

What Caused God? Apologetics Note #2

Periodically someone will say to me, "I don't understand how anyone can be an atheist. How else could one account for the origin of the universe itself?" The Christian apologist, Hugh Ross, makes an argument much like this. He argues first for the thesis that the universe had a beginning, the moment of the big bang. Second, he assumes that there must be a cause for the big bang. Next, if all physical reality, including time and space, arise out of the big bang, then, the cause of the big bang must be something that transcends the physical universe. Coupling this consideration with the apparent fine-tuning of natural law which makes life possible and the claim that it would take a super intelligent being to so arrange natural law, Ross concludes that this transcendent cause is God.

Those familiar with the traditional arguments for the existence of God will recognize that Ross' argument is a combination of the design argument (here from apparent fine-tuning) and the first-cause argument (the argument that the universe could not be its own cause). At a later time I will mention and discuss the hypotheses that atheistic scientists have been advancing to account for the origin of the universe—they do not accept the assumption that one must postulate a transcendent cause—but in what follows I will restrict my comments to an older objection to the first-cause argument, an objection which may be given the label "What caused God?" In Introduction-to-Philosophy classes it is often presented as a fatal objection to the first-cause argument.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell is one who raises this objection. In his essay, "Why I Am Not a Christian?"¹ Russell states the first-cause argument as follows, "...everything we see in this world has a cause, and as you go back in the chain of causes further and further you must come to a First Cause, and to that First Cause you give the name of God." According to Russell, the fallacy in the argument is that "If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause." What's more, "If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God."²

Russell's contention was that if the thesis that everything must have a cause is correct, then there has to be a cause of God, as well. Hence, to fail to seek a cause for God is to abandon the premise that everything must have a cause. In other words, if one thinks that something, God, can exist without being caused by anything else, then so much the worse for the thesis that everything must have a cause. Furthermore, if one allows that God is an exception to the rule, then why not simply stop with the universe and suppose that the universe came into being without a cause? Alternatively, why not suppose that the universe has always existed? "The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our imagination,"³ Russell says. His conclusion is that "there cannot be any validity to the argument. It is exactly of the same nature as the Hindu's view, that the world rested upon an elephant and the elephant rested upon a tortoise; and when they said, 'How about the tortoise?' the Indian said, 'Suppose we change the subject.' The argument is really no better than that."⁴

¹ Russell, Bertrand, "Why I Am Not a Christian," in *Why I Am Not a Christian: and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, essays by Russell ed. by Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster [a Clarion Book], 1957), pp. 3-23.

² Op. cit., pp. 6-7.

³ Op. cit., p. 7.

⁴ Ibid.

It should be said in response to Russell that when he wrote this essay, originally a popular lecture in 1927, the big bang theory had not yet arisen. According to big bang cosmology the universe sprang into existence some 12-15 billion years ago. And since time is part of the physical universe, time too had a beginning.^{5,6} Thus, even though one may be able to imagine that the universe has always existed, there are scientific reasons for thinking that the universe had a beginning.⁷

This, of course, does not address the “fallacy” that Russell said is committed by the first-cause argument. It does not address the apparent conflict between the principle that “everything must have a cause” and allowing that God be uncaused. To see what is wrong with Russell’s claim, let’s alter the Indian tale. Suppose that upon being asked, “What about the tortoise?” the response had been, “The world rests on the back of an elephant, and the elephant on the back of a tortoise, but all three rest in infinite space.” If this had been the reply, it would clearly block the further question, “But what does infinite space rest on?” Were such a question asked, the Indian master would rightly have replied, “Your question reveals that you do not understand the concept of infinite space.”

At this point, it might be objected that God is not infinite space. This is, of course, true, but God is in some respects more like infinite space than like any finite thing. God is not some sort of cosmic superman, like other beings yet with super strength and abilities. Rather, God is completely unique. His power is literally without limit.⁸ He is not limited by space, or time, or anything else in creation. Although we refer to God as “a being”—God does indeed exist—there is an important sense in which it is inappropriate to think of God as *a* being, one more being amongst the many that exist. The being of God, God’s nature, is reflected in some ways in what God has created, but God is categorically distinct from all that he has created.

Furthermore, God not only created the universe and all that is in it, he sustains its existence moment by moment. As the apostle Paul says, quoting a Greek philosopher approvingly, “In him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28) In an important sense, therefore, God is not an object or a thing at all. We can relate to God, and we speak of God as *the object* of our worship, but God is not an object or an entity in the sense that all finite things are. The theologian Paul Tillich aptly expressed this by stating that God is “the ground of our being” – not another being, but the source of all being; not a thing; but the creator of all things.

Coming back to Russell, when Russell says, “If everything has a cause, then God must have a cause,” he is taking “everything” to mean *all that is real*. God is real, but one must ask whether God is

⁵Stephen Hawking in *A Brief History of Time* (NY: Bantam Books), holds to the view that the universe is finite, namely that time only goes back so far, but nonetheless had no actual beginning. There are good reasons not to take the thesis seriously, but I will not go into them here.

⁶Even apart from big bang cosmology, the second law of thermodynamics points toward a beginning. That law states that entropy, a measure of disorder, always increases in a closed system. One can have local increases in order if there is energy input from outside the system, such as energy input from the sun to the earth, but in a closed system entropy is always increasing. Since the universe is not receiving energy input from outside itself, the entropy of the universe increases over time. But this suggests that the universe had a beginning. Moving back in time implies moving back toward zero entropy (i.e. towards maximum order). Another way of seeing this is that if an infinite amount of time had already passed, the entropy of the universe would long ago have reached a maximal state, and clearly it has not.

The increase in entropy in the universe creates another mystery, namely why it is that at the moment of the big bang (or just after it) the universe should exist in a state of low entropy. If one thinks of the increase in entropy by analogy to the winding down of a clock, the mystery is how the clock, the universe, came to be wound up in the first place.

⁷Not surprisingly, part of the initial resistance to the big bang theory was that it comported all too comfortably with the biblical creation claim.

⁸Sometimes when contemplating the vastness of the universe, a person will feel that God could not have created all this or could not attend to all of it. But such thinking simply reveals “the cosmic superman” mistake, namely thinking of God as being very powerful but nonetheless finite.

the sort of being which one should expect to fall under the principle “everything has cause.” Every *thing* may have a cause, but is God a *thing* in the sense which this dictum supposes?⁹

To illustrate the caution here, consider the reality of mathematical truths. The metaphysical status¹⁰ of mathematical entities is a difficult issue, but suppose one were to say that mathematical entities are real, should one therefore expect that they are caused? It would be rather odd to suppose that they must be caused. Mathematical entities are not at all like physical entities. Experience tells us that physical entities are caused and their existence seems to depend in an obvious way on prior states of affairs. But mathematical entities, if they exist, do not seem to have this same sort of contingent status. Now, this in itself does not demonstrate that it is utterly impossible for mathematical entities to have been caused—God might in some sense cause or sustain the existence of mathematical entities—but at minimum it would seem quite unwarranted to suppose that mathematical entities must have a cause.

In a similar way, it may or may not be logically coherent to ask whether something could have caused God. Whether or not such a question is logically coherent depends on how the concept of God gets defined. But at minimum it would be unwarranted to suppose that God must have a cause. Given that God is infinite and has the character described above, there is good reason for suspecting that the principle “everything has a cause” ought not to be applied to God.

Does this mean that the first-cause argument is a compelling argument? Not necessarily. At the beginning of this essay I mentioned the fact that atheists are trying to account for the origin of the universe in purely naturalistic terms—and this is a topic that I will address at some future time—but what can be said here is that if the first cause argument is less than compelling, its weakness does not lie in the sort of fallacy that Russell says it commits. The question “What caused God?” may or may not be intelligible, but there is good reason for suspecting that the one who takes this as a serious objection to the first-cause argument, either does not comprehend the concept of God or is not taking the concept seriously when the question is asked.

⁹Sometimes this principle is taken as being simply a self-evident truth of reason. On this reading, one might think that it should be applied to God as well, but given the concept of God, the extension is at least problematic. The other reading of the principle takes it to be an inductive generalization. On this reading, the important question becomes, what generalization does our experience warrant? One could argue that since our experience does not include the formation of entities such as angels or protons, it is unwarranted to generalize from our experience to the supposition that they have a cause. This objection has merit. It, of course, needs to be noted that the Bible says that angels are created by God. As for protons, we have theoretical reasons for thinking that protons are caused. In a similar vein one might argue that one ought not to generalize from our experience of physical things to the universe as a whole. Again, our experience does not include the origin of the universe, but if an infinitely old universe can be ruled out on theoretical grounds, then our inductive generalization amounts to the inference that all things which have a beginning have a cause. I will say more about this inference when I address recent naturalistic speculations about the origin of the big bang. That discussion will include comment on whether “virtual particles” which arise from quantum vacuum fluctuations constitute an exception to this rule (or generalization).

¹⁰Metaphysics is that part of philosophy which deals with the nature of reality. When one asks a metaphysical question one is asking about the nature of what exists and not just how things appear to us. And when one speaks of metaphysical categories or the metaphysical status of something, one is speaking of the kind of reality which the thing in question possesses.