

Specification content

The extent to which the Kalam cosmological argument is convincing.

The extent to which the Kalam cosmological argument is convincing

The Kalam cosmological argument as portrayed by William Lane Craig would seem to benefit from being written in the modern scientific age. Craig has the advantage over Aquinas et al., because he has access to contemporary scientific information about the universe: big bang theory, cosmological background radiation, etc. These all provide straightforward, scientifically valid evidence that the universe is finite and thus had a beginning. Indeed, the contemporary views of the universe all agree that there was a starting point – this provides an extremely useful groundswell of opinion for any argument attempting to demonstrate that a beginning of the universe is required.

In a sense, this renders the need for Craig to prove the universe as finite as meaningless. Why argue for something which is supported by the vast majority of the rational and scientific world. The fact that the universe had a point at which it began appears not to be in dispute. In fact, not only is it not apparently in dispute, it is readily accepted, almost as scientific fact rather than theory. The concept that all things in our experience – including the universe itself, have beginnings, lends itself nicely to the first part of Craig's argument. Craig's work here, it would seem, is done – the Kalam cosmological argument for God's existence appears to be entirely convincing. However, things are not quite as simple as they at first seem!

Craig's argument moves from demonstrating that the universe had a beginning to the suggestion that this beginning had a cause, external to the universe – which Craig eventually asserts as being God. It is at this point of the argument that the empirical support thus far enjoyed, is no longer available. The question of how convincing the argument is now rests on how far the individual is willing to accept the next steps in Craig's argument.

Effectively, Craig suggests that the cause of the universe must be through the deliberate choice of a personal being as the physical laws of the universe that cause everything within the universe to work did not themselves exist until the universe did. This logically means that the cause of the universe could not be explained in terms of physical laws. The only viable other explanation for Craig is that the cause is personal. For Craig, the only viable personal agent capable of existing outside of the universe and having the will, power and ability to create the universe is God.

For the theist, there is much that is attractive about this argument. It involves modern cosmology, appears entirely rational and fits in with traditional theistic interpretations regarding creation. In this sense it is a convincing argument.

For those not predisposed to the position of the theist, however, the argument does not have the same power to convince. One of the key elements of the argument that is often cited is that Craig states, quite categorically, that infinity is impossible. Later in the argument he refers to a personal creator that is infinite. As an argument, this is self-contradictory and is one of the key reasons for non-theists to reject the Kalam cosmological argument for God's existence as unconvincing.

AO2 Activity Possible lines of argument

Listed below are some conclusions that could be drawn from the AO2 reasoning in the accompanying text:

1. Scientific points of view support the Kalam argument and strengthen it.
2. The Kalam argument is only as convincing as the individual's prior belief (or non-belief) in God.
3. The denial of infinity, if rejected, completely undermines the Kalam argument.
4. The conclusion of a personal creator is based on a false dichotomy.

Consider each of the conclusions drawn above and collect evidence and examples to support each argument from the AO1 and AO2 material studied in this section. Select one conclusion that you think is most convincing and explain why it is so. Now contrast this with the weakest conclusion in the list, justifying your argument with clear reasoning and evidence.

AO2 Developing skills

It is now time to reflect upon the information that has been covered so far. It is also important to consider how what you have learned can be focused and used for examination-style answers by practising the skills associated with AO2.

Assessment objective 2 (AO2) involves 'analysis' and 'evaluation'. The terms may be obvious but it is crucial to be familiar with how certain skills demonstrate these terms, and also, how the performance of these skills is measured (see generic band descriptors Band 5 for AS AO2).

Obviously, an answer is placed within an appropriate band descriptor depending upon how well the answer performs, ranging from excellent, good, satisfactory, basic/limited to very limited.

For starters, try using the framework / writing frame provided to help you in practising these skills to answer the question below.

As the units in each section of the book develop, the amount of support will be reduced gradually in order to encourage your independence and the perfecting of your AO2 skills.

Have a go at answering this question by using the writing frame below.

EXAM PRACTICE: A WRITING FRAME

A focus on evaluating how far the Kalam cosmological argument convincingly demonstrates that God exists.

The issue for debate here is ...

There are different ways of looking at this and many key questions to ask such as ...

The Kalam cosmological argument is an inductive proof and as such has both strengths and shortcomings. In order to determine the extent to which this argument proves a convincing argument for God's existence, it is necessary to consider each of those strengths and shortcomings in turn ...

In light of these considerations, it could be argued that ...

Nevertheless, it is my view that ...

and I base this argument on the following reasons ...

Key skills

Analysis involves identifying issues raised by the materials in the AO1, together with those identified in the AO2 section, and presents sustained and clear views, either of scholars or from a personal perspective ready for evaluation.

This means that it picks out key things to debate and the lines of argument presented by others or a personal point of view.

Evaluation involves considering the various implications of the issues raised based upon the evidence gleaned from analysis and provides an extensive detailed argument with a clear conclusion.

This means that the answer weighs up the various and different lines of argument analysed through individual commentary and response and arrives at a conclusion through a clear process of reasoning.

Study tip

Always point out the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Kalam argument, as identified in your notes. Consider why these might be considered so, using relevant examples and/or evidence and then give your own reasoned opinion based upon what you have chosen to write about.