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The Cosmological Argument, Sufficient Reason, and Why-Questions

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I propose to take a fresh look at the cosmological argument for God by focusing on one contemporary version defended by Richard Taylor in his book *Metaphysics*.¹ I have selected Taylor's argument, first, because of its wide circulation and influence on contemporary philosophers of religion, but more importantly, because it is a contemporary version of a *classical* argument and will enable me to evaluate traditional themes.²

I find that Taylor, like many cosmologists, runs together two importantly different motivations for the cosmological argument—one which starts from a certain *causal* property of things in the world, another which emphasizes a *logical* property of these things. Accordingly, I will disentangle two distinct but recurrent patterns of argument by looking at specific texts in Taylor's defense, and then evaluate them on their separate merits. Each of the arguments finds support in the validity of the cosmological question: "Why does the world, i.e., the totality of things, exist?" But each rests on a different interpretation of this perennial question. I will, finally, attempt to judge the validity of both interpretations by examining the logic, in nonproblematic contexts, of why-questions about the existence of things.

Taylor begins his defense by introducing the *principle of sufficient reason* and explaining its special status as a principle of thought. Before stating the principle, he lays a ground for it by giving a concrete illustration of its use, as follows: Imagine that you are walking in the forest and come upon a strange but impressive object, "a large ball, about your own height, perfectly smooth and translucent" (103). Although you would find it "puzzling and mysterious" that such an object would be there before you, you would have no doubt whatsoever that there was some explanation for its being there.

The idea that it might have come from nothing at all, that it might exist without there being any explanation for its existence, is one that few people would consider worthy of entertaining. (103–4)

While this is undoubtedly true, we may well wonder: what is the lesson behind this story? We are told that these suppositions on our part illustrate our acceptance of the general principle that there is a sufficient reason for every “positive truth” (104). And the supposition, that there is some explanation of how the ball *come to exist*, illustrates our acceptance of a subprinciple, entailed by the general principle, “that there is some explanation for the existence of anything whatever, some reason why it should exist rather than not” (104). It is this subprinciple that functions in Taylor’s argument, and hence will occupy center stage in this discussion. Taylor goes on to say that while this principle “cannot be proved,” it nevertheless seems to be “a presupposition of reason itself” (105), and he accepts it on this basis.

Consider the following more precise formulation of the subprinciple which I will call PSR_1 to indicate that it is not the most general form of the principle of sufficient reason.

(PSR_1) For any actual being x , there is an actual being y , and a property P , such that y being P is a sufficient reason for the existence of x .³

This rendering of the principle makes more explicit the point that in general it is not *beings* that call for explanations, or that provide explanations, but *facts* about beings. Thus PSR_1 states that any fact of the form x *exists* is explained by another fact of the form y *is P*. Furthermore, it should be pointed out, since Taylor wishes to say that some beings are self-explanatory, that PSR_1 does not exclude possible instances in which x and y are identical.

Now this formulation of the principle of sufficient reason raises a host of problems. The most obvious is whether or not Taylor’s justification of the principle is adequate. But there are more fundamental questions of interpretation that arise from the highly general and vague formulation of the principle. One is put in mind of Whitehead’s observation that “too large a generalization leads to mere barrenness.”⁴ How, for example, should we understand the highly generic expression “reason”? The example of the ball in the forest suggests that “reason” has the sense of “causal explanation,” since we would naturally seek a causal explanation for the existence of the ball. And yet this may be too narrow an interpretation, for Taylor wishes to apply the principle to the world as a whole, and also to God.

Another question that weighs heavily is this: to what sorts of beings does the principle apply? On the face of it, Taylor is committing himself to the idea that any actual entity whatever has a reason for its existence. But any such across-the-board application of the principle would be too broad, for there seem to be some *kinds* of things to which it does not apply. Does it make any sense, for instance, to say that there is some reason or explanation for the existence of such abstract entities as propositions, numbers, and sets?⁵ But while this consideration points up a need to place further restrictions on the kinds of beings to which PSR_1 has application, I believe it would be unprofitable to press Taylor on this point, for he is not so much concerned with defending a universal principle of reason as

he is with justifying the rationality of the demand for an explanation of the existence of one particular being, namely the world as a whole.

A final preliminary matter: we need to put into focus the idea of a *contingent being*, which plays a central role in Taylor's argument. Now if we begin to take seriously the central theme of causal dependency implicit in Taylor's mundane examples of a ball, a grain of sand, the moon, etc., we arrive at the idea that

a *contingent being* is a being that is causally dependent for its existence on some other being.

We must be careful to keep separate the concepts of a contingent being in this sense of a *causally dependent* being, and that of a *logically contingent* being, i.e., a being whose existence is a logically contingent fact. While it is undoubtedly true that every causally dependent being is a logically contingent being, these concepts are by no means identical. For the concepts that contrast with them are, respectively, a causally independent being and a logically necessary being. But the world as a whole, and even a hydrogen atom, could be causally independent beings, and yet not logically necessary beings.

When we look at the structure of Taylor's argument, we will have to bear in mind, then, that there are two importantly different senses of "contingent being," one pertaining to the causal properties of a thing, the other pertaining to the logical properties of a thing. As we will see, Taylor runs these two senses together in his argument with the result that he conflates two distinct patterns of argument motivated by two very different sorts of worldly facts. One argument moves from causal considerations, and the pervasiveness of causal dependency in the world, to the conclusion that the world as a whole requires a causal explanation. The other is motivated by the fact that the world is a logically contingent being and leads to the conclusion that there is a logically necessary being that explains it. The main purpose of this discussion is to disentangle these two lines of argument and evaluate them on their separate merits.

The Causal Ground of the Cosmological Argument

Now it is time to set out the main steps of Taylor's argument for God. The first step is to show that the world as a whole is a being that exists, and so, by PSR_1 , requires some reason or explanation for its existence. It is then argued that the world as a whole is a contingent being, and hence that the reason for its existence lies outside itself in another being. Finally, Taylor argues that the being that explains the world's existence is a necessary being, that is, the quest for the explanation of the world does not lead to an infinite series of contingent, i.e., dependent, beings.

Each step in this argument has its own set of associated problems, and not all of them can be dealt with. What I choose to do is focus on two specific arguments Taylor gives in defense of the first step, that there is some explanation for the existence of the world as a whole, and then draw out some of the implications of this discussion for the remaining steps.

The hallmark of cosmological arguments is that they move from some empirical fact about the world to a conclusion about God as the explanation or ground of this fact. Let us begin by asking: what is the fact about the world that sets Taylor's argument in motion? Interestingly, Taylor does not attempt to generate a cosmological question from the "mere fact of existence" of some *particular thing in nature*. For if it were a question of finding a sufficient reason for the existence of a ball, or a grain of sand, say, then we would only have to discover the cause of its coming into existence to have such an explanation.

What does require an explanation is the fact that *the world as a whole exists*, where the world is thought of as a collection of everything, viz. "the totality of all things excepting God, in case there is a God" (107).

Now it is interesting to note how Taylor does *not* try to establish his conclusion. Since he accepts the idea that there is an explanation for the existence of anything whatever, it seems that it would be a simple matter to deduce that the world has an explanation, for surely the world is something. It is a thing at least in that broad sense in which whatever can serve as the logical subject of a true statement is a thing.

But Taylor does not make this simple inference. He is fully aware that it is controversial whether or not the world, conceived as the collection of its constituents, is itself a being separate from them, standing in need of an explanation which transcends the explanations of its constituents. One thinks here of the arguments of Hume that no such explanation is necessary.⁶ And thus Taylor does not simply invoke PSR₁, but defends the validity of its application in this special case. This observation is important, I believe, because in giving this defense Taylor is indirectly defending the principle of sufficient reason itself by showing its applicability in this crucial test-case.

We are, at last, ready to look at the relevant texts. Taylor writes:

It matters not at all as regards the necessity for an explanation of the existence of something whether it be large and complex, such as the world we actually find ourselves in, or whether it be something small, simple and insignificant, such as a ball, a bacterium, or the merest grain of sand. (106)

Here we find perhaps the most clear-cut instance of a recurring pattern of argument in which Taylor assimilates the world as a whole to the physical objects in the world. And in another passage we find an ingenious variation of the same theme, where instead of viewing the world as a kind of physical object, he views a physical object as a kind of world. In reference to the ball in the forest, Taylor proposes the following thought-experiment:

If we now imagine the forest to be annihilated, and in fact everything else as well to vanish into nothingness, leaving only this ball to constitute the entire physical universe, then we cannot for a moment suppose that its existence has thereby been explained, or the need of any explanation eliminated, or that its existence is suddenly rendered self-explanatory. (106)

What is implied in these passages, I believe, is that the world though much larger and more complex than the things in it, is sufficiently *like* them to require a cause of its own.

The world as a whole is like a huge ball.⁷ And on the strength of this comparison, we should be willing to apply our belief that everything within the world has a cause to the world itself, the collection of all things. It seems, then, that this strand of Taylor's argument is a type of *causal* argument which moves from the fact that things in the world have causes to the conclusion that the world as a whole has a causal explanation on the basis of a resemblance between them.

If this is a correct interpretation, then the structure of Taylor's argument must be seen in a new light. In the first place, the argument is clarified by the fact that the principle of sufficient reason is now functioning as a *causal* principle pertaining to physical objects in nature. Moreover, the idea that every physical object has a causal explanation for its existence is a principle which lays claim to the kind of status Taylor initially gives PSR₁—that is, it has the status of a framework principle at least in our common sense understanding of the world.

But at the same time, if we interpret the argument in this manner then it rests on the doubtful assumption that the world as a whole is comparable to the physical things in it. Does the world resemble ordinary objects to a degree that warrants extending the causal principle to include it? Taylor's comparison seems open to Humean objections: the world as a whole is unlike ordinary objects in crucial respects. For even if we focus our attention on the physical dimensions of the world, ignoring the mental, it is still true that the world in this sense is not an *observable* thing. I am not observing the world as a whole when I observe some particular thing in it, any more than I am viewing the whole earth when I view the Grand Canyon. The reason why the world as a whole *cannot* be observed is that, to put it crudely, there is no place to view it from. The world as a whole includes not only everything that is in space and time, but also the space and time in which everything is. Unlike the things in the world, the world of time and space does not exist anywhere or for any duration of time. This difference is so fundamental as to make any comparison between the world and its constituents barely comprehensible. Hume's counsel seems appropriate at this point:

But can a conclusion, with any propriety, be transferred from parts to the whole?
Does not the great disproportion bar all comparison and inference?⁸

A further objection is that much of the plausibility of Taylor's analogy depends on our having a certain *picture* of the world. We are to *imagine* the world as a kind of great big object, like a huge ball. But this picture of the world gives aid and comfort to the idea that the world has a cause only because it is impossible to imagine the world without imagining it to be in a spatial and causal framework.

In like manner, when Taylor asks us to imagine a ball as itself the "entire physical universe," by "annihilating" in our imaginations all other existing objects, it is important to realize that we do not thereby annihilate the spatial and causal setting in which the ball initially exists, and hence the general condition remains that anything in this setting has a cause. But the dissimilarities between the world as a whole and ordinary objects that have already been mentioned should give us grave reservations as to whether this picture can bear any weight. The conclusion that must be drawn, then, from this discussion is that

Taylor's causal argument for God fails in that it rests on a highly dubious analogy between the world as a whole and the ordinary objects in the world.

One comment about the later stages of this causal argument will suffice: even if the argument succeeded in showing that the world was causally dependent on some other being, we would have no basis for thinking that this being was a necessary being. On the contrary, as long as we understand PSR₁ as a causal principle pertaining to things in nature, then we should infer that this being, like every cause in nature, is a *dependent* being. Thus Taylor must rely on a different argument, or on a stronger interpretation of PSR₁ to arrive at his final conclusion.

The Logical Ground of the Cosmological Argument

I stated earlier my belief that Taylor runs together his causal argument and a very different argument that has a different starting-point. The second line of argument moves from the idea that the world is a logically contingent being to the conclusion that there is a necessary being that explains it. Let us see how this reasoning goes, although we will find that it loses its initial plausibility when detached from its causal counterpart.

The following passage occurs early in the essay, in the midst of the causal considerations discussed above:

It happens to be true that something exists, that there is, for example, a world, and . . . there . . . seems to be nothing the least necessary in this, considering it just by itself. That no world should ever exist at all is perfectly comprehensible and seems to express not the slightest absurdity. Considering any particular item in the world it seems not at all necessary in itself that it should ever have existed, nor does it appear any more necessary that the totality of these things, or any totality of things, should ever exist. (105)

In this passage, Taylor is, in the first place, defending the idea that the world is a logically contingent being by arguing that we can conceive that no world at all exists without absurdity or contradiction. I think that Taylor has made out this point, and I shall accept it as true that the world is a logically contingent being. But then how do we move from this logical feature of the world to the conclusion that there is a logically necessary being that explains it? In fact, what Taylor does at this point is invoke PSR₁, which entails that there is a sufficient reason for any being whatever, whether logically contingent or necessary. However, it seems to me that his argument is more complex than this and that once again he is offering an additional ground for the application of PSR₁ to the world as a whole. For he argues in the above passage that since it "happens to be true" that there is a world, since this is not necessarily true, then *in virtue of that fact* the world requires an explanation.

This claim that a logically contingent being requires an explanation *because* it is logically contingent is one that infects many forms of the cosmological argument, and is one that I have come to believe is false. And yet it is probably as difficult to show that it is false as it is to show that it is true. What can be shown, I believe, is that in ordinary contexts in which we seek explanations for the existence of things, we are normally not at all concerned about

the logical contingency of these things. Let us look more closely at these everyday contexts of seeking explanations.

Why-Questions about Existence

It seems to be a necessary condition of asking any sensible why-question about any actual state of affairs, and specifically about the existence of any being, that the questioner have a grasp of some alternative state of affairs which *is not*, but which might have been. One can only wonder "why?" about something which might have been different. A child, for example, can only ask the question "why do I exist?" if he has grasped the truth that he might not have existed. It is often a startling realization when a child comes to see that he might not have existed. But what exactly is seen when the child realizes that he might not have existed? Is it that his existence is a logically contingent fact? Surely not! What is seen is that his existence is causally dependent on events and decisions that took place before his coming into existence, and that if those events and decisions had not occurred he would not have existed. *What might have been* in this situation refers to nonactual states of affairs which would have been if circumstances had been different. And thus the child's realization of his contingency is the realization that his existence is contingent upon antecedent causal factors. If the child then asks "Why do I exist, for I might not have existed?" he seeks to remedy his ignorance about the causal conditions that led to his coming into being and that precluded his not coming into being.

What this example shows, I believe, is that the most natural way to understand why-questions about the existence of things, whether things in the world or even the world as a whole, is as attempts to dispel some uncertainty about the *causal* factors on which it is supposed the existence of these things depends. The logical contingency of these things is not normally a ground for seeking an explanation.

We are now in a position to see that questions of the form

(1) Why does x exist (it might not have existed)?

may express two very different sorts of puzzlement, and have two very different senses, depending on the sense of " x might not have existed." On the one hand, this subjunctive may refer to what is possible relative to the questioner's knowledge about x 's existence taken as a causally conditioned fact of nature. If so it refers to what is *epistemically possible*, and the force of the question is:

(1A) Why does x exist (it might not have existed, i.e., relative to my knowledge of the causal setting in which x exists, it is still possible that x should not have existed)?

If this is what is intended, then the questioner's puzzlement arises from the fact that he is ignorant of the specific causes of x 's existence, and the correct answer to this question is one that provides an account of these causes. Moreover the questioner is warranted in

thinking that the question has an answer only if, and because, he is warranted in thinking x 's existence is caused.

On the other hand, the subjunctive " x might not have existed" in (1) may refer to what is *logically possible*, in which case the force of the question is:

(1B) Why does x exist (it might not have existed, i.e., it is easy to imagine that x does not exist; the existence of x is a logically contingent fact)?

If this is intended, the questioner's puzzlement arises from the fact that x does not exist necessarily. This question seems to be aimed at the existence of x taken in abstraction from its causal setting—"in itself" or "just by itself," as Taylor put it. Thus, information about the causes of x 's existence does not relieve this puzzlement because it does not remedy the fact that x is a contingent being. Presumably what *would* remedy this fact would be the realization that x 's existence was in some way dependent upon a necessary being. And this brings out the way in which the second pattern of argument that we have isolated, based on the logical contingency of the world, gives aid and comfort to the idea that only a *necessary being* could provide a *sufficient* reason for the world's existence. For if one's attention is riveted on the logical contingency of a being, then one is likely to be dissatisfied with any proposed explanation of that being in terms of another logically contingent being.⁹

What I am calling attention to is the strangeness, the inappropriateness, of questions that have the sense of (1B). Of course, I do not wish to deny that the mere logical contingency of a being is ever a source of puzzlement. What I have argued is that questions that express this puzzlement are illegitimate in that when they are cut loose from any causal foundation, then they are cut off from the only ground that would warrant us in thinking that they have an answer.

Summary

To sum up the main results of this study: I have disentangled two distinct patterns of argument that Taylor runs together in his attempt to show that there is a reason or explanation for the world as a whole. The first is based on the causal dependency of things in the world, the second is based on their logical contingency. It seems to make the most sense of Taylor's discussion if we interpret him not as invoking the principle of sufficient reason at the crucial juncture, but as using these arguments to give backing to that principle by showing that it applies to the world in its totality. However, these arguments do not succeed in doing that. The first fails because it depends on a remote analogy between the world as a whole and the physical objects in the world. Concerning the second, an analysis of the logic of why-questions about the existence of things has revealed that the logical contingency of something is not a ground for thinking it has an explanation. The only promising interpretation of the principle of sufficient reason that we have found is as a causal principle pertaining to things in nature.

Acknowledgement – I wish to thank Professors William Rowe, Joseph Camp, and Ludwig Schlecht for valuable criticisms of this paper in its earlier stages.

Notes

1. *Metaphysics* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963, 1974), pp. 103–112. Page references included in text.
2. Taylor's argument can be viewed as a refinement of Leibniz's cosmological argument in "On the Ultimate Origination of the Universe," where the principle of sufficient reason also plays a crucial role. See *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*, trans. Paul Schrecker and Anne Schrecker (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965), pp. 84–86.
3. I am substituting "being" for "thing," as Taylor uses these terms interchangeably in his discussion.
4. A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1967), p. 30.
5. Professor Joseph Camp has reminded me that we can successfully explain the existence of, e.g., the number 7, in accordance with PSR₁, in terms of the existence of the number 6 and its property of having a successor. However, it remains true that there is no warrant for seeking an explanation of the existence of numbers, i.e., the infinite *set* of all numbers.
6. See William Rowe, "Two Criticisms of the Cosmological Argument," (*The Monist*, July 1970), for a discussion of Hume's arguments. Rowe argues convincingly that there is still a *question* about the existence of the world as a whole once the existence of each particular being in the world has been explained. If we accept the principle that a thing can be identified with its parts only if all the meaningful statements and questions about it can be reduced to statements and questions about its parts, then this gives us a basis for *not* identifying the world as a whole with the things in it.
7. In a similar vein, Peter Geach likens the world to a "great big object" in his interpretation of Aquinas' Five Ways, in *Three Philosophers* (Oxford, 1961), p. 112.
8. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Pt. II (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1947), p. 147.
9. Taylor's claim that the world's existence must be explained by a necessary being—the third step of his argument—is defended along different lines. He seems to argue that this conclusion is required by general conditions for giving an adequate explanation of a "dependent and perishable" being. (See p. 110.)