
SO Double Standards About Causes in Religious Apologetics

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Some arguments for the existence of God, such as William Lane Craig's Kalam cosmological argument, assume, or try to show, that the universe has a start, before arguing that anything which begins to exist has a cause. The cause is claimed to be God. There are problems with justifying the assertion of a universal rule that everything that begins has a cause. Asserting such a rule would need to be justified on the grounds that some philosophical view requires it or that our experience of the world shows it to be the case. Such justifications, when explored in more detail, would eliminate God as easily as they eliminate an uncaused thing or event – if the reasoning behind them is even valid. Claiming that everything that begins has a cause in a proof of God therefore involves a double standard.

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1 Introduction

Some arguments for the existence of God assume, or try to show, that the universe has a start, before arguing that anything which begins to exist has a cause. The cause, for various reasons, is claimed to be a personal entity, otherwise known as God.

One such argument is the Kalam cosmological argument from William Lane Craig, a Christian apologist.¹ William Lane Craig, in his presentation of the Kalam cosmological argument, claims that actual infinities cannot exist. He uses a mathematical situation known as Hilbert's paradox of the Grand Hotel to try to show this. After claiming to have shown that an actual infinity cannot exist, Craig claims that this means that the universe must have a finite age.² Craig says that anything which begins to exist has a cause, and he rules out any natural cause for the start of the universe, claiming that a personal cause, God, is responsible.³

I will not be discussing every aspect of the Kalam cosmological argument here: It was just given as an example of the sort of thing that I mean. I will not be getting involved in issues such as what the word “universe” means and whether we can meaningfully discuss things outside it, or what the word “begin” means either. This article is about the assumption that everything which begins to exist has a cause, and how the way it is typically used in attempted proofs of God's existence involves a huge double standard on the part of the person making the argument. (With regard to the Kalam cosmological argument, that would be William Lane Craig.) I will now explain what is wrong with the assumption that everything that starts to exist has a cause.

While I have been meaning to write this article for a while, the final decision to write it was prompted by a discussion about the Kalam cosmological argument on the *RichardDawkins.net* forum.⁴ The argument in this article is a narrow, specific objection to the “everything that begins has a cause” assumption used in many arguments, including the Kalam cosmological argument, and I do not want to detract at all from any of the other excellent objections to the Kalam cosmological argument that have been made in that discussion.

¹ Craig, W. L. (2000). *The Kalam Cosmological Argument*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers. (Originally published: 1979, London: Macmillan, New York: Barnes and Noble).

² Craig supports this with some other reasoning that I will not go into here.

³ A short summary of the Kalam cosmological argument is in Appendix 1: A Summary of the Kalam Cosmological Argument on Page 28. The argument known by this name is somewhat older, but William Lane Craig is known for promoting a particular version of it.

⁴ <http://forum.richarddawkins.net/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=103915>.

2 “Everything that begins to exist has a cause.”

The idea that everything that begins to exist has a cause is generally suggested as if it were some universal principle. My response to this is simple: There is no need to assume that such a rule universally applies, and you can do philosophy and science without assuming it.

When I have asked theistic apologists *why* everything that begins to exist must have a cause, I am often told that it is a “rule”. That is inadequate: If people want such a rule they need to justify it. Some theistic apologists simply refer to incredulity to justify such a rule; for example, Ryan Hemelaar, in his defense of the Kalam cosmological argument states:

“To say that something can pop into being uncaused out of nothing I think is worse than magic. For at least in magic, you have the magician and maybe a hat, but here you have nothing being caused by nothing, yet coming into existence. It seems absurd.”⁵

It seems to me that some people never even consider it that deeply, and just assume that the rule is there. I am often told that it is *obvious* that everything that begins to exist must have a cause. That is still useless. Some people have asked me from where an uncaused thing is supposed to come if it has no cause. That is just turning the claim into a question: An uncaused thing would be uncaused.⁶

The assertion that everything that begins must have a cause seems to get justified in two ways. Each of these will now be discussed, with the problems that it has.

⁵ Hemelaar, R. (2008). The Kalam Cosmological Argument for God’s Existence. *Operation 513 – Apologetics Blog*. <http://operation513.blogspot.com/2008/07/kalam-cosmological-argument-for-gods.html>.

⁶ We might try to offer answers based on non-causal relationships, but none of these answers would provide a “cause” according to the specific meaning of the word. They may provide an explanation, though.

3 Justification 1: “If you believe in ‘materialism’ then you must believe that everything that begins to exist has a cause.”

3.1 Justification from Philosophical View

When challenged about this rule that everything that begins to exist has a cause, one response from apologists is to try turn things back onto the non-believer, claiming that, if you believe in “materialism” (or something similar), you must believe that everything that begins to exist has a cause.

An obvious problem with this is that it does not justify the rule. It merely tries to suggest that the person asking for the justification believes in the rule, or should do so to be consistent with other aspects of his/her position. This is making assumptions about what other people believe: The apologist is merely assuming that a non-believer must subscribe to some restrictive philosophical view that requires the belief that everything that begins to exist has a cause. Nevertheless, let us look at this justification further.

It is not necessary to assume that everything that begins to exist must have a cause to approach the world coherently. If something is uncaused, there may be some explanation for its existence, or there may not be, depending on what philosophical principles we have bought into, but any such explanation, by definition, would not be based on the language of time and causality – and we might regard things described by such language as special cases. We might think that time is not part of the fundamental “framework” of reality, but is itself an emergent thing, as some philosophers now think. No such position is needed for the argument I am making here, though. You can do philosophy and science without it. For example, you might assume that the goal of science is to construct scientific models to relate various events without assuming universal causality, or you may simply assume causality as a convenient working hypothesis about what is happening around you, without necessarily assuming that it is universal. I am not trying to tell people exactly how to do science here: The point is that we need not assume that everything that begins has a cause to do it. It is up to the theistic apologist to offer some proof that such a rule universally applies, or even evidence to suggest that that is the case, rather than merely assuming that his/her opponents must subscribe to a philosophical position that requires it.

When the apologist insists that “materialism” requires us to believe that everything that begins to exist has a cause, I could argue with the definition of “materialism” and question whether it actually does require such a rule, but it does not matter, anyway. For the sake of argument, I will accept the name “materialism” for some philosophical system that is supposed to be attractive to scientifically-minded non-believers and

requires, amongst other things, the acceptance of this rule that everything that begins to exist has a cause. This, however, does not force me to accept such a rule. If I refuse to accept such a rule about causes I merely need to call any philosophical view to which I subscribe something else. Nor would this mean I have to buy into some religious viewpoint: It would merely mean I was subscribing to a less restrictive view about what can and cannot exist. As I have already indicated, I could still approach the world rationally, requiring that claims meet various criteria, demanding evidence and so on. This justification of the rule achieves nothing beyond (possibly) raising the issue of what detractors call their position.

3.2 All it does is apply a double standard and beg for a less restrictive philosophical view.

There is a more serious problem with this “materialism” justification. Let us still accept the name “materialism” for this philosophical system that is supposed to be attractive to scientifically-minded non-believers and requires the belief that everything that begins to exist has a cause. Now, suppose that a proof of God’s existence starts by claiming that everything that begins to exist has a cause and the justification for this is “If you believe in materialism you must believe that.” The argument goes on, eventually “proving” that God exists. Whatever we can say about this “materialism”, if it is the “scientific” kind of world view that theists are assuming non-believers to have, we can be practically certain that any tenable form of such a view that is restrictive enough about reality to rule out uncaused things is going to rule out things like God as well. I am not saying that the two are related, merely that the theist is assuming a restrictive philosophical view to justify this rule about causes, and if “materialism” really is that restrictive, any tenable form of it is not going to be the kind of view which admits things like non-contingent beings which exist outside space and time without needing any body or brain – or whatever they claim God is doing. For example, we might think “materialism” requires us to believe that all that happens is events *caused* in space-time by other events – a view which, while it would rule out uncaused things, would rule out God as well. When such an argument concludes that God exists, the argument is reaching a conclusion that is incompatible with “materialism” – and yet “materialism” itself was used as a justification for the “everything needs a cause” rule which was used to get it off the ground in the first place. This inconsistency would mean that the argument’s conclusion could not be accepted. All this would demonstrate is a contradiction in the “materialistic” view. This does not mean that there is such a contradiction – merely that showing that is the most that the argument could possibly achieve and, remember, this is making the (possibly generous) assumption that a “materialistic” view does indeed require everything that begins to have a cause. If we accepted this, it would not mean that scientific philosophy would be about to collapse: We could merely make our philosophical view less restrictive to prevent this problem, and if we had to call our new view something other than “materialism” that is a trivial issue of semantics. There is no reason to think that any less restrictive view we needed

to adopt would require us to believe in God, or even to take the idea seriously. The point of all this is that such an argument has no chance of proving God: At most it is an attack on what “materialism” is claimed to be.

Ultimately, this justification of the “everything needs a cause” rule is showing a double standard. The theistic apologist is expecting the audience to have a philosophical view which is so restrictive that it does not allow uncaused things, but not so restrictive that it does not allow a God: An attempt is being made to selectively enforce some kind of restriction on what a “sensible” scientific viewpoint is supposed to be. It is all quite arbitrary.

One objection that might be made to this is that allowing an uncaused event seems to be philosophically contrived, as if a philosophical view were being “bent” a bit to get round arguments like those of Craig. Theists may claim that allowing an uncaused thing as a special case in a world view is irrational, because it may seem to be “adding something onto the end” of a world view just to deal with a (presumed) need for a start to the universe. As I have said, a non-believer does not need to do that. A non-believer may think that reality must consist of caused events with the possible exception of some first event. Alternatively, he/she may have a view that reality is wider in scope than this and must consist of caused events, with the possible exception of some first event, and lots of other things beyond the scope of causality. Alternatively, a non-believer may just not commit to any particular philosophical view and allow caused events, a possible uncaused event at the start of the universe and *maybe* some extra things not described by causal relationships or maybe not. None of this makes the problem of inconsistency go away: The theistic apologist is insisting that we must have some philosophical view that is restrictive enough to disallow uncaused things, but not so restrictive that it disallows disembodied, atemporal, non-contingent, uncaused minds with super powers⁷. Even if we just have the simple philosophical view that everything is caused apart from some “special” first thing or event, and we are not obliged to do so, pointing out that special case as if it refutes such a position is a double standard from people who then want to introduce their own special thing, God, to explain everything after they have got rid of any other special cases. Nothing will get rid of the double standard here.

All this, of course, is even assuming that theists have successfully demonstrated that the universe (using a meaning of the word “universe” which is quite wide in scope compared to some modern usage of it) *does* have a start, which might be considered a bit of a reach in itself.⁸

⁷ or whatever properties God is supposed to have. There is a limit to how far down *that* rabbit hole it is worth going here.

⁸ The “big bang” does not count. When it is described as the start of the “universe” it does not follow that a philosophical claim is being made. The word “universe”, these days, is used with varying degrees of

4 Justification 2: “*Experience* tells us that everything that begins to exist has a cause.”

4.1 “Our experience tells us...”

One justification of the assertion that everything that begins has a cause is that *our experience of the world tells us that things that begin to exist always have causes*: We never encounter things starting to exist, or happening, without causes. Based on this, it is claimed that it is stupid to suggest that something so far out of our everyday or scientific experience as an uncaused thing could ever exist.⁹

I have a problem with this right away. This is not a proof. It is an empirical justification for what is supposed to be a universal rule. If you expect empirical observations, based on what you experience in everyday life or the results of those scientific experiments that humans happen to have performed, to be treated as if this is a universal experience of everything that could possibly exist, you are already on shaky ground, as human experience may be limited. While that does not, in itself, mean that the idea has no merit at all, people using such an idea in “proofs” of God’s existence, as if it is known to be true with the same degree of confidence that, for example, two plus two equals four, should at least be honest about this.

Unless the theistic apologist wants to admit to special pleading, this kind of justification is a special case of a more general principle which I will call the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”.

The Principle of “It just doesn’t happen”

If a thing or event is proposed which is profoundly outside our everyday or scientific experience – if it is fundamentally different from anything that we have encountered before – then we can reasonably say that *it just doesn’t happen* and say that such a thing does not exist, or such an event does not happen.

I am not saying that such a principle is sensible, but anyone who assumes things not to exist because we have not experienced them is assuming something like this. We might

scope and various cosmologies attempting to describe wider realities have been made. All that can really be said of the big bang with much confidence is that it is the start of our “local” reality.

⁹ The quote of Ryan Hemelaar given on Page 4 looks like an example of this.

debate what “fundamentally different” means, but anyone following such a principle will presumably have his/her own ideas.¹⁰

An example may make this clearer. The following is what was said by a theist, on the *RichardDawkins.net* website’s forum, apparently trying to support the universal rule that everything that begins has a cause.

“The scientific evidence is:

1) All material things have a cause in their beginning. They are rearrangements of matter that have a cause for their rearrangement to become something else. In other words, nothing has ever been created from nothing.

2) We have an absolute physical laws [sic] that say matter is energy and that energy can not be created nor destroyed.

3) We have never, ever in the entire history of science ever seen anything that violated either 1) or 2) above.

4) The universe is a collection of matter and energy.”

When you look at what this is really saying – what it relies on – it is nothing more than appeal to the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”.¹¹

There are two ways in which the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” causes problems when our experience is used to justify the claim that everything that begins has a cause and I will now discuss these.

4.2 Problem 1: If you are claiming that there is a first event in the universe, you are claiming something profoundly outside our experience *by definition.*

If there is a first thing or event in the universe, then it is obviously special by being the first event: It is hyper-unusual by definition, irrespective of whether or not a God caused it. It is special because nothing else is the first thing in the universe. Such a thing or event is clearly absolutely outside everyday or scientific experience. You never observe a first thing or event in the universe while waiting for a bus, nor do you find it in a laboratory.

This goes completely against the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”. In fact, it seems to be the ultimate example of something unusual. A first thing or event in the universe is

¹⁰ That is a problem in itself, as will be discussed later.

¹¹ <http://forum.richarddawkins.net/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=103915&start=600#p2583008>.

so special that only one of them exists or occurs – ever. If you accept the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, you should be opposed to such an unusual thing. You may, of course, reject the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, but if you do that you can hardly use a special case of it to justify other claims you make: You cannot consistently claim that there is a universal rule that everything that begins to exist has a cause because our experience indicates that an uncaused event *just doesn’t happen*.

Theists might answer this by claiming that there is some philosophical proof that there is a first event or thing in the universe, and that such a proof always wins out over any empirical evidence, and so wins out over the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”. This is a weak reply because it implies an admission that philosophical arguments can be found proving the existence of things which would otherwise be ruled not to exist by the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”. It is an open invitation for us to say that any “universal principle” justified by the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” is suspect, and possibly waiting to be dealt a deathblow by some as yet undiscovered philosophical argument. At the very least, it reduces the strength of the claim that everything that begins to exist has a cause to one that may provisionally seem to follow from our experience – and that is if we even buy into the idea at all that our empirical experience is a good indicator of what universal truths there are in the first place. (I do not.)

There is a double standard being shown by theists here in trying to assert something like the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” in claiming that there is no special, uncaused event, while ignoring such a principle when claiming that there *is* a special, first event (regardless of whether or not something caused it). A first, uncaused event in the universe would be about as common as a first event of any kind, whether caused or not, in the universe.

Another point I would make is that some theists seem to like saying, “Just because you have not seen any evidence for God, that does not mean there isn’t one. How can you say there is no God unless you have looked everywhere?”¹² Regardless of the merits or otherwise of such an idea, I hope that anyone saying this is not a fan of William Lane Craig and does not assert that “it just doesn’t happen” with regard to uncaused things. To do so would be hypocrisy: making universal, wide-sweeping claims about reality from limited experience when it supports theism, but claiming that this is unjustified when things are the other way round.

¹² An example of this kind of thinking, by Travis Shepherd, a theist, is at <http://www.theshepherdz.net/travis/?p=21>.

4.3 Problem 2: If you are claiming that a thing was caused by God, you are claiming something profoundly outside our experience.”

The theistic arguments being considered here are ones which claim that there is a first thing or event in the universe, and then try to show that God is the direct cause of that thing or event. For example, William Lane Craig’s Kalam cosmological argument, is supposed to prove that the universe was caused by a non-contingent, personal entity. Such things are clearly outside the realm of our everyday or scientific experience. You do not observe things being caused by non-contingent, personal entities that exist outside space-time (or whatever is being claimed) while waiting to pay for your shopping, nor do you observe such things in scientific experiments. If you accept the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, you should think that there is a rule prohibiting the existence of things being caused by non-contingent personal entities outside space-time as your experience should tell you that *it just doesn’t happen*. As with the previous problem, you may, of course, reject the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, but if you do that you can hardly use a special pleading version of it to justify your claim that there is a universal rule that everything that begins to exist has a cause because our experience tells us that an uncaused event just doesn’t happen.

As with the previous problem, there is a double standard being shown by theists here. In this case it is in trying to assert something like the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” in claiming that there is no special, uncaused event, while ignoring such a principle when claiming that there *is* an event caused by a non-contingent, personal entity outside space-time (or whatever else God is supposed to be). A first, uncaused event in the universe would be about as common as an event which is seen to be caused by a god.

One point I will make is that I have not just been discussing viewing *God* as profoundly outside our experience. The focus of what I have been saying here has not been directly on God, but on this first thing or event that is supposed to need him as a cause (there supposedly being no other cause available). Any thing or event that is caused by God must itself be profoundly outside our experience, as must be the god doing the causing. If we are going to apply the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” a *God*-caused thing or event should be no better than an *uncaused* thing or event.

We might consider a God-caused thing or event to be profoundly outside our experience simply because it is caused by *God*, but we might also consider particular properties that God may be claimed to have. These properties would make God hyper-unusual, but they would also make a God-caused thing or event hyper-unusual, by virtue of having an unusual cause. I have already mentioned God being non-contingent. God is claimed to have different properties by different people, so I can hardly list all the features that God is supposed to have that might cause him to be treated as a special case. There is one respect in which God is particularly unusual: All the minds of which

we know seem to need a physical substrate – something physical which allows them to exist, such as a brain. God is supposed to be a personal entity without any physical substrate. He does not have anything like a brain. He just exists. The unusual properties of God mean that things or events caused by anything like God are completely outside our experience, and should be a valid target for the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” – if we are ever going to apply it.

I have been discussing applying the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” to things or events with unusual causes – to things or events caused by God – but we can also apply it directly to God himself. We can say that God, because he is unusual in the ways we have been discussing – for example, he is non-contingent and incorporeal – is so unlike any other cause we have experienced that we should apply the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” to such a cause. In fact, if we wanted we could ignore the “cause” issue and just say that God as a thing is so far out of our experience that the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” should be applied to rule that such a thing does not exist.

The idea of applying the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” to a God-caused thing or event is most useful, as it most closely corresponds to the idea of an uncaused thing or event which seems to concern theistic apologists so much. However, the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” can also be applied directly to God as an unusual cause or just to God as an unusual thing. There is a lot of similarity between these ideas, and they might be viewed as different ways of saying the same thing. Throughout the rest of the article, it will often not make much difference which of these is being discussed and any of the others could be substituted.

4.4 Possible Responses from Theists

Here are some replies that theists may have about this principle of “It just doesn’t happen”.

4.4.1 “You are assuming some ‘first thing’ or ‘first event’ is caused by God, but it is the entire universe itself that is caused by God.”

I have only even made the distinction because I had to say something. Change the terminology if you want: It will make no difference.

We can also doubt the coherence of this objection. If a thing has a beginning, as most people understand it, and is caused, then it is the *beginning* that is caused, and then a chain of causality results in everything else. If theists want to argue that the universe gets caused in a different way then that is fine: As well as not working, the hyper-unusual ontology here makes things even more outside the scope of our experience and gives more reason for applying the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, if we are going to apply it at all.

4.4.2 “You are assuming that our experience should tell us about everything. Our experience is only of *natural* things. God is *supernatural*. Your principle of ‘It just doesn’t happen’ can only be applied to *natural* things.”

For a start, this is assuming that the word “supernatural” means something profound, and I dispute this. I have made my objections in a previous article, *Against the Supernatural as a Profound Idea*.¹³ Ignoring this issue, and assuming that “supernatural” does mean something profound and useful (and this is being generous), there are four problems with this excuse:

The first problem is that I have not just argued that the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, if applied at all, should be applied to God. I have said that it can be applied to the first thing or event, due to its unusual status in being caused by God, and that means the first *natural* thing or event. Even if this first thing or event is supposed to have a “supernatural” cause, it does not change the fact that we are talking about something in the “natural world”¹⁴ which happens to have a hyper-unusual, “supernatural” cause. We can clearly ask why we have not encountered any more such things or events in the “natural” world – and if the theists’ answer is, “Because it only happens at the start of the universe,” that would be absurd, considering what they are saying about *uncaused* things or events.¹⁵

The second problem is that, with any definitions of “natural” and “supernatural” that we might take seriously, this kind of excuse is trying to treat an uncaused thing or event as if it is “natural”, when all of the argument that such a thing is too preposterous to exist, and should have the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” applied to it, seems to be treating an uncaused thing or event as if it is even weirder to believe in than a god – as if it is so far out of our experience that we can reject its existence, even if we take God seriously. Theists are effectively claiming that an uncaused thing or event is *too far out* to take seriously when arguing against it, but *not far enough out*, when they want to claim that such a thing is within the scope of the knowledge we have from our experience. Any distinction between “natural” and “supernatural” that is based on our

¹³ Almond, P. (2008). *Against the Supernatural as a Profound Idea*.

<http://www.paul-almond.com/Supernatural.htm>.

¹⁴ I dislike using terminology like this as if it means anything profound, but I am playing along.

¹⁵ Theistic apologists may try to argue with this by saying that the first thing or event is “supernatural”, due to it having a “supernatural” cause, but this would be self-defeating. The whole point of the theistic objection being discussed here is that “supernatural” things have a special “get out” from the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”. In case anyone is thinking of arguing that, for some reason, you should be aware that if a “supernaturally” caused event is “supernatural”, and the first event is “supernatural”, the second event is “supernatural” due to being caused by this event and so on: The entire universe would need to be “supernatural”. This also applies if you think God somehow just created the entire universe, rather than causing a first event: A view like this would make the entire universe “supernatural” and the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” nonsense.

experience would involve us in being inconsistent here, and I have argued in the article that I mentioned previously (*Against the Supernatural as a Profound Idea*), that more profound understandings of “natural” and “supernatural” are incoherent – that it has to be something such as “what is in our experience”.

The third problem is that if two things are profoundly outside the scope of our experience, then no comparison will change the fact that they are *both* very much outside it. Trying to claim that our experience is of “natural” things, so we are somehow entitled to make universal statements about the non-existence of “natural” things which are outside the scope of this experience, yet we are not entitled to make the same universal statements about “supernatural” things, is arbitrarily deciding how far beyond the scope of our experience the part of reality to which we can apply the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” extends. If an uncaused thing or event is regarded as “natural”, and we have not encountered anything like this before, this means that, by definition, our experience of reality does not include all conceivable “natural” things, but only some of them. There is no obvious justification for saying that this experience justifies us in extending our experience, as if it were about all conceivable, “natural” things, but not extending it further.

As an analogy for this, imagine that you live on an island where you have seen one billion red penguins and no other birds, ever. Suppose that someone suggested that there may be such a thing as a blue penguin or a green ostrich on the island. Blue penguins and green ostriches are outside the scope of your experience, so maybe there is a case for applying the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” to them, and ruling that all birds are red penguins. I am not going to suggest that we should apply it – I do not agree with the principle anyway, and as I do not agree with it I can certainly not advise on whether this scenario meets the requirements – but if we are going to apply it we should apply it *consistently*: Unless we have a good reason for thinking otherwise, we should apply the principle to both blue penguins *and* green ostriches.

Now, suppose someone told you, “Ruling out both blue penguins *and* green ostriches is flawed. You have only ever seen penguins. All your experience is in *the world of penguins*, and justifies you in asserting universal rules about penguins only. This justifies applying the principle of ‘It just doesn’t happen’ to say that all penguins must be red, and blue penguins do not exist, but it does not justify applying it to say that all birds must be red penguins and that a green ostrich cannot exist. A green ostrich is outside the world of penguins, and your experience tells you nothing of such things.”

This would clearly be a fallacy. We can easily imagine a scenario – such as an island with a huge number of red penguins, one blue penguin and one green ostrich on it – in which this would give the wrong conclusion. Your experience is about *red penguins* and that is all. If you think this experience tells you something about penguins in general, then you are claiming that your knowledge extends beyond your experience of penguins – that you know about penguins in general. However, you could just as well claim that your

knowledge extends beyond your experience of penguins to birds in general, justifying universal rules about *them*. The arbitrariness of this should show that it is invalid for anyone to do this in the first place. We have seen one billion red penguins. If we make a rule that no blue penguins exist, that rule can be proved wrong by a blue penguin turning up, and if we make a rule that no green ostriches exist, that rule can be proved wrong by a green ostrich turning up. A blue penguin would have to do exactly the same thing as a green ostrich to wreck the rule about its non-existence – just turn up – and unless you have some reason for thinking that an island with a lot of red penguins and one blue penguin is less plausible than an island with a lot of red penguins and one green ostrich, there is no basis for making universal rules about penguins and not ostriches. Doing so is just making an arbitrary decision about how far our knowledge of what does not exist extends.

In this hypothetical situation, “penguins” are an analogy for “natural” things. Saying that observing only red penguins allows us to declare that blue penguins do not exist, as we have enough experience of “the world of penguins” to do that, is like claiming that we have enough experience of “the natural world” to say that an uncaused thing or event, if we would consider such a thing “natural”, does not occur, and claiming that green ostriches are exempt from any such rule is like saying that “supernatural” things are exempt. The same problem exists – the arbitrary nature of deciding how far out from our experience we should extend our knowledge of what does not exist.

The fourth problem results from the fact that contradictory rules seem to be in place about whether being outside the scope of our experience is good or bad in terms of plausibility. If an uncaused thing or event is a “natural” thing that, despite being “natural”, is profoundly outside the scope of our experience, a thing described as “supernatural”, such as God, is clearly even more outside the scope of our experience. We should not even need an exact definition of “supernatural” to justify this. “Supernatural” things are supposed to be profoundly different to natural things. Claiming that God is “supernatural” is claiming that God is *not even in the same category* shared by uncaused things or events and everything we experience, yet, for some reason, being even further outside our experience is supposed to make God *less* subject to the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” which is applied to an uncaused thing or event for also being outside the scope of our experience but at least not so far out that it is outside the category of “natural” things. Claiming that our experience lets us rule out “natural” things, but not “supernatural” things is effectively claiming that our experience lets us rule things out if they are far outside the scope of our experience, but that if they are *even further* outside the scope of our experience they become plausible again. This is absurd: It is effectively claiming that being outside the scope of our experience is bad, but being *a lot* outside it is good. We should be able to see this from the example of the island with the penguins that I gave previously. If we have only seen one billion red penguins on an island, then there is no reason to think that a green ostrich is more plausible than a blue penguin. If anything, it should be the other way round. Our experience of “the world of penguins” (our stand-in for the “natural world”

is of only seeing red penguins. A blue penguin disagrees with our experience in one respect – having the wrong color – but a green ostrich disagrees with our experience in two respects – having the wrong color and being the wrong species of bird. If disagreeing with our experience counts against the plausibility of something then, if anything, the green ostrich should be *less* plausible than the blue penguin – and the blue penguin is in the category which is analogous to “the natural world”, while the green ostrich is outside it.

One answer to this from theists may be that I have misunderstood what “natural” and “supernatural” mean. I am not claiming to know exactly what they mean, and I do not think these words have any profound, coherent meaning anyway. This answer will not help though, because whatever “natural” and “supernatural” are supposed to mean, if they mean anything they are categories of some kind, and suggesting that something can share membership of a meaningfully and usefully defined category with everyday things, and yet be further outside the scope of our experience than something which is not even in that category, is going to sound implausible. It would probably just be trying to use vagueness in the concepts of “natural” and “supernatural” to get a desired result.

It should also be noted that this issue makes things even worse. Claiming that God, or a thing or event caused by God, is somehow exempt from the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” by being “supernatural”, while uncaused things or events are “natural”, and therefore subject to it, cannot be used to make a strong argument for exempting God from the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, as has been shown. Using this argument is actually an admission that God is so much further outside the scope of our experience than an uncaused thing or event that he is not even in the same category – and the same could be said of a God-caused thing or event if that is supposed to be supernatural. If the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” is valid at all, the case for applying it against God is even stronger than it is for an uncaused event – based on the theists’ own claims. *The assumptions in this argument, when we try to deal with them consistently, turn into an argument against God’s existence.*

4.4.3 “You are arguing against a principle of ‘It just doesn’t happen’ that we can assert with certainty, but no problem is caused by asserting it with some degree of probability. A principle of ‘It *probably* just doesn’t happen’ would be quite valid.”

I have been describing the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” without any qualifying words like “almost certainly” or “probably”, but my main argument does not rely on an assumption that theistic apologists are trying to apply the principle with absolute certainty. In fact, I note that some theists have told me that our experience of the world suggests *very strongly* (or words to that effect) that everything that begins must have a cause. If this is the case, we should note that this leaves arguments such as the Kalam cosmological argument as, *at best*, strongly suggesting the existence of God, rather than proving it.

In fact, such arguments do not even achieve that. The objection I have to the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” is not about the certainty in the claim or its validity, but about the inconsistency of its application, and that inconsistency does not go away if the principle becomes merely a strong suggestion: It just means that theists who are claiming that uncaused things *probably* do not exist are being inconsistent when they fail to assert that God *probably* does not exist as well and that an argument would be using a premise that something is implausible to support a conclusion of the existence of something which is just as implausible. The main points of what I have said do not require the principle to be applied with certainty. If you go through what I said and put the word “probably” in my statement of the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, and in the assertions that are supposed to follow from it, my argument does not change much.

One loophole that a theistic apologist may try to exploit here is the idea that, if the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” is applied in some probabilistic way, so that the principle tells us to have doubts about various things happening, it may tell us to have different degrees of doubt about different things, and that we should have more doubt about uncaused things or events than we should have about a thing or event caused by God, or about God himself. This would be flawed. Even if such a version of the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” were justified, any reasonable application of it is hardly likely to leave a thing or event caused by God, or God himself, as a reasonable idea. It should be obvious that anything as far beyond the scope of our experience as a thing or event caused by God, or God himself, should have a huge amount of doubt placed on it by any reasonable application of such a principle, regardless of what we do with uncaused things or events. Theists may, of course, attempt to argue with this by saying that, by the time we have got to the end of an argument like the Kalam cosmological argument, we have no alternative but to assume a god, so the doubt at this stage is irrelevant. That, to me, would be suspect: Arguments like this tend to rely on numerous assumptions, and if the conclusion is going to be something that seems unlikely to exist, we should be suspicious about those assumptions. Even if we assume that a probabilistic version of the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” is valid, there is no reason to suppose that it should be applied any more to an uncaused thing or event than it should be applied to one caused by God. A thing or event caused by God is profoundly different to anything we routinely encounter, and it is hard to know where even to start if we are supposed to start comparing that profound difference with that of other things. The only reason for applying the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” against a God to a lesser degree would be bias on the part of the apologist.

In fact, any suggestion that we should apply the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” to different degrees should, if anything, cause us to apply it *more strongly* to a thing or event caused by God, or God himself, than we apply it to an uncaused thing or event. When you start to consider God’s various attributes, you can find him to be profoundly different in a number of different ways, such as having a mind with no physical substrate. You can hardly say the same thing about an uncaused thing or event, as the *absence* of a cause cannot really have any attributes, and this should suggest that the

problem of being outside the scope of our experience may be considered worse in the case a thing or event caused by God, or God himself. As I mentioned when discussing the issue of the possible theistic reply that God is “supernatural” and an uncaused thing is “natural”, and so they should be dealt with differently, claiming that God is “supernatural” is claiming that God is in an entirely different category of things, a strong reason for viewing him as being *further* outside the scope of our experience than an uncaused thing or event, and therefore for applying the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” *more firmly* against a thing or event caused by God, or against God directly.¹⁶ At first glance, there is no reason for applying the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” less firmly to a thing or event caused by God, or to God directly, than to an uncaused thing or event, and when you start to look at the details, you just get reasons for applying it *more* firmly to a thing or event caused by God, or directly to God.

Everything discussed so far should have shown that if we try to apply the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” with certainty, we will end up with a mess. This should suggest that applying it with certainty is a bad idea. This should be obvious if we return to the red penguins and blue penguins example. Suppose we were on that island, and there happened to be a blue penguin there, and we had only seen a lot of red penguins. We might think that was all there was, and apply the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, but *we would be wrong*. This, in itself, should make it clear that the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, in the sense of asserting universal rules in which we have absolute confidence, is invalid. No matter how many red penguins we have seen, we can never be justified in assuming that this tells us with certainty about *everything* that we could possibly meet: If we claim certainty from our experience we are deceiving ourselves.

If such certainty is unjustified, could we at least assert a universal rule with some degree of probability, as has just been discussed? For example, if all we had ever observed were one billion red penguins on the island, could we validly assert that there are probably no birds that are not red penguins *anywhere in reality*? It should be obvious that even a *probabilistic* version of a universal rule like this is suspect. Our experiences can only ever be about a part of reality, and to think that this implies universal rules, even probabilistically, implies an assumption, even if it is just a probabilistic one, that *all of reality is like the part in which we have been having our experiences*. If reality is larger than the part we have experienced, then that assumption should be suspect.¹⁷ This does not mean that any claim is automatically sensible. Nor does it mean that our experience is worthless. If the last one billion penguins we saw were red, we can be reasonably confident, unless we have reason to think otherwise, that the next penguin we see will be red. This kind of reasonable expectation about future observations might be viewed

¹⁶ Page 13.

¹⁷ If reality is *much* larger than the part we have experienced, then such a probabilistic rule becomes even more suspect, but I will not attempt to apply that to the idea of an uncaused thing or event at the start of the universe. Making reality much larger would not help a claim which is for a single thing and which says something about the status of the universe.

as the real basis of what many people call “universal” physical laws. However, when theistic apologists make universal statements about what can be assumed not to exist, based on experience, they may be overreaching themselves.

4.4.4 “We *do* experience God in everyday life and in science.”

Someone is clearly going to come out with this one. Typical examples of ways people may try to demonstrate this may be:

- “The incredible beauty of the world can only be explained by a creator.”
- “The complexity of the universe requires a designer.”
- “Biological complexity requires a designer.”
- “Morality is objective and implies a supreme giver of morality.”
- “I have personal experience of God.”
- “The Bible is proof of God.”

I am not going to try to refute any of these claims here, because I do not have to. Any claim that we have everyday or scientific experience of something that is obviously God or caused by God¹⁸ must be assuming that we already know that God exists. If this is the case, the use of such experience to support a proof of the existence of God is redundant.

4.4.5 “We experience things *like* God in everyday life and in science.”

Instead of claiming that we have everyday and scientific experience of God, an apologist may claim that we have everyday and scientific experience of something *like* God. The idea of this would be that it would make God less profoundly outside the scope of our experience, as we would know that things with the same kinds of properties already exist, and this could be used to justify applying the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” to an uncaused event or thing, but not to God (assuming that the principle is actually valid). As this would not actually be assuming that God exists, any proof of God supported in this way would still have some use.

To do this you would first need something that we experience that is *like* God. I can obviously not predict with complete accuracy what people would come up with, but there is one obvious thing that someone trying to do this might choose: the human mind. Many people believe that the human mind is not just based on the brain but instead has some kind of “special” existence, and that it is outside the scope of what can be scientifically understood. Such people may think it is a good candidate for something

¹⁸ The distinction is irrelevant here.

like God. In fact, Alvin Plantinga, a Christian apologist, has already argued that believing in God is only like believing in other people having minds.¹⁹

There are two problems with this:

The first problem is that this position on the human mind is not accepted by everyone. In fact, it tends to be accepted more by the kinds of people who believe in God and less by the kinds of people who do not believe in God. People who believe in it tend to talk about “souls” as well.²⁰ In fact, there is such a close link between the idea of a non-physical mind or soul and the idea of a God, that this really amounts to trying to use one supernatural claim in a religious world view to support another. Non-believers will tend not to accept any of the “supernatural” claims, instead taking the view that the human mind is the result of physical processes in the brain. All that any of this is really doing is widening the scope of the theists’ claims to include supernatural minds or souls as well. A theist reading this could disagree with me, claiming that minds are supernatural, or that we have souls, and trying to support this with an argument. If this is all that theists can do to try to support the claim that everything that begins has a cause it should be obvious by now that things have got very messy for the apologist: Arguments like Craig’s Kalam cosmological argument would need supporting by arguments about the nature of the mind or whether or not everyday experience shows that we have a soul. This is going to be controversial anyway and supporting an attempted proof of God like this would merely make the “proof” dependent on another supernatural claim. The people who accept that supernatural claim are going to the ones who already agree with you about God.

The other problem with trying to use something like the human mind or souls to argue that we have experience of things like God is that theists seem to claim properties for God that they do not seem to claim for minds or souls. In the Kalam cosmological argument, for example, God is supposed to be atemporal and non-contingent, which would seem to be special features of God. God is supposed to have caused the first thing or event in the universe, which makes him special by definition: None of the other minds in reality get to do this, and if you want to use the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” on uncaused things or events, you should accept that this is a problem. There are also properties such as omnipotence and omniscience. Even if you think that there is some kind of supernatural element to the human mind, or that we have a soul, we do not see minds working in the everyday world without some kind of physical system, such as a human body, being there. The claim for God is for a personal entity with no need of any physical body at all.

¹⁹ Plantinga, A. (New Edition, 1990). *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. (Originally published: 1967, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press).

²⁰ I am not going to try to separate the concepts of “mind” and “soul” here, as it does not affect what I am saying.

Ultimately, no attempt like this to try to make God seem “less far out” is going to work, because if a theist wants to use the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” on uncaused things or events, we can still direct it at the first thing or event itself. A thing or event which lacks any conventional cause, and instead is caused by God, merely by being the first thing or event, is unusual and far outside the scope of our experience, regardless of what parallels you may try to show between things like human minds and God. God is claimed to be special by theists, and the first thing or event, that relies on God for its cause, should be similarly special. We have no everyday or scientific experience of such a thing.

4.4.6 “The principle of ‘It just doesn’t happen’ is subject to personal interpretation.”

The principle of “It just doesn’t happen” asserts that something can be said not to exist or not to occur if we have never experienced anything like it, but it does not state how far out of our experience something would have to be for this to apply. We may never have experienced a man called Kevin Smith winning \$12,640,201.43 in the lottery on Tuesday before, but if this happened, few people – even people who routinely try to apply something like the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” would claim it did not happen and had been faked. This would be because, while this may be something we have not experienced before, it is only outside the scope of our experience in the trivial sense of its details, not in a profound or important sense. Anyone applying the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” would have to decide how far outside the scope of our experience something would need to be – how profoundly different from everything we know – to have the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” applied to it, and for any individual situation he/she would have to decide if the thing being considered is profoundly different enough.

This need for subjective interpretation may create what some theistic apologists may feel is a loophole. A theist may say that the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” applies to uncaused things or events, as they are profoundly different to what we normally experience, but not to non-contingent, personal things because, although they may be profoundly different, they are not profoundly different enough, given the theist’s view of how profoundly different something would need to be to have the principle applied to it. This has problems. Whatever level of profound difference is required, it requires the assumption that God is less profoundly outside the scope of our experience than an uncaused thing or event; otherwise, whatever level of profound difference was required to assert the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, asserting it against an uncaused thing or event would always require it to be asserted against God as well. This could be strongly argued against. God is certainly outside the scope of everyday experience, apart from, maybe, the experience of people who have a “personal relationship” with him – and if a proof of God relies on *that* it is not a very good one. An uncaused thing or event could only be said to be outside our experience in one respect: It is uncaused. Even that could be disputed by referring to quantum mechanics. God, on the other

hand, is profoundly outside our experience in a number of respects. The idea of a non-contingent being is profoundly strange for a start. The fact that he has to cause the first thing or event, which nobody else gets to do, should make him seem, as a cause, as unusual as the first thing or event itself. An uncaused first event and a God-caused first event would occur with the same frequency – once, ever. Various properties of God make both a thing or event caused by God, and God himself, profoundly outside the scope of our experience. God is supposed to have intentionality without time in some arguments, like the Kalam cosmological argument.²¹ He is also supposed to be outside space. He is supposed to have a mind without a physical substrate. Any suggestion that all this is somehow less outside the scope of our experience than an uncaused event is wishful thinking, and any claim to this effect is going to be subjective at best, making a “proof” that uses it just a matter of opinion.

Worse still, even if a theistic apologist manages to make a good argument that an uncaused thing or event is further out of the scope of our experience than a non-contingent, personal being, this does not deal with the issue that *both* of them would clearly still be very far outside the scope of our experience and that a reasonable application of the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, if it is valid, might be expected to take them *both* out. A theist could only deal with this by arguing that the level of profound difference at which the principle gets applied is high enough to rule out uncaused things or events, but not high enough to rule out God. This would be purely a personal opinion, and suspicious, as it would be arbitrary and serves the apologist’s purpose. The rest of us, to whom a non-contingent, personal entity should seem very far outside the realm of everyday and scientific experience, should have no reason for accepting it. By this stage, any apologetic argument relying on all this has become a mess of assumptions, all arranged to give a particular result, and is nowhere near a proof of God. It is nowhere near even *suggesting* a god unless you make various questionable assumptions – and that is assuming that the rest of the attempted proof, which is beyond the scope of this article, even works.

4.4.7 “If you reject the principle of ‘It just doesn’t happen’ you have to take God seriously.”

I have said that I am not supporting the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”, and in fact I do not accept it. Theists may argue that the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” is needed for me to reject religious claims. They may say, for example, that if I reject the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” then I have no justification for skepticism about God or miracles. David Hume is well known for saying that a miraculous explanation should be rejected if an alternative, conventional explanation is available.²² Some theists

²¹ William Lane Craig’s views on God and time are actually a bit more complicated than this, though not in a good way.

²² Hume, D. (New Edition, 2008). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Originally published: 1748). The original book by Hume is also available online at

may argue that if I reject the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” then I am disagreeing with Hume.

The first point I would make in answering this is that the argument in this article is not based on a rejection of the principle of “it just doesn’t happen”. I happen to reject that principle, but that is just my personal view and it is nothing to do with the argument given here. My argument is about theistic apologists applying it inconsistently – using it when they want to show that an uncaused thing cannot exist, but ignoring it when it would work against their claim of things being caused by God. This is a problem whether the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” is valid or not. If the principle is valid, then theistic apologists are applying it inconsistently, by using it on alternatives to God, but not using it on things or events caused by God or God himself. If it is not valid, then theistic apologists are unjustified in applying it at all to justify the claim that everything that begins has a cause.

If you try to apply the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” to support apologetic arguments, you are going to get into a mess. For example, if you use it to support the Kalam cosmological argument’s assertion that everything that begins has a cause, and you think you have shown that there is something hyper-unusual, such as a first moment, then *any* explanation of this unusual thing is going to fall foul of such a principle, and you are going to end up in inconsistency. This would suggest that the principle is invalid, or the argument is defective where it is supposed to be proving that the universe had a beginning – or both of these could apply. I regard the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” as invalid, but that does not matter with regard to the argument I am making here.²³

My own rejection of the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” might be misconstrued as a rejection of Hume’s argument against miracles. Hume did not try to establish such a principle. Rather, he said that we should reject a miraculous explanation when a more plausible alternative is available. When the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” is applied by theistic apologists, it is in a situation where *any* explanation is going to be completely outside the scope of human experience.²⁴

<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/9662> and

http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/david_hume/human_understanding.html.

²³ I will also say that my own view is that there is no reason why reality cannot be much wider in scope than our experience, that the Kalam cosmological argument’s attempt to show that the universe had a beginning is flawed, that what we call “the universe” does not need to be all of reality, and that we need not even assume causal relationships in reality as a whole, as they do not have to be universal. While what we generally call “the universe” may have a beginning, this is philosophically irrelevant if it is part of a larger system that does not. None of this matters with regard to my criticism of the kinds of theological argument being discussed here, and I merely include it so that people cannot make the pointless accusation that I evade the issues I raise.

²⁴ Of course, we have to accept the theists’ claim that this situation exists in the first place to get this far.

On Double Standards About Causes in Religious Apologetics

I may appear to be saying that there is no reason to reject fantastic claims, such as those for the existence of God. If I appear to be rejecting the idea that we should ever dismiss fantastic claims, it would only be by thinking that something like the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” would be our only reason for dismissing claims. The principle of “It just doesn’t happen” is a naïve, simplistic way of approaching claims. Whether or not something is within the scope of our experience is a poor criterion for accepting or dismissing it. In reality, we should consider other attributes of the claim, such as how well-defined it is, its coherency, and its complexity. There could be a lot of discussion about this, and there is, but it is not important here.

5 Conclusion

Some attempted proofs of the existence of God claim that *everything that begins has a cause*. It is then argued that the universe had a beginning, that the first thing or event in the universe needs a cause, and therefore that the start of the universe was caused by God. An example of such an attempted proof is the Kalam cosmological argument from William Lane Craig. Many objections can be made against these kinds of proof, but in this article the objection has been about just one issue: the claim that everything that begins has a cause and the problem of a double standard being shown by theistic apologists who claim both that an uncaused event cannot occur and that an event caused by a God can, and did, occur, as if this is more plausible.

When theistic apologists claim that everything that begins has a cause they are asserting a universal rule. This is a quite extraordinary claim to make, and it needs justification. Unfortunately, the kinds of justification provided by theists are weak, taking forms like “Everyone knows that...”, “It is stupid to think that...” “It would be like magic if...”. None of these are valid justifications. They are merely statements about the theist’s incredulity that an uncaused event could ever happen. They do not justify such incredulity.

There are two obvious ways in which someone may try to justify the claim that everything that begins has a cause.

One way is by claiming that it is “philosophically required” somehow, for example by suggesting that if the non-believer subscribes to “materialism” or a “physicalist” view of the world, he/she must believe that everything that begins must have a cause. The problem with this is that, whatever view the theistic apologist thinks the non-believer has, the non-believer has every right to hold a view which does not involve taking the apologist’s god seriously, and yet which still does not hold the idea that the requirement for things to have causes must be universal. For example, someone could take the view that temporal relationships could be a special case of relationships between things. Alternatively, someone could just take the view that temporal relationships are only relevant to events which are not at the start of the universe, and that no more sophisticated cosmology is necessary. Whether such a view would be described by the word “materialism” is irrelevant: The definition of a word will not prove anything. Ultimately, the non-believer does not have the responsibility of describing a world view in which it is not universally required for everything with a beginning to have a cause. The theistic apologist is making the claim and, if it is true, should be able to demonstrate this without his/her opponent providing anything. Even if there is an answer to this, there is another problem. If the theistic apologist is supporting the idea that everything has a cause with an appeal to some philosophical position such as “materialism” or “physicality” that the non-believer is supposed to have, and if nothing better can be provided, he/she is effectively assuming that some philosophical position like “materialism” applies. I will not argue about exactly what a word like “materialism”

means here, but after assuming such a restrictive position, the “proof” then goes on to “prove” that God exists, and it is likely that a philosophical view called something like “materialism” or “physicalism” that is restrictive enough to disallow uncaused things or events will also disallow something like God. Theists are trying to have it both ways here: They are projecting a restrictive, “scientific” (in their opinion) philosophical view onto their opponents to support the premises for an argument to prove that something *outside* that restrictive philosophical view exists – meaning that the restrictive philosophical view on which the premises were based could no longer justifiably be held. An argument like this, with a premise justified like this, can never prove the existence of God. At most, even if the rest of the argument were valid, it *might* show that a particular philosophical view was too restrictive.

The other way in which someone may try to justify the claim that everything that begins has a cause is by reference to our experience. The idea would be that all of our experience of reality tells us that everything that begins has a cause. The theistic apologist has already set his/her sights low by using this justification, because it amounts to an attempt to give empirical justification to a premise in a “proof”, meaning that at best the argument would not really be a proof, but just something that is suggested by our empirical observation of reality. If we stated this as a general principle it would be relying on what I have called *the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”* – the idea that things cannot exist, or events cannot occur, if they are different, in a profound way, from things in our everyday or scientific experience. The problem with such a principle is that using it to rule out uncaused things, but not theistic claims, is a double standard. Claiming a *first thing or event* at all is claiming a very special case, profoundly outside our experience by definition: None of us has ever observed a first thing or event. There is only one such thing or event and it is about as unusual as a thing or event could be. When a *thing or event caused by God, or God himself*, is claimed this is also making a claim for something profoundly outside our experience. In everyday life, we do not see God causing things, nor do we have any scientific experience of this. A consistent application of the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” would rule such things out. Theistic apologists, however, do not apply this principle consistently. They apply it just to uncaused things or events, claiming that everything in our experience tells us they do not exist or happen, while ignoring the fact that if our experience justified such assertions, there is no place for an *event caused by God* in reality either.

This problem becomes still worse if we consider particular properties of God. For example, God is supposed to have a mind with no physical substrate or body. When have we ever experienced anything remotely like that? Now, I am not saying that this principle of “It just doesn’t happen” is valid – I happen to think it is not – but whether it is invalid, or valid and applied inconsistently, it does not help a “proof” of God.

Objections like this make some attempted proofs of God, like William Lane Craig’s Kalam cosmological argument, worthless. Such arguments are based on nothing more than universal assertions about what can and cannot exist, which conveniently rule out things

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that the theistic apologist does not want to exist, and allow something that the theistic apologist really, really wants to exist. One feature of this type of argument that should stand out is its self-serving nature in displaying such a double standard.

I have objected to theistic apologists applying the principle of “It just doesn’t happen” inconsistently, and this article is about inconsistency, but I am not trying to argue for *consistent* application of the principle of “It just doesn’t happen”. I do not need to: All I need do is point out the inconsistency in its use and theists can sort the problem out, or not, as they wish.

6 Appendix 1: A Summary of the Kalam Cosmological Argument

A summary of the Kalam cosmological argument suggested by William Lane Craig is as follows:

1. Anything that begins to exist has a cause.
2. The universe began to exist.
3. Therefore the universe had a cause.
4. Therefore the universe was caused by a non-contingent, personal entity – God.

Craig presents extra arguments to support each of these statements. The claim that the universe began to exist is supported with an argument that an actual infinity cannot exist in reality. Craig uses a mathematical scenario known as Hilbert's paradox of the Grand Hotel. Hilbert's Grand Hotel is supposed to be a hotel with an infinity of rooms, all of which are occupied. Someone arrives wanting a room, and the manager can accommodate the new guest by asking the occupant of Room 1 to move to Room 2, the occupant of Room 2 to move to Room 3 and so on, leaving Room 1 vacant. As the hotel previously contained no unoccupied rooms, the fact that a vacant room can seem to come from nowhere like this may be counter-intuitive. Craig goes further and says that this, and other issues raised by Hilbert's Grand Hotel, show that an actual infinity could never exist in reality, and that the universe therefore had a beginning. To try to show that the universe had a beginning, Craig makes further arguments, one of them attempting to show that if the universe were infinitely old we would never have got to the present.²⁵

²⁵ In my view, all of this is deeply flawed; however it is not the subject of this article.

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