Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 21 | Issue 2

Article 7

4-1-2004

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Recommended Citation

Oppy, Graham (2004) "Faulty Reasoning About Default Principles in Cosmological Arguments," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil20042127

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol21/iss2/7>

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FAULTY REASONING ABOUT DEFAULT PRINCIPLES IN COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Graham Oppy

Robert Koons claims that my previous critique of his “new” cosmological argument is vitiated by confusion about the nature of defeasible argumentation. In response, I claim that Koons misrepresents—and perhaps misunderstands—the nature of my objections to his “new” cosmological argument. The main claims which I defend are: (1) that the move from a non-defeasible to a defeasible causal principle makes absolutely no difference to the success of the cosmological argument in which it is contained; and (2) that, since it is perfectly well understood that non-theists have many reasons for rejecting the defeasible causal principle, it is pointless to claim that the move to a defeasible principle brings about a shift in the “burden of proof”. (Since some people may have forgotten—or may choose to ignore—the fact that non-theists do have reasons for rejecting the defeasible causal principle, I also provide a discussion of a modest sample of these reasons.)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Robert Koons finds fault with my criticisms of his “new” cosmological argument; perhaps no less surprisingly, I find his replies unsatisfactory.¹ There seems to be little prospect that our views about the merits of the argument will converge; and that might be taken to be a reason for me to hold my counsel. However, I think that there are various ways in which Koons misrepresents what I said previously; some good may come from getting clearer about where we *genuinely* disagree. So here goes.

1.

Suppose that we are arguing about the colour of some object. You think that the object is yellow; I’m not convinced. You offer me the following argument on behalf of your view: “You do not dispute that the object *looks* yellow. And anything which looks yellow is yellow. So surely you cannot dispute the claim that the object is yellow.” I am not convinced. The truth of the matter is that we are in circumstances in which we disagree about whether the colour things appear to have is the colour they actually have. So I say that it seems to me that the circumstances may be special: based on my prior experience, etc.—my overall view of the world—I am inclined to think that these may be circumstances in which one ought not to conclude from the fact that this thing appears to be yellow that it really is yellow.

Following the lead of Robert Koons, you then say: “I have a lovely new

argument which should convince you that this thing which appears to be yellow really is yellow. You agree, do you not, that it is a default reasoning principle that things which appear to be yellow really are yellow? That is, in the absence of reason to think otherwise, if things appear to you to be yellow, then they really are yellow. But mark the consequence: in the present circumstance, you agree that this thing appears to be yellow; *ergo*, absent reasons which you have not yet given, you ought to believe that this thing is yellow. What do you say?"

Well, I say exactly what you should expect me to say. I have *already* told you that I am inclined to think that these may be circumstances in which one ought not to conclude from the fact that this thing appears to be yellow that it really is yellow. You have given me exactly *no* reason to revise that opinion; your lovely new argument is completely worthless. Of course, I might not be *entitled* to my inclination to think that these are circumstances in which one ought not to conclude from the fact that this thing appears to be yellow that it really is yellow. But this argument of yours does absolutely *nothing at all* towards showing that I do not have that entitlement. Since you are the one who is putting forward the argument—you are the one who is claiming that my beliefs are irrational, or inconsistent, or whatever—there is no doubt that your argument is a worthless failure.

(The point here is not to deny that I have an obligation to form reasonable—and perhaps even warranted—beliefs. On the contrary, I accept that we all have a permanent—though perhaps defeasible—obligation to conform our beliefs to the canons of rational belief formation and rational belief revision. Rather, the point is that, since you are the one who is denying that I am reasonable—or perhaps warranted—in some aspect of my believing, it is up to you to make the case. The mere fact that we disagree on some matters does not give me a reason to revise my beliefs, any more than it gives you a reason to revise yours.)

2.

My imagined interlocutor in the previous section really does follow the lead of Robert Koons. The core idea behind his "new" cosmological argument is that, if one replaces the generalisation *every wholly contingent event has a cause* with the defeasible generalisation *normally a wholly contingent event has a cause*, then one converts a question-begging argument into one which is rationally compelling.

Our experience warrants adopting the causal principle as a default or defeasible rule. This is, however, all that is needed for the cosmological argument to be rationally compelling. ... The burden of proof is shifted to the agnostic, who must garner evidence of a positive sort for the proposition that the cosmos really is an exception to the rule. Merely pointing out the defeasible nature of the inference ... does not constitute a cogent rebuttal.²

I think that Koons is here mixing up considerations to do with *winning debates* and considerations to do with *reasonable belief revision*. (Note, on the

one hand, his talk about arguments being “rationally compelling”; note, on the other hand, his talk about “cogent rebuttal”.) However, once we separate out these two distinct kinds of considerations, it is clear that Koons doesn’t have a successful case to make with respect to either.

On the one hand, there is nothing in Koons’ adjustment to cosmological arguments which gives non-theists any more reason to revise their beliefs than was given by the original cosmological arguments. Since Koons talks about his argument being “rationally compelling”, it is natural to suppose that he thinks that, on the contrary, his adjustment to cosmological arguments does suddenly present non-theists with some extra reason to revise their beliefs. But that is plainly absurd. The concession that, in its original form, the argument is question-begging, is, I take it, tantamount to the concession that, since non-theists simply don’t accept the claim that the universe has a cause—and hence don’t accept the claim that every wholly contingent event has a cause—it is pointless to insist that an argument which starts from that assumption is rationally compelling. But, of course, starting with the assumption that, normally, wholly contingent events have causes, doesn’t change the fact that non-theists don’t accept the claim that the universe has a cause; consequently, we all know in advance that they think that they have “positive reason” for supposing that the universe as a whole may be an exception to the general rule. Hence, it is *no less pointless* to insist that an argument which starts with the revised assumption is rationally compelling.

On the other hand, if we imagine that a debate is taking place, concerning the proposition that the universe has a cause, then it is a consideration which requires a response to claim that, normally, a wholly contingent event has a cause. If nothing is said in reply, then—by the standard rules of debate—that marks an advantage for the defenders of the claim that the universe has a cause. But, of course, exactly the same point would apply if, instead, the claim was advanced that every wholly contingent event has a cause. If nothing were said in response to that claim then—by the standard rules of debate—that too would mark an advantage to the defenders of the claim that the universe has a cause. So, once again, there is no substance to the claim that matters have been in any way *advanced* by the move from generalisation to defeasible generalisation.

An important general point to note here is that, where two parties disagree about a given subject matter—say, about the proposition that *p*—it is just a mistake for the members of one party to infer, from the observation that those on the other side have not been able to furnish them with a reason to change their minds, the conclusion that those on the other side are not rational in their beliefs. Non-theists almost universally do not believe that the universe has a cause; a successful argument for the conclusion that the universe has a cause must furnish them with a reason to change their minds about this matter—i.e., it must provide non-theists with something which, by their lights, they will recognise as a sufficient reason to change their minds. (Of course, the relevant non-theists must be *reasonable*, *reflective*, and *sufficiently well-informed*; but there is no doubt at all that there are such non-theists.⁴ And there is no reason for claiming that an argument is successful against those who are not reasonable, reflective and well-

informed when it is not successful against those who are reasonable, reflective and well-informed: for there is no better evidence to be had about how *those* people would respond to the argument were they reasonable, reflective and well-informed than to go by the responses of non-theists who are reasonable, reflective and well-informed.)⁴

3

Suppose, again, that we are arguing about the colour of some object: say, a swan which is housed in the next room, and which neither of us has seen. You have lived all your life in the northern hemisphere, where all the swans which you have encountered have been white. While you have heard reports of observations in the southern hemisphere of black swans, you judge that these reports have absolutely no credence. Of course, you do not rule out *a priori* the possibility that there might be swans of some other colour; you have no reason to think that there is any logical necessity about the colour of swans, though you at least toy with the idea that there is some kind of natural necessity in virtue of which swans are white. I, on the other hand, have reacted differently to the reports of observations of black swans in the southern hemisphere; I judge that these reports are reliable, and that there is very good reason to suppose that some swans are black.

You claim that the swan in the next room is white. In defence of this claim, you offer an argument which turns on the defeasible generalisation that all swans are white. Given your assessment of the evidence, there seems little reason to dispute that you have reason to accept this defeasible generalisation: you need to be given some reason to think that there are swans which have some colour other than white; so, in particular, you need to be given some reason to think that the given swan has some colour other than white. But, of course, I see things differently. The defeasible generalisation which you accept is not acceptable to me, because I believe that some swans are black. Indeed, in my view, there is no more reason to think that the swan in the next room is white than there is to think that it is black; so, of course, I can hardly accept the default generalisation that all swans are white. Your argument fails to persuade me because, with good reason, I do not accept the defeasible generalisation upon which the argument relies. I would, no doubt, be prepared to accept the defeasible generalisation that all swans are either white or black—that is a defeasible generalisation which is warranted by my evidence (and the other things which I believe)—but that generalisation won't allow you to draw the conclusion which you want to draw.⁵

This story parallels the other important part of my previous dispute with Koons. While a non-theist will not accept the defeasible generalisation that every event has a cause, a non-theist could accept the defeasible generalisation that every non-first event has a cause. (A first event is an event to which no event is temporally prior. The entire history of the universe up to the present is a first event; so too are any parts of this history which have the specified property.) The reasons which Koons takes to make the defeasible generalisation that every event has a cause plausible may be supposed to carry over to reasons which non-theists can take to make the

defeasible generalisation that every non-first event has a cause plausible; but, of course, since the non-theist supposes that first events do not have causes, the non-theist cannot accept the defeasible generalisation which Koons proposes.⁶

It is perhaps also worth noting here that it would be plainly silly to insist that the greater simplicity of Koons' generalisation is a decisive argument in its favour, just as it would be silly to insist that the greater simplicity of the generalisation that all swans are white is a decisive argument in favour of that claim. Which generalisation one ought to accept has to be decided in the light of everything else which one accepts, including all of the relevant evidence which one possesses. And, as I insisted in my previous paper, simplicity is not the only consideration which matters; such things as empirical adequacy, explanatory power, fit with other well-established theories, and so forth, must also be taken into account.

4

I have said in various places that there can be reasonable non-theists who reasonably do not accept the claim that the universe has a cause. While nothing which I have said so far in my criticism of Koons strictly depends upon this claim⁷, it might be worthwhile saying something about the kinds of reasons which non-theists might have for believing as they do. The aim here is not to persuade theists of the truth of the non-theist position; rather, the aim is to try to promote understanding of how things may look from a non-theistic standpoint. I shall mention three kinds of considerations; it should not be supposed that these are the only kinds of considerations which might be mentioned here.

(1.) There is a well-known argument that there must be brute contingency if there is contingency at all. This argument can be adapted to the framework of Koons' proof as follows. Consider the event which is the sum of all wholly contingent events. Suppose that that event has a cause. That cause must be a necessary event, since it is wholly distinct from the sum of all wholly contingent events. But now consider the causal relation which holds between this necessary event and the sum of all wholly contingent events. If that relation is necessary, then—since the cause is necessary—it follows, *per impossible*, that the sum of all wholly contingent events is necessary. On the other hand, if that relation is contingent, then, again *per impossible*, there is an event—the “coming about” of the sum of all wholly contingent events—which is contingent, and which has the sum of all wholly contingent events as a proper part. This kind of argument is utterly familiar in the literature on causal principles and principles of sufficient reason; and there seems to be quite good excuse to find in it a reason for doubting that the universe—i.e. the sum of all wholly contingent events—has a cause.⁸

(2.) Suppose that Koons is right in thinking that no seriously controversial assumptions are required in order to move from the claim that the sum of all contingent events has a cause to the conclusion that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God. Then, since there are all kinds of reasons for being sceptical about the existence of an omnipotent, omni-

scient, and perfectly good God, it will follow that there are all kinds of reasons for being sceptical about the claim that the universe has a cause (and, hence, about the argument which goes by way of the default generalisation that normally, a wholly contingent event has a cause). For instance—and this is just one point among many—there are the considerations adduced in logical arguments from evil: many non-theists find it utterly incredible to suppose that the amounts and kinds of evils which are to be found in the world—e.g. the excruciating suffering of animals and young children—are compatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God.⁹ If we suppose—as Koons no doubt does—that there are no further seriously controversial assumptions which are needed in order to move from the claim that an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God exists to the conclusion that the God of the Christian *Bible* exists, then the contradictions and absurdities of scripture and orthodox theology provide a whole swag of further reasons for being sceptical about the claim that the universe has a cause. (The general point to be made here—and it is one which I made in my original paper—is that axiomatic developments of theories often encourage the vice of failure to comply with the principle that one must always take into account one's total relevant evidence when assessing a given claim. Koons' default generalisation is no exception to the general rule: if there are independent reasons for thinking that a cause of the universe must be the Christian God, and there are independent reasons for thinking that there is no such being, then there are independent reasons for thinking that the universe does not have a cause.)

(3) It is a familiar point that non-theists often appeal to Ockham's Razor in order to justify their rejection of theism. In the present case, we may assume that there is no disagreement between theists and non-theists about the existence of the sum of all wholly contingent events. (In fact, there is some disagreement about the nature of parts of this sum; but this point will not affect the argument which is under development.) So, one way of framing the dispute between theists and non-theists is in terms of the question whether the extra ontological and theoretical costs involved in the postulation of a cause for the sum of all wholly contingent events is worth the gains in explanatory power, and so forth. If non-theists can reasonably suppose that the costs are not worth the gains, then this is yet another way in which rejection of the claim that the universe has a cause—and hence rejection of the default generalisation that wholly contingent events have cause—can be justified. And, of course, arguments for the conclusion that the costs are not worth the gains are not hard to come by. For instance, if the argument in (1.) above is correct, then there must be brute contingency in the world (if there is any contingency at all); so the extra costs in the theistic picture cannot be justified on the grounds that they remove brute contingency from the picture.

It should be noted that I do not suppose that the kinds of considerations which I have mentioned in (1.)-(3.) can easily be developed into arguments which ought to persuade theists to give up their theism. Rather, the point is—as I insisted in my earlier piece—that it is well-known that non-theists, by their own lights, have many reasons for rejecting the claim that the universe has a cause. (1.)-(3.) are merely intended as an *aide de memoire* for those who suppose—as it seems that Koons does—that non-theists just blankly

refuse to accept that the universe has a cause, without having any reasons for thus refusing.¹⁰

5

Oppy (1999) criticises various aspects of Koons (1997) not discussed above, but taken up again in Koons (2001). While I do not propose to take up these further issues here, I would like to note that there are many further matters about which Koons and I disagree. In particular, I do not think that the defence of “corollaries” in Koons (2001) will withstand much scrutiny. Perhaps I shall be able to revisit this issue on some other occasion.¹¹

Monash University

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NOTES

1. See Koons (1997) for the “new” argument; Oppy (1999) for my criticisms of that argument; and Koons (2001) for Koons’ response to those criticisms.

2. Koons (2001:195)

3. If one holds that there *can be no* non-theists who are reasonable, reflective and sufficiently well-informed (at least with respect to their non-theism), then it seems to me that it is just a sham to claim that there are arguments which ought to persuade non-theists to give up their non-theism. If someone who holds a particular view is *ipso facto* not reasonable in holding that view, then there is no question that an *argument* could provide them with reasons to give up the view.

4. For a much fuller development of the line of thought introduced here, see Oppy (2002).

5. In case it isn’t completely obvious that I can’t accept the default generalisation that all swans are white, consider the following. Why shouldn’t I accept, as a default generalisation, the claim that all human beings are men? True enough, there are known exceptions—women and children—but, given that I recognise these exceptions, why should that matter? Answer: because I ought not to assume that someone who might, for all I know, be a woman or a child, is a man. To make assumptions in that way will certainly lead to unfortunate and embarrassing consequences.

6. It should be noted that it is far from obvious that one can say that the relevant difference between the case of the default generalisation about human beings discussed in an earlier footnote, and the default generalisation which Koons would have non-theists accept, is that the class of men is small in the class of human beings, whereas the class of non-first events is enormous in the

class of events. After all, it is plausible to suppose that there will be infinitely many first events, and that there will also be infinitely many events—and it is no easy matter to determine whether these two infinities will be of different sizes. (I *suspect* that a souped-up version of the Schroeder-Bernstein theorem can be used to show that the two cardinalities are indeed identical; however, I am not at all certain that I am right about this.)

7. Look back to the last paragraph in Section 2 if you need more argument in support of this contention.

8. This kind of argument can be framed equally well in terms of “situations” (Koons’ favoured terminology). Consider the situation of the Cosmos’ arising contingently. That situation involves nothing more than the Cosmos (which, by hypothesis, is wholly contingent) and the property of arising contingently—and so is itself wholly contingent. However—in consequence—that situation properly contains the Cosmos. And this contradicts the assumption that the Cosmos is the sum of all wholly contingent beings. So there is no situation of the Cosmos’ arising contingently. The only alternative, given that the Cosmos has a cause, is that it arises necessarily from something which is necessarily existent. But anything which arises necessarily from something which is necessarily existent is itself necessary—and that contradicts the assumption that the Cosmos is wholly contingent. So it cannot be that the Cosmos arises: it cannot be that the sum of all contingent situations is caused by anything. By the standards of argument which Koons sets for himself in his most recent paper, surely this argument points to considerations which are sufficient to justify non-theists in refraining from believing that the universe has a cause.

9. Of course, even more non-theists also find it natural to suppose that, given the amounts and kinds of evils which are to be found in the world, it is very unlikely indeed that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God. However, one should not make the mistake of supposing that there is no mileage left in logical—as opposed to evidential—arguments from evil. If one supposes—as many non-theists do—that the very idea of libertarian freedom is mired in confusion, then the considerations raised in logical arguments from evil are apt to seem pretty formidable.

10. Here’s a sketch for another argument, this time for the conclusion that no theist ought to accept the claim that every wholly contingent event has a cause. This argument relies on the assumption that theists must buy into the free will defence against arguments from evil. (That assumption, in turn, can be underwritten by Mackie’s famous argument: if free will is compatible with determinism, then God could—and hence should—have made a world in which everyone always freely chooses the good.) The free will defence relies on the assumption that people have libertarian freedom, i.e. it relies on the assumption that, when people make free choices, there is nothing in the world which determines or causes those choices. So, consider an occasion on which a person X freely chooses A rather than B. Plainly, the event of X’s freely choosing A rather than B is a wholly contingent event—but, as a result of doctrinal commitments elsewhere, the theist is required to deny that there is a cause of X’s freely choosing A rather than B. So, by the theist’s own lights, it simply isn’t true that every wholly contingent event has a cause. Given that theists have good reason to reject the claim that every wholly contingent event has a cause, they are hardly well placed to insist that non-theists ought to accept it.

11. I am extremely grateful to William Hasker for his editorial advice; this paper is much improved in consequence.