

THE COSMOLOGICAL  
ARGUMENT FROM  
PLATO TO LEIBNIZ

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*Wipf and Stock Publishers*  
EUGENE, OREGON

Wipf and Stock Publishers  
199 West 8th Avenue, Suite 3  
Eugene, Oregon 97401

**The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz**  
By Craig, William Lane  
©1980 Craig, William Lane  
ISBN: 1-57910-787-7  
Publication date: October, 2001  
Previously published by Harper & Row Publishers Inc., 1980.

To  
**MY PARENTS**

who taught me as a boy  
the adventure of learning and  
spared me nothing that might further that end

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# Preface

## I

It was my reading and outlining of Frederick Copleston's masterful *A History of Philosophy* during my student days that first sparked off my interest in doing a comprehensive study of the cosmological argument for the existence of God. Copleston's *History* provides the broadest historical survey to date of the cosmological argument, but his expositions of the various versions of the proof are necessarily brief and must be extracted from the wide range of other material presented in his work. Perhaps the finest overall study on the cosmological argument up to this point is R. L. Sturch's unpublished Oxford doctoral thesis 'The Cosmological Argument'. Unfortunately, Sturch's survey of the argument, because it is broader than mine, is much less detailed and sometimes contains positive misunderstandings. What I have sacrificed in breadth, I have attempted to make up in analysis and accuracy. A comprehensive, scholarly history of the cosmological argument still remains to be written. Such a history would include the cosmological arguments of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Razī, Bonaventure, Suarez, Descartes, Locke, Clarke and Wolff, thinkers whom I have not included in this study. But my present work is a step in that direction. In this book I have chosen to analyse in detail the cosmological arguments of thirteen of the proof's greatest proponents; these constitute the peaks in the long history of the argument and are exemplary models of the various forms which the cosmological argument assumes. In the final chapter of this work, I attempt to formulate a typology of the various versions surveyed and to distil what I perceive to be the major critical issues involved in each form of the argument.

## II

I hope that this study will help to meet a serious need in the contemporary debate over the argument. For the past thirty years or so,

philosophers of religion interested in argumentative theism have been preoccupied with the ontological argument, but interest in that proof now appears to be waning, and there are glimmers of a revival of interest in the cosmological proof, if one can judge by the frequency of articles on the subject in philosophical journals. But contemporary writers have by all indications a woeful ignorance of the historical versions of the argument. I am amazed at the shallow and often grossly inaccurate expositions of the differing forms of the argument given by contemporary authors. As a result of these misunderstandings, many of the purported refutations of the cosmological argument are aimed at straw men. In fact, as a result of my research, I would venture to say that if one were to pick up at random an article on the cosmological argument, it is probably historically inaccurate and focuses on the wrong issues. This makes it indeed a challenge to present and perspicaciously analyse the most significant versions of the cosmological argument, and I approach the task with trepidation. For I am sure that if most of the expositions and critiques I have read are filled with errors evident to me, then the chances are that my own analysis is also in error in places. But the frustration is that I do not know where those places are; so I must beg the reader's indulgence when he discerns instances in which I have unknowingly erred.

### III

What exactly constitutes a cosmological argument? Probably the best definition is that the cosmological argument is an *a posteriori* argument for a cause or reason for the cosmos. Three items in this definition deserve emphasis. First, the cosmological argument is an *a posteriori* argument. Unlike the ontological argument, the cosmological argument always contains an existential premiss, that is, it asserts that something exists. The fact that the argument may also employ *a priori* principles, such as the principle of contradiction or the principle of causality, does not negate the fact that the argument as a whole is *a posteriori*, since its truth is dependent on the fact that something exists.<sup>1</sup> Second, the cosmological argument seeks a cause or reason. Some versions of the argument conclude to a being which is the first cause of the universe, either in a temporal sense or in rank. Other versions posit a being which is the sufficient reason for the world. The distinction between cause and reason is an important one that is rarely appreciated but one that must be maintained if we are correctly to understand the different forms of

the argument. Third, the cosmological argument seeks to account for the cosmos. Most versions of the cosmological argument and certainly all of the modern ones attempt to account for the existence of the world. But the prime mover arguments do not seek a cause of the world's existence, but a cause of the world's being a cosmos, usually by positing an astronomical system of spheres set in motion by the prime mover. Here a somewhat arbitrary and hazy boundary is drawn between the cosmological and teleological arguments, the latter also seeking a cause of the world's being a cosmos, but with the emphasis on order, design, and the adaptation of means to ends. The cosmological argument, then, does not necessarily have to conclude to a cause of the universe's existence, for its ancient forms were dualistic and sought merely to account for cosmic motion.

The cosmological argument has a long and venerable history, possessing a resilience under criticism that is truly remarkable. Its intersectorian appeal is broad, and it has been propounded by Greek pagans, Muslims, Jews, Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, and even pantheists. Among the catalogue of its supporters are the greatest minds of the Western world: Plato, Aristotle, ibn Sīnā, al-Ghāzālī, ibn Rushd, Maimonides, Anselm, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Scotus, Suarez, Descartes, Spinoza, Berkeley, Locke and Leibniz. The durability of the argument and the stature of its defenders is eloquent testimony to the fact that to man this world is somehow just not sufficient of itself, but points to a greater reality beyond itself.

### IV

I should like to thank my wife Jan for her production of the typescript; I consider her a full partner in this enterprise. I am indebted to Professors Anthony Kenny and John Hick for their reading and commenting on the text. I also wish to express my gratitude to the late Mr Hugh Andersen and Mr and Mrs F. C. Andersen of the Baywood Corporation for their generous grant that made this research possible.

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### NOTE

1. For a good statement of this point, see William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 3.