

# ATHEISTS' CHALLENGES TO COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

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**Abstract.** In this paper I intend to identify some points of disagreement between theism and atheism. I will try to point out three epistemological clashes occurring in the controversial treatment of cosmological arguments. I am not assessing the arguments pro and contra, which have been thoroughly studied and discussed, but just trying to understand the misunderstanding.

By a cosmological argument, I will understand any argument to a first generating and sustaining cause of the universe. Suppose that, up to the present day, every purported cosmological argument has been defeated. This would not disprove theism. Would this provide a good presupposition in favour of agnosticism? Probably yes (except if the relevant God of theism was not creator, or if God's existence could be accessed without implying the dependence of the world on God's creative power).

But of course, this would not preclude the success of further attempts to make a positive case for a creator.

A more conclusive strategy would consist in finding out a flaw that generally dismisses every attempt to make a sound argument to a creator. A first flaw could be found in the very concept of creation out of nothing. A second flaw could be about which are the standards and which the right stopping point of a causal explanation of the world. And, finally, there could be Hume's argument against the necessity of a cause to every new existence. For, if even a new existence is not crying out for an explanation, a fortiori the mere existence of anything at all will not.

## I.

Let us first deal with the widespread idea that there is something wrong with the very concept of creation out of nothing, since it would contradict the basic principle that nothing comes from nothing. Our first concern will be then a brief inquiry into the alleged conflict between the concept of creation out of nothing and the principle that out of nothing comes nothing.

Let us consider first, the following definition of creating:

(1)  $x$  creates  $y =_{\text{Def.}} x$  makes  $y$  come into existence.

Then let us phrase the so-called epicurean or lucretian<sup>1</sup> principle *ex nihilo nihil fit* which I suggest to express positively:

(2)  $(\forall a) ((a \text{ comes into existence}) \rightarrow (\exists b) (a \text{ comes out of/from } b))$

Suppose now (3)  $C$  creates  $W$  out of nothing

By (1) & (3), we get:

(4)  $C$  makes  $W$  come into existence out of nothing.

And here is a crucial issue as to whether 'out of nothing' is referring to a paradoxical origin of the creature OR qualifies the operation of the creator.

In the first case, statement (4) should be read as (5)  $C$  makes  $\{W$  come into existence out of nothing $\}$ , but if  $W$  is made come into existence out of nothing, then  $W$  comes into existence out of nothing; which would certainly contradict (2). But instead of (5), (4) could be read as (6)  $C$ , out of nothing, makes  $\{W$  come into existence $\}$ .

This is the question of the scope of clauses in sentences including factive verbs. If I make you laugh without reason, one may ask whether I, having no reason to do that, make you laugh, or I make you laugh, but you have no reason to laugh, you are just caused to laugh, by inhaling a laughing gas I may have spread in your face. So, the phrase 'out of nothing' does not necessarily describe the making-of of the creature. It may only stipulate that creation operates without any pre-existent substratum.<sup>2</sup> It just suggests that creation out of nothing is creation not

<sup>1</sup> *'nullam rem e nihilo gigni divinitus unquam'*: which means 'no reality was ever produced by divine deeds' (Lucretius, *De rerum natura* I, 150, cf. '*nil posse creari de nihilo*' (ibid., I, 155-156).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Geach has suggested a clear analysis of the concept of creation out of nothing. He dismisses apparent difficulties arising 'from illicit manipulations of the word "nothing" in "made out of nothing"'. 'Nothing' is not 'the stuff we are made of'. Creation

out of anything. This is the way Aquinas or Geach used to conceive of *creatio ex nihilo*. Nevertheless, even on this account, creation out of nothing still contradicts principle (2), since there is no *b* out of which *W* comes into existence.

So if we wish to remain consistent with the basic knowledge (the tautological evidence?) that nothing comes out of nothing, we will have to qualify the epicurean principle of ontological conservation. It may operate within the framework of physical events and transformations. According to Lavoisier's famous rephrasing of the epicurean principle: 'In nature nothing gets lost, nothing gets created, everything gets transformed.' But what obtains within nature, or given nature, may not obtain concerning the very existence of nature. The epicurean principle of ontological conservation may apply to every member of the collection of natural entities, without applying to the collection itself. In this case, the theist will certainly not commit the Fallacy of Composition. On the contrary, he could suspect some atheists to commit it, since they claim that the universe as a whole cannot be created out of nothing, like every part of it.

Well and good, but then – one objector might say – what kind of action do we ascribe to God when we pretend God creates the world? Surely we do not ascribe to him any kind of action we are acquainted with. And this may raise a difficulty for theistic metaphysics, for it hugely weakens the intrinsic probability of the metaphysical hypothesis of creation out of nothing. According to Mackie: 'the hypothesis of divine creation is very unlikely.' Mackie considers that God the creator must be endowed with a power 'of fulfilling intentions *directly*, without any physical or causal mediation; without material or instruments'. But, as he puts it, 'There is nothing in our background knowledge that makes it comprehensible. All our knowledge of intention-fulfilment is of *embodied* intentions being fulfilled *indirectly* by way of bodily changes and movements which are *causally* related to the intended result ...'<sup>3</sup>

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out of nothing is to be conceived in terms of creation *not out of anything*. As already phrased by Aquinas, *creatio non ex aliquo* is not a *creatio ex non aliquo*.

'God created an *A*' =<sub>Def.</sub> (God brought it about that  $(\exists x) (x \text{ is an } A) \ \& \ \sim (\exists x) (\text{God brought it about that } x \text{ is an } A)$ ). In creating, God is not acting upon any individual. Nor is he acting upon 'nothing'. (Peter T. Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 83.)

<sup>3</sup> J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 100.

This is a strong objection against the prior probability of the explanatory hypothesis of divine creation. Against this objection, Richard Swinburne claims that creating *ex nihilo* is 'a perfectly conceivable basic act' and that it successfully passes the test of verificationist criteria! Let us now turn to consider his defence of the conceivability of creation out of nothing. According to Swinburne, 'It is logically possible that I could just find myself able as easily to make appear before me an inkwell or to make a sixth finger grow, as I am at present able to move my hand. Various tests (for example, sealing off the room and keeping its content carefully weighed) could show that the inkwell or finger were not made of existing matter.'<sup>4</sup>

Let us comment upon this. Surely, all this is logically possible. Nevertheless, the tests recommended by Swinburne would only be relevant (and feasible) in the case of a partial creation, and in the case of a temporal one. For first, the process of verification here suggested requires a prior framework of physical objects and structures. It requires a neutral observer, a sworn bailiff, or every impartial witness. It requires a laboratory or a place closed to external contributions, whose content is likely to be carefully weighed. These requirements are not to be fulfilled if creation of everything out of nothing is to be tested. Second, it may not even be relevant at all, to the extent that creation may not essentially be a temporal process, nor a change of states of affairs.

Suppose now you really look at Mr. Swinburne making an inkwell appear before him or making a sixth finger grow. Would you infer that he is endowed with a creative power? I would not. Or at any rate, not immediately. If this appearing of inkwells or fingers were to happen once upon a unique time, or on certain circumstances, with a special *mise en scène*, my suggestion would be it is a magic trick, or an organized deception, an imposture.

If it were to happen more regularly, I would rather suggest that the epicurean intuition of the principle of ontological conservation is subject to qualifications. It would not be absurd to suggest that, for instance, fingers or even inkwells are not always to be considered like sets of entities whose number is definitely closed. (A four-dimensionalist doctrine of temporal parts could account for these strange phenomena. What we call a finger, for instance, should have to be replaced within a spacetime

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 49-50.

worm, where some objects like hands would have distinct temporal parts including perhaps different numbers of fingers on different subregions of time). I do not want to advocate the view that fingers and inkwells do appear from scratch or grow without pre-existent matter. But if they did, their coming into existence should not at all cost be interpreted in terms of creation by a supernatural agent. Fred Hoyle and Hermann Bondi's steady-state theory of the universe involved a hypothesis of matter constantly created to form new stars and galaxies to maintain a constant average density. This hypothesis was not that of a supernatural creation. It was but a refinement of a principle of conservation of matter-energy.

An ultimate explanation in terms of someone making something exist out of nothing may be the best explanation of why there is something rather than nothing, but since the explanation does not fit with what we know about processes, its explanatory power will have to be all the more strong than its prior probability is low, or at least not so high as Swinburne claims it is.

## II.

Let us now turn to consider briefly the second possible misunderstanding between theist and atheists.

Seemingly, every cosmological argument rests upon one or another version of the PSR, and are based on the assumption of the impossibility of infinite causal regress. Then, if at least one of those assumptions prove to be false, we get a general defeater of cosmological argument.

But alas, both concerns have only proved to be very controversial issues.

William Rowe acknowledges that 'the Cosmological Argument might have been a *sound* argument'. He nevertheless asks: 'Why, after all, should we accept the idea that every being and every positive fact must have an explanation?'<sup>5</sup>

As emphasized by Patterson Brown, the quest for ultimate explanation in terms of essentially ordered causes is begging the question.<sup>6</sup> It is

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<sup>5</sup> William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1978), p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Patterson Brown, 'Infinite causal regression', *Philosophical Review* 75:4 (1966), 510-525 (p. 525). There is a complex proof by Stephen Davis consisting of 18 steps arguing that there can be no infinite regress for a series of hierarchical causes (that is, essentially ordered causes). There cannot exist only transitory contingent beings. There must exist at

because they conceive of causal relations in terms of essentially ordered causes that theists can raise and solve the question of an ultimate explanation. They pretend that the very existence of the whole series of states of affairs, be it finite or not, cries out for an ultimate explanation. Following a famous comparison by Leibniz, they are still demanding an author being responsible for the content of his book, even if the book had been sempiternally reprinted, by accidentally successive publishers.

On the other side, atheists will be happy with 'the principle that every occurrence has a preceding sufficient cause'. So they can easily conceive of 'a series of things or events running back infinitely in time, each determined by earlier ones, but with no further explanation of the series as a whole'.<sup>7</sup> A book is sufficiently explained by its being reprinted from the preceding edition.<sup>8</sup> This time, atheists could complain that this move from the contingency of the components of the universe to the contingency of the universe commits the Fallacy of Composition. As William Rowe puts it: '[For] it is one thing for there to be an explanation of the existence of each dependent being and quite another thing for there to be an explanation of why there are dependent beings at all'.<sup>9</sup>

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least an eternal non-contingent being. (Stephen T. Davis, 'The Cosmological argument', *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids, MI: M. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997), pp. 60-77.)

There is a simpler way out, suggested by Mackie, who as a true gentleman fairly defends Aquinas. He exonerates him from having committed the logical fallacy which consists in inferring 'at some time everything is not' from 'each thing at some time is not': 'If each thing were impermanent, it would be the most improbable good luck if the overlapping sequence kept up through infinite time. Secondly, even if this improbable luck holds, we might regard the series of overlapping time as itself a thing which had already lasted through infinite time, and so could not be impermanent.' J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> This is nicely summarized by Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues*: 'In such a chain, too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes that which succeeds it. Where then is the difficulty? But the WHOLE, you say, wants a cause. I answer, that the uniting of these parts into a whole, [...] is performed merely by an arbitrary act of the mind, and has no influence on the nature of things. *Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.*' (Emphasis added.) David Hume, *Dialogues*, ed. by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> William L. Rowe, *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 264.

The theist's argument seems to require mistakenly that, since we can ask for the cause of particular things, we can ask for the cause of the set of all contingent beings. Kretzmann considers 'there is no particular difficulty in dealing with the whole collection of dependent beings like with an object'. Quoting some remark by Bernard Katz: 'I do not think that pointing out that the existence of S is successive, or that there is no time when all its members simultaneously exist, is a good reason for concluding that S cannot be construed as a concrete being.'<sup>10</sup> But it could equally be said that there is no particular difficulty in treating the whole collection of dependent beings as different from any object.

In the preceding considerations about creation *ex nihilo*, we had noticed that the theist was denying that whereas physical processes are ruled by the principle of conservation, the existence of the whole could escape the rule. So the so-called Hume-Edwards principle is a weapon used by every side. It is clear that the recourse to epistemological rules is here opportunistically flexible. Anyway, Mackie himself acknowledges that there are cases where an infinite causal regress is not possible: 'Where the items are ordered by a relation of dependence, the regress must stand somewhere, it cannot be infinite or circular.' Mackie grants with some fair-play that this principle 'is at least highly plausible'.<sup>11</sup> But, he adds, 'the problem will be to decide when we have such a relation of dependence'.<sup>12</sup>

'Though we understand that where something has a temporally antecedent cause, it depends somehow upon it, it does not follow that everything (other than God) *needs* something else to depend on in this way.'<sup>13</sup>

This echoes Patterson Brown's considerations: talk of causes in terms of legal responsibility instead of mentioning only concomitances makes it easy to argue against infinite regress in per se ordered causal series. Patterson Brown wonders 1°) whether it is a relevant concept of cause, and 2°) whether it always applies to the observed phenomena.

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<sup>10</sup> Norman Kretzmann, *Metaphysics of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 102-103.

<sup>11</sup> J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, p.90. Our current intuitions are such that we would not expect 'a railway train consisting of an infinite series of carriages, the last pulled along by the second last, the second last by the third last, and so on, to get along without an engine'. But are our current intuitions still relevant when applied to the very existence of the universe? One could answer: 'they are of course *a fortiori* relevant', or 'they are probably off the mark'.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Both theists and atheists seem to be, each on their own side, begging the question, in disagreeing about what is a sufficient explanation, and what is its relevant stopping point.<sup>14</sup>

### III.

Suppose now the concept of creation out of nothing is free from contradiction, and that philosophers agree with the standards of explanation (I have a dream). Creation out of nothing is supposed to provide us with an explanation of why there is something rather than nothing at all. But the very question as to why there is something rather than nothing at all could prove to be pointless. One of the most radical atheistic strategies consists in denying that the mere existence of something, or even the coming into existence of something, cries out for an explanation.

Why should we not agree with Hume, wondering whether after all, something might arise without a cause? Hume has endeavoured to defeat the 'general maxim in philosophy', which is a version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, 'that *whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence*'.<sup>15</sup> Mackie, in his turn, claims it is at least conceivable that something might begin to exist out of nothing, without any reason or cause.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> '[I]f we ask what is the explanation of the necessary being, [...] the answer is meant to be internal to the necessary being [...] you see *why* the being exists when you understand *what* it is.' Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 74. Alexander Pruss points out, 'Claiming to be a brute fact should be a last resort. It would undercut the practice of science.' Alexander Pruss, *The Principle of Sufficient Reason: A Reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 255.

<sup>15</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section III 'Why a cause is always necessary', 2nd edition, ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 78. Hume defeats Clarke and Locke's attempts to demonstrate the necessity of a cause in reducing causeless production to contradiction.

Clarke: 'Every thing, it is said, must have a cause; for if any thing wanted a cause, it would produce ITSELF; that is, exist before it existed; which is impossible.'

Locke: 'Whatever is produced without any cause, is produced by nothing; or in other words, has nothing for its cause. But nothing can never be a cause.'

Those purported demonstrations are all 'fallacious and sophistical' (*ibid.*, p. 80). Clarke's sophism is to equate 'wanting for a cause' with 'producing itself'. And Locke's fallacy consists in equating 'to be produced without any cause' with 'to have nothing for its cause' or 'to be caused by nothing'. Which is in its turn begging the question, for in order to be produced, anything has to be produced by something.

<sup>16</sup> J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, pp. 89, 94.



Hume's point is this one: as such, the very coming into existence of anything does not cry out for an explanation. The brute fact that something (without further qualification) begins to exist does not forcedly require an explanation, a reason or a cause, why there is such a thing rather than not. This is the issue I would like to discuss now.

According to Hume, 'We can never demonstrate the necessity of a cause to every new existence, or new modification of existence, without shewing at the same time the impossibility there is, that any thing can ever begin to exist without some productive principle.' And, Hume says, the latter proposition is utterly incapable of a demonstrative proof: 'twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle.' Hume does not deny that the world may owe its existence to a cause. He just makes an epistemic point: 'it is not from knowledge or any scientific reasoning that we derive the opinion of the necessity of a cause to every new production.'<sup>17</sup>

Let us follow how Anscombe constructs Hume's argument. It is an argument from the imaginable possibility of separating the ideas of coming into existence and that of a productive principle, to the impossibility of demonstrating the necessity of a cause.

- (1) All distinct ideas are separable.
- (2) The ideas of cause and effect are distinct.
- (3) It will be easy to think of an object's coming into existence without thinking of a cause.
- (4) The separation of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning of existence is possible for the imagination.
- (4a) It is possible to imagine something's beginning to exist without a cause.
- (5) The actual separation of these objects [cause and beginning of existence] is so far possible that it implies no contradiction or absurdity.

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<sup>17</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section III 'Why a cause is always necessary', p. 79. In a letter to John Stewart, Hume writes: 'But allow me to tell you that I never asserted so absurd a Proposition as that anything might arise without a cause: I only maintain'd, that our Certainty of the Falsehood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition nor Demonstration, but from another Source', David Hume to John Stewart, February 1754, in *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., ed. J. T. Grieg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1, p. 187.

Anscombe remarks that Hume is allowed to say:

- (6) For any beginning (or modification) of existence E and any particular cause C, I can imagine E's happening without C.

And to infer from this:

- (7) For any beginning (or modification) of existence E, and any particular cause C, E can be supposed to happen without C : i.e. there is no contradiction or absurdity in the supposition.

But, as Anscombe emphasizes, the proposition does not give me the possibility of imagining an effect without any cause at all. It does not give me:

- (8)\* I can imagine this: there is a beginning (or modification) of existence without any cause.<sup>18</sup>

In Anscombe's view, there is a flaw, because from

'For any, it is possible that not ...' there does not follow: 'It is possible that for none ...' For instance: it does not follow from: 'For any colour, I can imagine that a rose is not that colour', that 'I can imagine that a rose has no colour'.

Our very ability to imagine for any cause, that a beginning or modification of existence does not depend on that cause, does not entail:

- (9)\* A beginning of existence can *happen* without any cause.<sup>19</sup>

To put it briefly:  $(\forall E \forall C)$ , I can imagine that E occurs without C.

But not:  $(\forall E)$  I can imagine  $(\forall C)$ , E occurs without C.

If Anscombe is right, Hume would have mingled two different issues: 1°) Why should everything that begins to exist owe its existence to a cause? 2°) Why is there this cause of beginning of existence rather than another cause? Surely, Hume is put under pressure. These are indeed two distinct issues, but does it matter so much? Suppose there is a limited number of causes or at any rate a finite number of kinds of causes I can imagine to be responsible for the occurrence of E. Suppose I can imagine that E occurs without C<sub>1</sub>, & I can imagine that E occurs without C<sub>2</sub>, & without C<sub>3</sub>, ... & without C<sub>n</sub>. Am I entitled to say that I can imagine that E occurs

<sup>18</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, "Whatever Has a Beginning of Existence Must Have a Cause": Hume's Argument Exposed, *Analysis*, 34 (1974), 145-151 (p. 149).

<sup>19</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, "Whatever Has a Beginning of Existence Must Have a Cause": Hume's Argument Exposed, pp. 148-9.

without the disjunction  $C_1$  or  $C_2$  or ...  $C_n$ , that is neither with  $C_1$ , nor with  $C_2$ , and so on, that is with none of them? Of course not. On this point Anscombe is right: there is a logical mistake. The only attainable conclusion, as Anscombe put it, is 'that the effect can occur with any particular cause which you have imagined it without'.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless all the successful attempts to imagine E occurring without the different C's (from  $C_1$  to  $C_n$ ) would cast a serious suspicion on the causal explanation of E's occurrence, and this is exactly what Hume intended to show.<sup>21</sup>

By the way, Anscombe has partly reconsidered the case. She considers that the description 'something coming into existence' 'was a mere title one gave to one's mental picture of something – a rabbit, say, or a star – coming into existence'. Anscombe esteems she has 'understood the existence of other things (like places, times, which on their turn presuppose 'processes measurable by some master time-keeping process') to be involved in something's coming into existence'. But she acknowledges 'it does not yet imply the existence of a cause'.<sup>22</sup> And even if we need to envisage ourselves 'as having reason to say something came into existence at this time and place and not at any other',<sup>23</sup> talk of something coming into existence (but not arriving from elsewhere where it already existed) requires 'to make sure that *any* identification of this as this individual with something that was somewhere else is excluded ... The task is too much for me; [...] It seems that there is

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> By the way, it looks quite easy to defeat Hume's inference from imaginability to possibility. Let us follow Anscombe's counter-example: 'I can imagine or think of a sprig of leaves as existing without there being any definite number of leaves that I think of it as having. But this does not mean that I can think of it as existing without having a *definite number of leaves*'. Ibid., p. 151. Cf. p. 150: 'If I say I can imagine a rabbit coming into being without a parent rabbit, well and good: I imagine a rabbit coming into being, and our observing that there is no parent rabbit about. But what am I to imagine if I imagine a rabbit coming into being without a cause? Well, I just imagine a rabbit coming into being. That this is the imagination of a rabbit coming into being without a cause is nothing but, as it were, the title of the picture. Indeed I can form an image and give my picture a title. But from my being able to do *that*, nothing whatever follows about what is possible to suppose "without contradiction or absurdity" as holding in reality.'

<sup>22</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Times, Beginning and Causes', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 60 (1974), repr. in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Volume II (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), pp. 148-162 (p. 159).

<sup>23</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, "'Whatever Has a Beginning of Existence Must Have a Cause': Hume's Argument Exposed', p. 160.

no experience which itself *positively* indicates that I have to do with a beginning of existence here, except indeed that the object is here now and was not here before. But, that being obviously insufficient, I have got to exclude other explanations of its arrival here. That it came into existence here is apparently to be arrived at by elimination.<sup>24</sup> This is quite the same criterion as Swinburne's test of *creatio ex nihilo*. But does it hold for the creation of the universe? Anscombe is happy to 'leave these questions, raised by the conception of a beginning of the world, where it is indeed very difficult not to flounder and flail about, gasping for breath and uncertain of talking sense.'<sup>25</sup> So, if even Miss Anscombe is gasping for breath, the atheists will not be without excuse.

Let us come back to Hume. In the last footnote of the *Enquiry*, Hume seems to triumph over what he terms 'that impious maxim of ancient philosophy, *Ex nihilo, nihil fit*, by which the creation of matter was excluded, [and which] ceases to be a maxim, according to this philosophy.'<sup>26</sup> Has Hume become a defender of creation out of nothing? Not exactly! The last section of the *Enquiry* goes on: 'Not only the will of the supreme Being may create matter; but, for aught we know a priori, the will of any other being might create it, or any other cause, that the most whimsical imagination can assign.' The way Hume defeats the maxim *Ex nihilo, nihil fit* proves to be very compromising for the rationality of metaphysical theism: 'If we reason *a priori*, anything may appear able to produce anything.'

Having defeated the justification of the maxim *Ex nihilo nihil fit*, Hume seems to grant that, as far as we know, *Ex quocumque quicquid fieri potest*. Since there is no *a priori* justification, the opinion of the necessity of a cause to every new production 'must necessarily arise from observation and experience.' And this epistemological point entitles Hume to dismiss the concept of creation as causal explanation of the world. This is Philo's objection to Cleanthes' 'experimental theism': 'Have worlds ever been formed under your eyes? [ ... ] If you have, then cite your experience, and deliver your theory.'<sup>27</sup> Sure, none of us was ever able to observe a constant conjunction between creating activity and the

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159

<sup>26</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section XII, Part III, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 164.

<sup>27</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues*, Second Part, ed. by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 53.

coming into existence of a world. Following Hume, Russell contends that since we cannot experience something like the universe, we cannot ask about its cause. The universe is 'just there, and that's all'.<sup>28</sup> Here again, there is the problem of moving from the contingency of the components of the universe to the contingency of the universe.

It seems then we have no *a priori* demonstrative reason to deny the possibility of something coming of a sudden into existence without a cause. This very point can be granted to Hume. But, as I shall try to explain, this does not jeopardize too much the thesis of creation.

It seems that a stronger defence of the requirement of a cause for anything (be it everlasting or endowed with a temporal beginning of existence) would consist in considering the very kind of thing that there is.

If the thing that begins to exist is an entity without a known property, alone in its kind, surely we are not able to deny it the ability of existing of its own, or to exist without a cause. The doubt cast by Hume on the PSR may be justified as long as we are dealing with vague statements like: anything can or could exist without a cause. But as soon as the thing whose causeless existence is at stake, and is described more accurately, then we may find some reason why we do not accept such a statement anymore.

This may provide a better starting point for an argument to a first sustaining cause.<sup>29</sup>

True, if you are able to conceive of one eternal self-sustained thing, then you have no reason to deny this property to any ultimate constituent of reality. So the universe could be made up of a vast collection of eternal self-sustained things. Generally speaking, Hume's claim against the necessity of a cause holds. But in this case, things would

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<sup>28</sup> Bertrand Russell and Frederick Copleston, 'Debate on the Existence of God', in John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 167-190 (p. 175).

<sup>29</sup> This is the kind of inference that Maxwell makes, in his famous Bradford Lecture on *The Molecules* (1873). Maxwell agrees with Herschel that 'the exact quality of each molecule to all others of the same kind gives it the essential character of a manufactured article, and precludes the idea of its being eternal and self-existent'. Then, Maxwell reaches his metaphysical conclusion: 'because matter cannot be eternal and self-existent it must have been created.' Of course, there is another possibility: things could be self-existent, and nevertheless they would receive their properties from a common source. But this is hard to conceive. Anyway we may need an additional step for the argument: for identity of properties doesn't necessarily preclude the idea of self-existence. It just makes this self-existence less probable.

exist independently from each other, and then any likeness of structural or dispositional properties would become fully unaccountable. The regularity of so many entities falling into a finite number of identical sorts would not be just a riddle. It would cry out for an explanation. How could they fit together spontaneously without a coordinating cause, a common source, usually called a creator, on which they all depend? The inference to a creator provides a metaphysical explanation which solves simultaneously the problem of self-existence and the question why things must owe their existence to a single cause. In this case, it is the way you describe the data, and not some general principles of epistemology that make the difference.

But of course, one may be satisfied with the brute fact of the spatio-temporal order of the world, without asking for a further explanation.

To conclude: the debate about the soundness of cosmological arguments reveals at least three kinds of epistemological misunderstandings:

Disagreement on the coherence and the intrinsic probability of the concept of creation.

Disagreement about the explanatory standards.

Disagreement concerning the very question as to whether the coming into existence of anything as such is demanding an explanation.

Is it plausible that these disagreements are only due to ignorance of some epistemic principles or to logical mistakes? Does everything turn on a mistaken quantifier shift, or on the completist fallacy? I do not think so.

It may of course happen that such or such debater commits a fallacy, or skips a crucial step in the justification of his premises or conclusion. But, as far as I know, this rarely changes their belief about the truth of the conclusion. At most they will refine their premises, change their definition and try to improve the steps of their argument, in order to be exonerated from being mistaken.

It is relatively easy for someone to change her mind about the number of the planets in the solar system. But how many philosophers have ever changed their mind about the existence of Jupiter (I mean the godhead, not the planet). And if they did, what should it prove? Anthony Kenny has finally departed from his earlier theism, having considered that God's traditional attributes were not consistent. Anthony Flew finally acknowledged that Swinburne was right. Which Anthony is right? Should we flee Flew's flaws? In a witty review of Swinburne's *Is there a God?*,

Richard Dawkins attacks the so-called simplicity of theistic explanation. Dawkins contests Swinburne's wondering about the orderliness of material objects (that is the repetitiveness and the retaining of structural and dispositional properties of particles of any one type): 'For him it would be simpler, more natural, less demanding of explanation, if all electrons were different from each other; worse, no one electron should naturally retain its properties for more than an instant at a time, but would be expected to change capriciously, haphazardly and fleetingly from moment to moment.'<sup>30</sup> Let us ask: 'Billions and billions of electrons, all with the same properties', so that once you've seen one, you've seen them all, is that a simple or a complex state of affairs? For R.S. it is not simple at all, for R.D. it is simple. So, once again, which Richard is right?

It is quite certain that Hume, if taught by Anscombe that he had forced his argument, would nevertheless maintain his conclusion and would search for a new argumentative path in order to reach it more correctly.

- David, you are completely mistaken! Not only you have committed a quantifier shift, but also you infer the possibility of causeless beginnings of existence from their mere imaginability.
- Ooops! I beg your pardon Miss Elizabeth. I promise I won't do it again. As a matter of fact, I entirely approve the detection of such flaws.<sup>31</sup>
- So you will correct your conclusion?
- Not at all, I stick to it.
- How dare you?
- For you yourself acknowledge the difficulty of the point.

I do not wish to imply that these debates are pointless. Statements about God's attributes and existence still have, in my view, a truth-value. And the epistemological controversies as to what is a sufficient explanation of the world, or as to what is evidence for what, are not a superficial disguise of our religious commitments or disbeliefs. They provide us with an explication of the background and of the basic beliefs involved on each side. They provide us with a logical clarification of our prejudices.

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Dawkins, 'Richard Swinburne's *Is There a God ?*', *The Sunday Times*, 4th February 1996.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, in the very same chapter: it does not follow 'because every husband must have a wife, that therefore every man must be marry'd'. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part III, Section III 'Why a cause is always necessary', p. 82.

They reveal preferences and reluctances in the need for explanations and, when developed in an atmosphere of loyalty, they improve the mutual respect of the debaters. They provide us, to some extent, with an opportunity of grounding exciting reasons on justifying ones. They may contribute to a better mutual understanding, but not forcedly to an agreement on the cosmological arguments.

Though I remain evidentialist in the first person, I cannot believe that the epistemological disagreements occurring in the assessment of the cosmological argument are due to flaws or faults, to fallacies or to unperceived shifts. So I would agree with foundationalism and coherentism in the third person.

The very possibility of such disagreements could be viewed as jeopardizing theistic commitments. For if there is a God, isn't it very likely that every rational being should have some epistemic access to his existence? Schellenberg's powerful argument from divine hiddenness could be displayed.

Swinburne's view that some 'epistemic distance' is required for human beings to act and decide for themselves without being under pressure may somehow account for that.

A crucial issue would then be: to what extent is a good God supposed to facilitate the justified belief that he exists and that human beings may rely on his providence? What proportion of which generation ought to have cognitive access to God's existence? What amount of hiddenness are we to expect from a perfectly loving God?