

Is there any need to explain why there is a universe at all? Would God be an explanation?

By Michelle Hogan

One could either regard the fact that the universe – or cosmos – exists as a 'brute fact', or one could accept the need for its existence to require an explanation. A third possibility might be that we cannot know why it exists. Among the numerous attempts to provide such an explanation is the so-called 'cosmological argument', which begins from indeterminate experience – the mere fact that there is a world – and comes into Kant's second class of arguments.¹ There are different versions of the cosmological argument, some of which can be traced back to the Five Ways of Thomas Aquinas. I will discuss the argument from contingency, which maintains that the 'contingent' world has been given existence by a 'necessary being'. In addition to this modal argument, I will comment on a modern version of the temporal (kalām) one, that the beginning of the universe must be a caused event. According to Leibniz, 'nothing happens without a reason', and the reason 'why something should exist rather than nothing', is that there is 'a cause for the prevalence of existence over non-existence', which is the existence-creating, necessary being called 'God'.²

In the 1948 debate with Bertrand Russell, Fr. Copleston supports Leibniz's argument from contingency - based upon the principle of sufficient reason. Contingent here means something which depends upon something else for its existence, and a necessary being is one 'which contains within itself the reason for its own existence, and which cannot not-exist'.³ Russell, however, maintains that the word 'necessary' can only be applied to analytic propositions, not to things; he states that 'the universe is just there, and that's all'.⁴ Copleston does not accept the difference that Russell points to, between Leibniz's 'division of propositions into truths of reason and truths of fact', so whereas Copleston asserts that Leibniz's argument provides the formulation for 'the fundamental metaphysical argument for God's existence', Russell maintains that 'necessary' is a useless word unless applied to analytic propositions.⁵ It seems to Russell as though they have gone back to the ontological argument 'that there is a being whose essence involves existence', which is similar to a claim made by Kant.⁶ Kant said that the conclusion drawn from the cosmological argument is 'that the *ens realissimum* is the absolutely necessary being' and that 'this is the proposition maintained by the ontological proof'.⁷ He continues by saying that 'absolute necessity is an existence determined from mere concepts'.⁸

J. L. Mackie, however, takes issue with Kant's claim, by saying that rather than the cosmological argument owing its cogency to mere concepts, it purports to show from the contingency of the world that there must be something else which is not contingent.⁹ Mackie expands on this and points out that even if we accept the concept of a being 'whose essence includes existence', there is the further question of 'whether there is something that instantiates it', and by asserting that the 'existence of this being is not logically necessary', Mackie seems to be in agreement with the stance taken by Russell.¹⁰ Another objection mentioned by Mackie is the principle of sufficient reason, because not only do we not know it to be true *a priori*, it does not seem to be 'satisfiable even in principle'.¹¹ Mackie states that the 'principle of sufficient reason is more far-reaching than the principle that every occurrence has a preceding sufficient cause', and it does seem to be too large a claim to argue from every occurrence in the world to the world as a whole having an

1 I. Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, pp.499-500.

2 G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Writings*, p.145.

3 Fr. Copleston, 1948 radio debate.

4 Russell, *ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 I. Kant, *op. cit.*, pp.509-510. The notion is that there are increasing degrees of reality.

8 *Ibid.*, p.510.

9 J. L. Mackie, 'More objections to cosmological arguments', in *Philosophy and Religion, A Guide and Anthology*, p.214.

10 *Ibid.*, p.215.

11 *Ibid.*, p.216.

explanation. The supposed principle could be supported empirically by actually finding causes, but not as an *a priori* truth.¹² Scientists like Stephen Hawking have investigated how the universe might have come into existence, and he has provided an explanation of how it might have happened in terms of the big bang, but he also maintains that any 'physical theory is always provisional, in the sense that it is only a hypothesis: you can never prove it.'¹³

In the debate, Fr. Copleston maintains that the totality of objects must have a reason external to itself, which he claims is a necessary being, but I would accept Kant's assertion that if we venture to apply our reason to 'principles beyond the limits of experience, there arise *pseudo-rational* doctrines which can neither hope for confirmation in experience nor fear refutation by it.'¹⁴ Further, Russell sees no reason to suppose that the total has any cause. It looks as though we cannot take instances of events in the world and project them beyond our experience, to provide an explanation for its existence. Even if we decided to, it would be difficult to see how God could be such an explanation, although William Lane Craig has attempted to show this. In answer to Hume's question of why the material universe may not 'be the necessary existent Being, according to this pretended explanation of necessity', Lane Craig reminds us that an essential property of a necessary being is eternity.¹⁵ He aims to show the superiority of theism by establishing that the universe did have a beginning, because an actual infinity is impossible. However, in order for this to work, we have to accept the first premiss, which is that 'whatever begins to exist has a cause of its existence' but as we have seen, we cannot rely on Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason. We could simply accept that the universe – probably – had a beginning, but this does not mean that the universe definitely has a cause of its existence. Even if it did, we cannot infer that the cause was a necessary being.

In his argument, Lane Craig comments on 'a more modest explication of necessity of existence' put forward by John Hick, in which a necessary being 'is an eternal, uncaused, indestructible, and incorruptible being' but so far in this analysis, I have only considered the 'necessity' of such a being, not the other qualities mentioned here.¹⁶ It looks as though Hick has developed the notion of a necessary being that is somehow the cause of itself, into something which is also indestructible and incorruptible. Presumably from there, it is only a short step to regarding this being as the God of classical theism, with the properties of omnipotence, omniscience, and so on. We could accept that this necessary being is the cause of itself, and God is thought to have aseity, but the question is whether one is justified in including those other properties in such a being. Avicenna assumes the veracity of a necessary being, 'which has no cause', meaning that such a being has no antecedent, but he proceeds from here to discussing this being as 'All Truth' and 'by virtue of His Essential Reality', he is 'United and One'; by doing so, Avicenna seems to have shown that he pre-supposed this necessary being to be God to begin with.¹⁷

It seems as though there is a need to understand how and why the universe came about, although I think we can only do this by observing what is actually there, bearing in mind that only a small fraction is actually observable.¹⁸ The principle of sufficient reason, with the implication that an explanation is required, might be demanding too much and perhaps there is no need for a necessary being at all, either in the form of the universe itself, or God. I think that the various cosmological arguments put forward by Lane Craig, Fr. Copleston and Avicenna have been unable to withstand the strong arguments against them from Russell,

12 *Ibid.*, p.217.

13 Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, p.11.

14 Kant, *op. cit.*, p.394.

15 William Lane Craig, 'The Existence of God and the Beginning of the Universe', <http://www.leaderu.com/truth/3truth11.html>, a modern version of the kalām argument.

16 John Hick, "God as Necessary Being", *Journal of Philosophy* 57 (1960): 733-4, cited by William Craig Lane.

17 Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā).

https://hilary2018.conted.ox.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/11943/mod_book/chapter/6794/Avicenna_CLA_Article_7.3.pdf

18 Probably only about 5%, because of the amount of dark matter and dark energy:

<https://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/what-is-dark-energy>

Hume, Kant and J. L. Mackie. One cannot prove the existence of a necessary being either rationally by logical argument or empirically by actual demonstration. This is not to say that the universe is unintelligible, though. A possible standpoint between brute fact and the requirement for an explanation of why anything exists - or why the universe exists in this particular way - might be that there is a reason for its existence, but it is beyond our scope of knowledge and experience, so no such explanation is available to us.

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