

Introduction to Kalam Argument

By T.T. Kumakura

This paper will discuss the Kalam argument for the existence of God. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate that the argument, supported by solid data from cosmology, is a powerful tool for apologetics. While some critics say the argument's very reliance on science may turn out to be its potential vulnerability, Kalam is nevertheless instrumental in conveying the message of the faith community to the public at large.

The Kalam argument is a form of the Cosmological Argument, a classic theistic argument that begins with the existence of the world and concludes that there must be a cause or sufficient reason behind it.

What distinguishes the Kalam argument from other versions of the Cosmological Argument is its assertion that the universe had a beginning. Since the universe does not have an infinite past, the argument goes, it must have been created by a being that exists independently of the universe. William Lane Craig, who revived this ancient argument in the 1970s, provides the following formulation:

- (1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause.
- (2) The universe began to exist.
- (3) Therefore, the universe has a cause. ¹

The assertion that the universe is finite is central to the Kalam argument. If the universe has an infinite past, then arriving at today would require the traversing of an infinite series of moments. However, traversing an infinite series of moments is impossible since there is no beginning to such a series. Thus, the argument exposes ``absurdities that would result if the universe had an infinite past,’’ says Eric LaRock. ²

Craig elaborates on what those ``absurdities’’ would be. To demonstrate the impossibility of infinite past, Craig cites a mathematical illustration showing that the notion of an actual infinite number leads to contradictory results.

In an interview with Lee Strobel, Craig uses an illustration of an infinite number of marbles to explain that an actual infinite cannot exist.

If someone had an infinite number of marbles and wanted to give some of them to a friend, one way he could do that would be to hand over the entire pile of marbles. In that case, he would have no marble left for himself. Another way would be to give his friend all of the odd numbered marbles. That way, he would still have an infinity left over and his friend would have an infinite number too. Yet another method would be for him to give away all the marbles numbered four and higher. Then, he would have only three left although his friend would have an infinite number of marbles. In each case, infinity minus infinity yields different results. Craig says mathematicians are forbidden from

¹ Craig, *the Kalam Cosmological Argument* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1979), 63.

² Eric F. LaRock, ``God, the Necessary Ingredient in the Edifice of Life’’ *Christian Apologetics Journal*, (Spring 1998), 11.

doing subtraction and division in transfinite arithmetic because that would lead to contradictions.³

The so-called Hilbert's Hotel paradox also illustrates a problem that could arise if actual infinities existed. It is a story of a hypothetical hotel with an infinite number of rooms, each of which is occupied by a guest. So, this hotel is fully occupied with an infinite number of guests. But if a new guest arrives, the proprietor can free up a room by moving the guest in room No. 1 to room No. 2, and the guest in room No. 2 to room No. 3, and so on. That way, the hotel has an infinite number of vacancies even though it is full. By moving every guest to the room the number of which is twice the number of their current room, all of the odd numbered rooms can be vacated for new guests. Strangely enough, the number of new guests stays the same after the new guests are accommodated because that number was infinite to begin with.⁴

These illustrations bolster an argument that an actual infinite cannot exist, an assertion that supports the central theme of the Kalam argument, i.e., the universe began to exist. This proposition is further stated in the following two ways:

(2.1) *Argument based on the impossibility of an actual infinite:*

(2.11) An actual infinite cannot exist.

(2.12) An infinite temporal regress of events is an actual infinite.

(2.13) Therefore, an infinite temporal regress of events cannot exist.

(2.2) *Argument based on the impossibility of the formation of an actual infinite by successive addition:*

(2.21) A collection formed by successive addition cannot be actually infinite.

(2.22) The temporal series of past events is a collection formed by successive addition.

(2.23) Therefore, the temporal series of past events cannot be actually infinite.⁵

Big Bang

The Kalam argument is supported by numerous data from science. Evidence from cosmology now supports a finite universe, while evidence from physics and biology has reopened the question of design, according to Stephen C. Meyer.⁶

³ Lee Strobe, *The Case for a Creator* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 103.

⁴ J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 471-472.

⁵ William Lane Craig, *Professor Mackie and the Kalam Cosmological Argument*, (Addison, TX: Christian Leadership Ministries; accessed Feb. 11, 2010); available from <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/mackie.html>; Internet

⁶ Stephen C. Meyer "The Return of the God Hypothesis," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, XI, 1999; accessed Feb., 11, 2010); available from <http://www.discovery.org/a/642>; Internet

The argument's premise that the universe had a beginning is in accord with the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe. The Big Bang theory says the cosmos came into being about 15 billion years ago and it has been expanding and developing according to conditions set at the moment of origin.⁷

Moreover, according to Craig, Big Bang was not a chaotic, disorderly event. Instead, it was probably fine-tuned for the existence of intelligent life with a complexity and precision.⁸ Meanwhile, the Second Law of Thermodynamics says the universe is running out of usable energy. That means if the universe were infinite, it would have run out of energy by now.

Furthermore, new evidences from physics suggest an intelligent cause for the universe. Even very slight alterations in the values of many independent factors, such as the expansion rate of the universe, the speed of light, the precise strength of gravitational or electromagnetic attraction, would render life impossible, Meyer says, adding that physicists now refer to these factors as "anthropic coincidences," and to the convergence of all these coincidences as the "fine-tuning of the universe."⁹

Recent evidences from biology also suggest a designer. Take, for instance, the molecular machines and complex systems in human cells. Lehigh University biochemist Michael Behe shows that the intricate machinery in the molecular motor, including a rotor, a stator, O-rings, bushings, and a drive shaft, requires the coordinated interaction of some forty complex protein parts, according to Meyer.¹⁰

"To assert that such an 'irreducibly complex' engine emerged gradually in a Darwinian fashion strains credulity, Meyer says."¹¹

As a matter of fact, the scientific evidence has accumulated to the point where atheists are finding it difficult to deny that the universe had a beginning. That's why they are now seeking to destroy the first premise of the Kalam argument, Craig says.¹²

The first premise that whatever begins to exist has a cause is "intuitively obvious," Craig says, because nothing comes out of absolutely nothing without any explanation at all. While Quantum theory holds that things can materialize out of a vacuum, the vacuum is in fact a sea of fluctuating energy, not a total nothingness.¹³

Since whatever exists must have a cause and the universe began to exist, there must be a transcendent cause for the universe.

Craig asserts the creator of the universe is a personal agent who has freedom of will. That's because if the universe were just a mechanical consequence that would occur

⁷Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 102-106.

⁸ Strobe, 106.

⁹ Meyer

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Strobel, 98

¹³ Ibid. 100-101.

whenever sufficient conditions were met, it would exist from eternity past since the effect would be co-eternal with the cause.¹⁴

The Kalam argument supports the Genesis account of *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation out of nothing. This was the church's response to dualism and pantheism during the early centuries. Against the dualists, who believed that God or gods created the universe using pre-existent materials, this means that God is the sole sources of all finite existence. There is no pre-existing mater co-eternal with and separate from the divine. Against the pantheists, who held everything was identical with the divine, the church held that the world was not divine. The world is not co-eternal with God because it has an absolute beginning and is distinct from God.¹⁵

Cosmological Argument

Let's discuss the other forms of the Cosmological Argument to put the Kalam argument in a broader perspective. Perhaps the best known versions of the Cosmological Argument are those formulated by Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), who presented the "Five Ways" of proving the existence of God.

The first way is the argument from motion. The idea behind this argument is that things do move and that whatever is moved must be moved by another, which itself must be moved by another, which is in turn moved by another again. Aquinas says this process cannot go on forever and that there must be a first mover that is not moved by anything else. That first mover is God.

The second way is based on the argument from efficient causes. Since nothing can cause itself, and there cannot be an infinite regress of efficient causes, there must be a first, uncaused Cause of all efficient causes.

The third way is taken from the idea of possibility and necessity. Aquinas makes a distinction between possible beings and a Necessary Being. Possible beings are those that begin to exist and cease to exist. It is possible for them to exist or not to exist. But a Necessary Being is a being whose existence is necessary and is not dependent on other beings. The argument says there must be a Necessary Being because not all beings can be possible beings. God was more than the efficient cause that started the casual series.

The fourth way is the argument from gradation. It says there are different degrees of perfection among beings, with some things closer to perfection than others; but things cannot be more or less perfect unless there is something that is wholly perfect. That perfect being is God.

The fifth way is a version of the Teleological Argument, which says the universe displays design and purpose of a Creator.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid. 111

¹⁵ Ted Peters "Cosmos and Creation" *Word & World* (Fall, 1984; 372-90).

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, "The Cosmological Argument," in *Philosophy of Religion Selected Reading*, eds. William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 126-128.

Another well-known form of the Cosmological Argument reasons from the principle of sufficient reason. German rationalist Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) believed that since the world was contingent, it had a sufficient reason outside of itself:

- (1) The entire world is changing.
- (2) Whatever is changing lacks within itself the reason for its own existence.
- (3) There is a sufficient reason for everything either in itself or beyond itself.
- (4) Therefore, there must be a cause beyond this world for its existence.
- (5) This cause is either its own sufficient reason or it has a cause beyond it.
- (6) There cannot be an infinite regress of sufficient reasons.
- (7) Therefore, there must be a first Cause of the world that has no reason beyond it but is its own sufficient reason.¹⁷

The principle of sufficient reason is the belief that for anything that exists or is the case, there must be a reason or an explanation.

The origin of the Kalam argument, meanwhile, is traced to Christians in the early centuries who sought to refute Aristotle's view that God and the universe were co-eternal. One such philosopher was John Philoponus of Alexandria, Egypt, who lived in the fourth century and argued that the universe had a beginning, according to Craig.¹⁸

When Islam took over North Africa, Muslim theologians picked up these arguments. They were later introduced to Latin-speaking Christians through Jewish thinkers who lived side by side with Muslims in Spain. Bonaventure, the Italian philosopher, used the arguments in the 13th century.¹⁹ The word *kalam*, which means "speech" in Arabic, came to denote the statement of points of theological doctrines, Craig says.²⁰

Criticisms

The Cosmological Argument began to lose its influence in the late nineteenth century. Scientists either asserted that science contradicts theistic belief or denied that science has any religious or metaphysical implications. Scientists and philosophers have for the most part denied that the testimony of nature lends support to a theistic worldview, Meyer says.

David Hume (1711-1776) was one such skeptic. Hume said God must be finite because this world was finite. For Hume, the idea of a necessary being had no meaning because it is always possible to conceive of anything, including God, as not existing,

¹⁷ Geisler, Corduan, 164-165

¹⁸ Strobe, 97

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*, 4

according to Geisler and Corduan. Hume also said an infinite series was possible and that the universe as a whole would not need a cause as long as the parts had causes.²¹

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), meanwhile, called the Cosmological Argument “an old argument in a new dress, ” or a disguised form of the Ontological Argument.²² For Kant, both the Cosmological Argument and the Ontological Argument were invalid because the use of a necessary Being makes an illicit leap from *the posteriori* to the *a priori*.

The Kalam argument also has a number of critics. One such detractor is J. L. Mackie (1917-1981), who objects to the argument’s two premises. Mackie asserts that (2.2) illicitly assumes an infinitely distant starting point for the temporal series and then pronounces it impossible to traverse the distance from that point to today. Craig cites Mackie as saying that if we take the notion of infinity seriously, we must say that in an infinite past there would be no starting point. Thus, from any specific point in past time there is only a finite stretch that needs to be traversed to reach the present.²³

Mackie contends that the alleged absurdities entailed by the existence of an actual infinite, to which the proponent of the Kalam argument appeals as evidence for (2.11), in fact involve no real contradiction. This is because our normal criteria for *smaller than* and *equal to* fail to be mutually exclusive for infinite groups. For finite groups to be *smaller than* means that the members of one group can be correlated one to one with a proper part of another group; to be equal to means that the members of the two groups can be exactly matched in a one to one correlation. These two criteria are mutually exclusive for all finite groups, but not for infinite groups. Once we understand this relation between the two criteria, we see that there is no real contradiction.²⁴

(In response, Craig says Mackie’s objection against (2.2) only strengthened Craig’s argument, while his analysis of (2.1) merely drew our attention to the conditions which generate the absurdities in question. Craig further says Mackie provided no good reason to doubt the truth of (1) and failed to show any unintelligibility either in God’s relation to the world or in his mode of existence.)²⁵

Evangelical scholars Geisler and Corduan, on the other hand, examine the Kalam argument from a philosophical standpoint. They say while the argument may be convincing as long as the scientific consensus continues to support the present models, the premises are not philosophically demonstrable.²⁶

The first premise that whatever begins to exist has a cause seems intuitively certain, but it is difficult to prove demonstratively. The second premise that the universe

²¹ Geisler, Corduan, 166.

²² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1993), 414.

²³ Craig, *Professor Mackie and the Kalam Cosmological Argument*

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Geisler, Corduan, 166.

began to exist is more questionable because it assumes that there is a real finite world. A pantheist would not grant that assumption.²⁷

Craig, for his part, admits that the Kalam argument does not necessarily point to a God who is omniscient, good, perfect, and so forth.²⁸ If this argument is sound and a personal creator of the universe does exist, then must we ask if that creator has revealed himself to humankind or if he remains aloof and detached from the world, Craig says.²⁹

The Kalam argument enjoys immense popularity now because current scientific evidences appear to be overwhelming in its favor. However, Geisler and Corduan may be right about the scientific consensus. In the event that future scientists come up with a convincing alternative to Big Bang, Kalam may turn into a Big Bust argument.

Nevertheless, Craig has made tremendous contributions to apologetics by repackaging the argument for the modern audience and reminding the scientific community and the public at large that Christian belief has a rational foundation and is not incompatible with science.

Moreland points out that Christians have for years focused their studies on religious issues within the church or on technical minutiae of Biblical exegesis.³⁰

“As important as exegesis is, we do not need another commentary on Ephesians or a new book on the doctrine of salvation. Instead we need a renaissance of evangelical statements of and defenses for what we believe about the broad issues being debated in the academy and the broader culture,” Moreland says.³¹

That’s why we need the Kalam argument.

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²⁷ Geisler, Winfried Corduan, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 1988), 172.

²⁸ Craig, *the Kalam Cosmological Argument*, 152-153.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ J.P. Moreland “Philosophical Apologetics, the Church, and Contemporary Culture” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (March 1996; 123-140).

³¹ Ibid.

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