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Level and paper	AH
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Section 1

Question 2 – How successful are the criticisms of cosmological arguments?

The 13th century theologian Thomas Aquinas put forward in his book “Summa Theologica” five proofs or “ways” for the existence of God. The first three of these ways variations on the same argument and are collectively referred to as “The Cosmological Argument” which tries to infer God’s existence from the existence of the universe. The argument goes that everything which exists must have been created, but since it is impossible for there to be infinite regress – that is, there cannot be an infinite chain of one thing being caused by another – there must be an original creator or “first cause” which is outside the standard rules of creation and this, Aquinas argues, is God. As he says in Summa Theologica “It is necessary to admit a first efficient cause, to which all give the name ‘God’”

The first objection that one may have to this argument is simple and obvious: “If God created everything, then what created God?” This objection has become commonly known as “the school boy argument” on account of school boys using it to annoy priests for generations. Despite this, it is a valid criticism. Aquinas claims that all things need a cause, and this would imply that God also needs a cause. On the other hand, if one says that God is an exception to this rule then one is admitting that there can be exceptions and if there can be exceptions, why can the universe itself not be one? It seems that The Cosmological Argument is based on a contradiction which is very difficult to get around, making this a strong criticism.

It also seems fair to question the very premise of the argument. Aquinas says that all things require a first cause, but is this really true? Certainly, everything that we experience in our day to day lives has a cause, but that does not mean that this applies to the universe as a whole. What if the universe was not caused, but merely happened to be? The 20th century philosopher Richard Swinburne said of the universe “Just is” and that it is a “brute fact” and so questioning what caused it is bound to be an exercise in futility. This view has been likened to that of a player who refuses to sit down to play a game of chess and so cannot lose, and I agree that it is very unsatisfying as an argument, as it effectively nullifies the point of asking questions. I do however think that it is important to remember that Aquinas’ argument is based on something of an assumption.

The other part of the argument’s premise is that infinity is impossible. Again, this seems to be true in daily life but can we really apply it to the cosmos? This is a difficult, possibly even scary thing to try and imagine, but the Darwinian Biologist Richard Dawkins says that when it comes to things like this “Just because you can’t imagine it doesn’t mean it isn’t so.” There does not seem to be any particular reason (excluding, perhaps, God) that the universe should fit to our reasoning or that our

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reasoning should encompass the universe, so this does not seem to be a good enough reason to reject the idea of infinity. Modern advances in science, however, does shed some light on this subject. according to our current models of the universe based on studies of phenomena on Earth and observations of the rest of the universe seem to indicate that the universe is moving towards “thermodynamic equilibrium” which means that, in short, all things are trying to move at the same speed in the same direction, have the same temperature, etc. This implies that, within time, the universe will undergo “heat death” where all activity ceases and nothing changes. Ignoring how depressing this is, it means that the universe cannot be infinite, as if it were, the universe would have undergone heat death and infinitely long time ago. Therefore, the empirical evidence shows that this particular criticism does not hold.

Modern science also provides some interesting contributions to the question of the possibility for non-causation. The scientist Niels Bohr observed in the 20th century what he believed were particles that spontaneously came into existence with no apparent cause. Using particle accelerators like the Large Hadron Collider physicists have since come to the conclusion that these particular particles were actually just moving too fast to be detected before being observed, so they did not actually come from nowhere, but the idea of uncaused particles still has some merit. It is an important point in quantum physics that many actions at the subatomic level, such as the decay of radioactive isotopes, are entirely random and cannot be predicted beyond working with averages and trend lines. This shows that it is indeed possible for actions to occur without cause, but can things be created without cause? In the past few decades the idea of “virtual particles” has become widely accepted by the scientific community. These particles spontaneously appear throughout empty space in pairs which quickly collide and annihilate each other. If this is so, then it shows that it is indeed possible for things to be created from nothing without a cause and so The Cosmological Argument falls through.

Perhaps one of the best criticisms of The Cosmological Argument that science has brought is the “Big Bang Theory”. According to this theory, approximately 13.7 billion years ago the universe was created in a massive explosion from an infinitely dense point known as a “space-time singularity” which literally means that all of space and time was condensed into an infinitely small point. After this explosion the universe was rapidly expanding and in time all the elements, stars and planets formed from the particles released in the explosion. Thus the universe was created. What is interesting about this theory is that it works to much the same premise as The Cosmological Argument. The main difference is that in this case, The Big Bang is the uncaused cause. This theory is very popular and is often regarded as fact, however it is not. Increasingly physicists are questioning this theory, though it is still widely regarded as the most complete that we have so far, and one of the physicists most responsible for developing the theory, Stephen Hawkins, now claims to have doubts over it. Its other weakness is that, being so similar to The Cosmological Argument, it is also vulnerable to many of the same criticisms, most importantly: “What caused it?”

There are no easy answers to this, however there are many models which provide possible solutions. One of these is that The Big Bang actually created two universes, travelling in opposite directions in time. Following time linearly in either direction

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would appear to show that both universes essentially cause each other as from either's perspective the other existed for an infinite length of time before collapsing and creating it and it will exist for an infinite time. Another model is "the oscillating universe" in which our universe was created from the collapse of another, which its self was created from the collapse of one before it. Similarly, our universe will eventually collapse, triggering another Big Bang which will create a new universe. These theories are unfortunately more or less unverifiable, as they rely on the existence of universes outside of our own which are unobservable. They are, however, both important as if either were true then they would allow the possibility of an infinite universe and so they potentially revalidate the criticism that infinite regress may be possible after all.

Ultimately, it seems that the simplest criticisms of The Cosmological Argument may be the best as they provide concise logical objections to it. While arguments based on science have their merits, the nature of science to change and develop means that such arguments tend to have holes which have not yet been filled.

Section 2

Part A

Question 2 – "Religious Experience proves the existence of God" Discuss

Religious Experience (RE) is a broad term used to describe a variety of experiences. Although what does and does not class as RE has been argued by many philosophers, in general they are agreed to be experiences rooted in the supernatural and divine. One of the core questions related to RE is whether any religious experiences are genuine, that is, do any of them show an actual case of divine influence? There are many varying opinions on this, ranging from strong skepticism to earnest belief.

In the 19th century the American philosopher William James attempted to categorise RE to allow it to be more easily studied, dividing it into the categories of Conversion, Saintliness and Mysticism. During his studies, he found, as expected, that when someone has a religious experience their faith in God is reinforced and reinvigorated. However, he also found that atheists and other non-religious people could have experiences that he would categorise as RE too. Interestingly, when these people had such experiences, their *non*-belief was reinforced. This would seem to suggest that RE can be caused by non-religious sources, or else some deity is going out of their way to make people not believe in them. Over the course of his research, James came to the conclusion that "God is real because he produces real effects." It is somewhat difficult to tell from his writing whether or not James actually believed in a real divine power, but his claim that people need a "useful" God and his critique of classical Gods as "childish" in that they "need to be placated" suggests that when he says "God is real" he means that God exists as a social of psychological phenomena, but not a real power.

The 20th century philosopher Richard Swinburne developed what he called "The Principle of Credulity" and "The Principle of Testimony". The Principle of Credulity is that he claims when we experience something, we generally believe that it happened and the Principle of Testimony is that when someone tells us something we

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generally believe that they believe it. There are, he admits, limits to these as one's experiences while drunk are not necessarily true and emails from Nigerian princes inspire doubt in the most trusting, but in general, he says, they hold true. From this, he argues that since people claim to have experienced God must have done so and so God must exist. Although this seems reasonable, it is worth remembering that the assumption that people have nothing to gain from claiming to have religious experiences. Many people have made money off of claiming to have had such experiences by writing books or becoming preachers. In the case of the "Toronto blessing" a small church became the centre of huge attention and media coverage, likely bringing profits to some. It is also possible that people who want a religious experience fool themselves into believing that they've had one, such as seeing Jesus' face on a slice of toast. Lastly, this does not account of the wide range of religions in the world. If we should believe all claims of RE, then we must value the native American who claims to have met a totem spirit as much the Christian who claims to have met Jesus. This would not make sense, since most religions specifically exclude the truth of other religions.

The 20th century psychiatrist Sigmund Freud believed that RE was an expression of mental illness. Freud was deeply critical of religion, saying

"Religion is mass neurosis;

Neurosis is individual religiousness."

His view that RE was caused by mental illness is not surprising then. He believed that religiousness had its roots in the "Oedipus Complex" where a boy lusts after his mother and so becomes jealous of his father, but also fears him, believing that his father has castrated his mother. As the boy grows, he comes to replace the father with God as a powerful, dominant figure. This idea seems fairly dubious, not least because it only explains religiousness in men, thus ignoring about 50% of the global population. This theory has largely been abandoned by the scientific community since, so perhaps it says more about Freud's childhood than it does about religion. It is worth remembering when regarding his theories that Freud was a psychiatrist and so most of his test sample would have been his own patients. Since these people almost certainly were suffering from mental illness to need the help of a psychiatrist his sample must have been fairly biased, so his conclusion is perhaps not surprising if it is incorrect.