

COMPOSITION AND THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

A COMMON criticism of the cosmological proof for the existence of God is that it commits the fallacy of composition¹; but this criticism no longer can be sustained in the light of recent MIND articles on the fallacy of composition, particularly the most recent article by Richard Cole.² According to Cole, arguments previously characterized as involving the fallacy of composition are really enthymemes. The difficulty with them is that although they are valid deductive arguments when so construed, nevertheless the truth of the conclusion does not follow from them in *some* cases because of the falsity of at least one of the premisses, *i.e.* they "contain a usually doubtful in-explicit assumption". Although the truth of the conclusion of the first argument below is proved since the form (*modus ponens*) is valid and the premisses are true, the truth of the conclusion of the second argument is not proved since it has a false premiss but the same form.

A. If all the parts of a chair are a certain colour, the chair is that colour. The parts of a chair are brown; therefore, the chair is brown.³

B. If all the parts of a machine weigh exactly one pound, the machine weighs exactly one pound.

The parts of a machine weigh exactly one pound; therefore, the machine weighs exactly one pound.

No ambiguity is involved in either of these arguments, and *modus ponens* is unquestionably valid as a pattern of argumentation. If there is any question about the arguments, it revolves around the truth of at least one of the premisses. The first premiss of A is proved true in experience since in no cases do we find the antecedent true and the consequent false. By contrast, the first premiss of B is proved false in experience since we find many cases where the antecedent is true and the consequent is false.

If I understand William Rowe correctly, he would perhaps want to treat the truth or falsity of these two first premisses as a logical rather than an empirical question such that the truth of the first premiss in A follows by definition from the terms involved, and the falsity of the first premiss of B perhaps would follow by definition from the terms involved.⁴ No experience could falsify and every relevant experience must confirm a necessarily true proposition. But it is not essential to defend these first premisses as necessarily true or false. Even if they are only empirically true or false, they would have the same effect on proving the truth of the conclusion of a valid deductive

¹ For example, see J. G. Brennan, *The Meaning of Philosophy*, pp. 267-268; or Milton K. Munitz, *The Mystery of Existence*, pp. 117 and 119.

² W. L. Rowe, "The Fallacy of Composition", MIND, vol. lxxi, pp. 87-92; and Richard Cole, "A Note on Informal Fallacies", MIND, vol. lxxiv, pp. 432-433.

³ Cole, p. 432.

⁴ Rowe, p. 89.

argument. Even if all the premisses are only empirically true and the form is valid, then the conclusion is true. And if at least one premiss is empirically false, the conclusion is not proved true if the form is valid.

The cosmological argument for the existence of God does not commit the fallacy of composition or any other "fallacy" in so far as this term means that the formal pattern of reasoning involved is unsatisfactory. The argument is an enthymeme with questionable premisses, but it is not fallacious. St. Thomas Aquinas in his "third proof" argued that the whole of nature was contingent (could either be or not be) since all the parts were contingent and further that the whole of nature at one time did not exist since each of its parts at one time did not exist. Neither of these versions of the cosmological argument involves a fallacy so long as it is possible to construe them as enthymemes, as follows :

(1) If all the parts of any whole are contingent, the whole itself is contingent.

All the parts of nature are contingent ; therefore, the whole of nature is contingent.

(2) If all the parts of a whole did not always exist, then the whole itself did not always exist.

All the parts of nature did not always exist ; therefore, nature as a whole did not always exist.

Since the cosmological argument is usually construed as a causal argument, perhaps the strongest formulation of it would be :

(3) If all the parts of any whole have been caused to exist by something outside that whole, then the whole itself has been caused to exist by something outside itself.

All the parts of nature have been caused to exist by something outside of nature ; therefore, the whole of nature has been caused to exist by something outside of nature.

If there is any problem at all with these three arguments, it is either that some of the propositions involved are meaningless (which I will not have space here to discuss) or that some of the premisses are false. There is no "fallacy" (*i.e.* incorrect pattern of argument) in any of them. I would argue that the *first* premiss of each of these three formulations of the cosmological argument is true. I need not go so far as to maintain that they are true because of the meaning of the concepts involved. At least they are true in experience. We certainly cannot find a necessary whole (that cannot not be) composed entirely of contingent parts (that can not be). Neither does experience show us a whole which always existed even though each of its parts did not always exist, nor do we find any whole which was not caused to exist even though each of its parts was caused to exist. To say that the relation between the world of nature and its parts is the *only* exception to these generalizations would be simply to beg the question!

The most questionable thing about the cosmological argument is the truth of its *second* premiss. Are the second premisses of (1), (2), and (3) above true or false? Are all the parts of nature contingent? The Greek Atomists would insist that only the composite wholes like stones, trees or men come into being and pass away but that the most fundamental parts of nature, the atoms, were eternal. A more modern physics might argue that energy is eternal though not the composites into which it enters. Either theory would deny the truth of the second premiss of (1). But can the truth of the eternity of atoms or energy be established, or must we admit that we simply do not know whether all the parts of nature are contingent or if some are eternal? Would we even know how to begin to decide such questions?

The truth of the second premisses of (2) and (3) above are again the most questionable aspects of the arguments. Was there a time when all the parts of nature did not exist? Were all the parts of nature caused to exist by something outside nature? I suspect that we simply do not know the answers to these questions. In this case we would not know if the truth of the conclusion of the cosmological arguments follow from them even after we have admitted the validity of the argument forms and the truth of the first premisses.

I have not attempted to deal with the question of the meaningfulness of the two premisses of the cosmological argument, though I do not doubt that they could be attacked from this perspective. I have established that the argument does not involve any fallacy and that we question the truth (or meaningfulness) of its conclusion only because we question the truth (or meaningfulness) of at least one of its premisses. It should be noted also that the conclusion of neither (1), (2) nor (3) above asserts the existence of a necessary, supernatural, intelligent, benevolent God. A much further development of the cosmological argument involving still other premisses would have to be produced in order to draw such interesting conclusions!

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