

## Steve's Comments on PHIL101 First Papers

In general, I thought that the papers were well done! They were interesting to read, even after twenty or thirty of them. Here are some section-by-section comments. Please read them over and try to incorporate the lessons into your next paper.

### Section 1:

Most students represented the argument well enough, but there were two relatively minor problems that frequently occurred:

- 1) There were frequent errors in distinguishing premises from conclusions, especially in the early premises. (For example, the fact that there threatens to be an infinite premise must be derived, in part, from the premise that every event must have a cause.)
- 2) The presentation of the argument contained irrelevant detail from the subsequent objection (e.g. talking about self-causation).

### Section 2:

The representation of the objection was generally more muddled:

- 1) Remember: if you disagree with an argument, that doesn't mean that you have to disagree with the conclusion of that argument. (For example, I can think that the Maple Leafs will win the Stanley Cup this year, but deny that Auston Matthews' brilliance implies that they will win the Stanley Cup.<sup>1</sup>) It is inaccurate to say that Nagel's objection to the Cosmological Argument shows that God does not exist, or even that there is no first cause. (So it would be a mistake to say that he disagrees with the *conclusion* of the argument.) All Nagel's objection does is show that the Cosmological Argument does not prove that God is the first cause, either because its premises are incorrect, or because the argument is invalid.
- 2) In other words, if you accept everything in Nagel's objection, as well as everything in the Cosmological Argument that Nagel *does not* reject, you will (a) agree that there cannot be an infinite series (untouched from the Cosmological Argument), (b) be ambivalent about (1) whether a self-causing first cause caused the universe or (2) the universe caused itself. Nagel does not present any arguments to think that (2) is any more likely than (1), though perhaps you could offer those arguments yourself in section 3(a) or section 3(b) – see below.
- 3) A more minor point, and one that didn't really factor into my evaluation of the papers: I think it was inaccurate to present Nagel's objection as saying that the premise "Every event has a cause" *contradicts* the conclusion that "God is a first

---

<sup>1</sup> Auston Matthews is an American professional ice hockey player on the Toronto Maple Leafs. He was drafted first overall in 2016. In his first game in the NHL, on October 12, 2016, he scored four goals, which was a record for any player's first game. Toronto still lost the game.

cause” – as Nagel notes immediately after, these two claims are consistent as long as you postulate that God can cause itself.

Section 3(a):

- 1) These were generally the least strong parts of the papers. Many papers wound up just repeating the objection in different words. You need to find something more substantive to say about the objection. If you disagree with the objection, it's easy: you find a reason to think that one of its steps is invalid. If you agree with the objection, you still have some work to do. You could strengthen one of the claims made by the objection. Or you could anticipate how someone might respond to the objection, and address their concerns.

Section 3(b):

A majority of papers made one of the following objections to the Cosmological Argument:

- 1) Not every event has a cause (e.g. quantum events)
- 2) We shouldn't rely on our intuition that there can't be an infinite series of causes.
- 3) Even if there is a first (uncaused or self-causing) cause, it need not be God (because it need not have the three “omni” characteristics.

These are adequate objections, but because they appeared so frequently, it was difficult to make your paper stand out if you chose one of them – especially if you didn't do much to dig into them by anticipating objections that come into mind. Here are some objections to each:

- 1) For one thing, this seems too strong. Do we really need to reject the foundational premise that every event has a cause in order to reject the cosmological argument? It seems like using a jackhammer where a screwdriver might be more appropriate. Also, why think that quantum indeterminacy is relevantly similar to the whole universe not having a cause?
- 2) This is true – obviously our intuition is misleading in many situations. But why think that this is one of them? What is the root of the initial intuition?
- 3) Same here. It's true that it is not obvious that a first (self-causing) cause need not be God, but what are some of the reasons why people might think it is? (Wouldn't it be odd if God were the second or the third cause?) Also, how does this relate to God's omnipotence? Could God still be omnipotent if it were not the first cause?

Section 3(c):

- 1) The summaries were generally good, but a little long for my taste, especially when that space could have been more effectively used for discussing

General Observations about Writing

- 1) In general the papers were structured in a logical way (the scaffolding and sections helped here) but the writing was sometimes difficult to follow on a paragraph-by-

paragraph level; sometimes things got a little dark in the middle of paragraphs, and it took multiple reads of the same paragraph to figure out your point:

- a. It is important to choose paragraphs of appropriate length – as a rule, you want to argue for one thing per paragraph. A paragraph should never be a whole page – generally about half a page is ideal, although this will vary depending on the kind of point you are making.
- b. Transition words matter a lot. Without a transition word between two sentences, you are leaving it entirely up to your reader to guess at the relationship between those sentences. Some kinds of transition words: lists (first, second, etc), logical consequence (‘therefore’, etc), temporal order, (‘before’, ‘after’, ‘then?..), illustration (‘for example’), and so on.