An endless thing cannot finish.
    - **Absurdity 2:** Every answer we might give to whether the number of years in the past is even or odd is absurd. It is absurd to say that the number is neither even nor odd. It is also absurd to say that the number is both even and odd. However, it is equally absurd to say that it is even because that would mean the reason it wasn't odd was because it lacked one year. It's absurd to say that an infinite number of years *lacks* a year. Finally, it is just as absurd to say that the number is odd because that would mean it only failed to be even

- because it lacked one year. It is again absurd to say that an infinite number of years *lacks* a year.
- **Absurdity 3:** Leads to the claim that there are two infinite numbers, one of which is smaller than the other. This is the example of the orbits of the earth and Saturn around the sun.
  - **Bonus Absurdity:** If we assume that an *actual* infinity is possible, then this leads to the absurdity that Hilbert's Hotel is possible. It is absurd though to say that it is possible for there to be a hotel where every room is occupied but nonetheless there is always room for one more person (*without kicking anyone out of the hotel or making anyone share a room*).
  - **AN OBJECTION:** Perhaps these supposed absurdities only seem impossible to us because humans are incapable of actually understanding the idea of infinity fully. In contemporary mathematics infinity behaves in ways that are quite unintuitive to most people. Infinity is not a number and so is neither even nor odd. There is an equal amount of even numbers (e.g. 2, 4, 6, ...) as there are natural numbers (e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4 ...). There is a mathematical proof that there are in fact different sizes of infinity. These ideas from contemporary mathematics seem counterintuitive to many people because people tend to think of infinity as just another really big number even though it is not a number.
- *The Scientific (Empirical) Defense*
    - The big bang theory is a very well confirmed theory. By observing the red shift of stars we are able to see that the universe is expanding. This means that if we were to rewind time we would see the universe getting smaller, smaller, and smaller until you get to a point in the past where the entire universe is contained in a single infinitesimally small point. This seems to imply that there was a *beginning* to our universe. So, given that the big bang theory seems well confirmed by our scientific observations, it seems that we have good scientific reason to believe that our universe has a beginning.

#### POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS OF AL GHAZALI'S ARGUMENT FOR GOD

Note that many might worry that *even if* Al Ghazali can adequately defend his premises, the argument seems to fall short of proving what he wants to. His conclusion says that "the universe has a cause", but it seems like there would need to be additional argument needed to establish that God exists... As an exercise for assessing Ghazli's argument and brainstorming how someone might add on to it, try to reflect on the following questions:

1. Why couldn't the cause of the universe be something other than God?
2. Why think the cause of the universe must be supernatural rather than natural?
3. Why think the cause of the universe must be a person?
4. Even *if* the cause of the universe were a person, what reason is there to think that the cause is a perfect all knowing, all good, and all powerful person?