

# A Note on Cosmological Arguments

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I am very grateful indeed to Fr Brian Davies for treating my work with such sympathy and thoroughness. He has put forward objections to some of my arguments and conclusions which richly deserve some attempt on my part at an answer.<sup>1</sup>

Fr Davies approves of a recent suggestion by Anthony Flew, derived from Kant, that one should distinguish sharply between those types of argument for God's existence which try to establish it from the mere fact of the world, and those which do so on the basis of some particular characteristic of the world. They propose that the term 'cosmological argument' should be kept for arguments of the former class.<sup>2</sup> With great respect and suitable trepidation, I would wish to dissent from this formidable team of authorities, preferring as I do a threefold division. For I believe it is very important in this context to distinguish between two sorts of properties which things or the world may have; one sort, by virtue of the fact that they can be objects of our knowledge at all; the other which they just happen to have as a matter of fact, independently of their knowability by us. Let us distinguish these as respectively A properties and B properties. Now the effect of the proposal of Kant, Flew and Davies is to reduce theistic arguments which are not versions of the ontological arguments to two types – those from the mere existence of things or the world, and those from the B properties of things and the world. And I believe that Kant and Flew are right, against Davies, that *if* this reduction of options is accepted, the case for a rational theism cannot be made.<sup>3</sup> Very briefly, it appears to me that any orderliness which the world just happens to have may properly be explained by natural means – for example, the sun working on the primal soup, followed by mutation and natural selection among living organisms.<sup>4</sup> And if the sheer existence of the world is surprising and in need of explanation, it is difficult to see why the sheer existence of anything postulated to account for it should not be equally surprising.<sup>5</sup>

It seems to me, and I do not think many would dispute this, that it is a major part of the significance of Kant for the history of thought that he distinguishes so sharply between what I have called the A properties and the B properties of things. But what is highly

implausible, in my view, is the way in which Kant *accounts for* their possession of A properties. Two answers to this question seem to be given in the *Critique*: –(1) The question of why things have A properties is improper, or at least unanswerable; (2) The human mind imposes their A properties on things in the course of gaining knowledge of them; things as they are in themselves, prior to and independently of our cognitive interaction with them, are unknowable. (My impression is that the latter line may on the whole be attributed to Kant himself, the former to most of those who appeal to his authority in this context.) Answer (1) seems to me about as satisfactory as any other expression of obscurantism. As to (2), for all the enormous subtlety and obscurity of the *Critique*, I do not see why the following question should not be put to anyone who regards himself as a Kantian in this sense. Did things and the world possess A properties, which he says we can know they must have, before the human mind set to work on them and independently of its doing so, or did they not? If they did not, the consequences seem curious indeed. Nearly all our scientific and historical knowledge, which purports to tell us how things are, and would have been even if we had never evolved to tell the tale, turns out to be mistaken. If they *did*, then how does it come about that they are fitted to our cognitive capacities in the kind of way that they are? This fact, on which the practice of science as usually understood depends, seems to require some kind of explanation, the least implausible candidate for which, in my view, is the intelligent agent supposed to be at the basis of the world which, as Aquinas would say, ‘all call God’. Kant drew attention in a striking way to the intelligibility of things, and implausibly invoked human intelligence to account for this, whereas he should have invoked divine intelligence.

It may be claimed that the possession by things of A properties is simply a matter of logic. One brief and brutal answer to this paraphrases Dr Johnson – ‘Sir, it’s not logic, and there’s an end on’t’. As Hume and any number of his successors have quite convincingly argued, there is no strictly *logical* process by which we can argue from the existence or occurrence of any item or course of experience to the existence or occurrence of any thing or event supposed to exist or occur prior to and independently of such experience; yet science, history and common sense alike depend on the assumption that we can. A little less summarily, it may be suggested that ‘logic’ can be understood in a wider or a narrower sense in the context of the present discussion, in which its scope is apt to expand and contract like something out of Freud’s *Collected Papers*. In the wider sense, it may indeed denote all the mental processes required for making the kinds of inference just described.

But in that case, to claim that the possession by things of A properties is a matter of logic, is simply to say that it is a matter of their possession of A properties. When any narrower sense of logic is understood, as I have said, it is simply false. But to say that the A properties of things are a matter of logic in the wider sense is to say that they are intimately related to those human capacities over and above experience which are required for knowing the world – which I not only admit, but emphasise as a central feature of the argument for the existence of God which I wish to defend.

Is this argument, after all, a type of cosmological argument? Its premiss is a fact of very great generality about the world and the things which make it up – just like those paradigm cases of cosmological argument, Aquinas' Five Ways. But arguably it is sufficiently unlike traditional forms of cosmological argument to deserve a separate label; and provided this label is not 'physico-theological', which for traditional reasons misleadingly deflects attention to the B properties of things, I have no objection. Miss Ginger Tumacz has suggested that it be called 'the epistemological argument'.<sup>6</sup> If we combine Miss Tumacz's terminological proposal with that of Flew and Davies, we divide what have traditionally been known as cosmological arguments into three types, cosmological *sensu strictissimo*, physico-theological, and epistemological. Nothing is lost for me by this manoeuvre, and if anything something is gained, as the issues on which I want to concentrate attention come into sharper focus.<sup>7</sup>

Is God as I argue for his existence – 'Meynell's God' in the unlovely terminology of Fr Davies – a 'brute fact', as Fr Davies alleges? In a sense yes, and in a sense no, as Mr Carteret-Pendragon the diplomat used to say. His existence *is* a brute fact in that he does not depend on anything else; but not in the sense that, given who and what he is, he could conceivably depend on something else; but just happens not to. That which understands all possibilities, and on the will of which all actualities other than itself depend, would not be such if it depended on anything else. It may be seen from this last that I am not committed to any form of the ontological argument to fill a gap at this point. Given that God exists at all, as he must do to account for the intelligible world, he cannot be dependent on anything else. But it does not follow from this that there is anything self-inconsistent, even in the very last analysis, about the proposition 'God does not exist' (this is the hinge of ontological arguments). At this rate the conception of God at issue in the argument I advance would seem to be closer to that of Aquinas than that of Leibniz, at least in the terms that they are contrasted by Fr Davies.

But it would be foolish to deny that the sort of 'natural the-

ology' which I try to practise by no means follows the letter of Aquinas. Now I am nuts about St Thomas, and would be very distressed to be convinced that it was too far from his spirit. What I see as an advantage of this kind of argument (it seems to be a disadvantage as far as Fr Davies is concerned) is that it establishes rather directly that God is an intelligent agent, which surely, for ordinary people at least, is a vitally important part of what it is for God to be God. If I understand the main course of the argument of the opening section of the *Summa*, Aquinas does this only very slowly and indirectly – establishing first that there must be a First Cause, then arguing that the First Cause cannot be a body (for all the ravings of David of Dinant), and inferring, by way of the elimination of that possibility, that the First Cause is a spirit and so intelligent.<sup>8</sup>

Of the protagonists of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Philo and Demea were concerned that the Deity might be demeaned by being made comparable to man, Cleanthes that he might be etherialised beyond vanishing point by being exalted too far above him. If, as a believer, you insist that terms used of God are to be understood in a sense *toto caelo* different from the same terms as used of man or any other creature – you might just as well join the atheists. Evidently Fr Davies is more bothered by Philo's bogey than by Cleanthes'; but I, in this respect a disciple of Anthony Flew, who has taught believers to fear the 'death by the thousand qualifications' of their belief, am the other way about. Fr Davies asks whether my God is knowable. I am inclined to put the counter-question – just how unknowable is Fr Davies's God? If any coherent description can be given of him, is he not just as knowable as mine? If not, of what use is it to talk about such a being at all?

One of the things which Fr Davies supposes to have gone wrong with my argument, I think, is that I have invoked a knowable God to account for a knowable world; and this lands me in the well-known intellectual pickle of having to account for a knowable God. But I cannot see that the introduction of an unknowable God at this point would help matters in the least. The crucial thing for me at this point in the argument is what God and the world are supposed to be knowable *as*. According to the view I defend, reality is what is to be known in judgments selected from intelligible possibilities arrived at by the putting of questions to experience. The question then arises, of whether there is good reason to suppose that there is something which is related to the rest of reality (call this 'the world') as that on which it depends; or, more specifically, whether this something is related to 'the world' in this sense somewhat as the human mind is related to its actions and products.

God is knowable as not dependent in his turn on some other being or beings for reasons which I have already given.

Fr Davies concludes by contrasting the 'brute fact' which is my God with the 'source of wonder' which is his own. But if God is really the unrestricted intelligence which grounds the intelligibility of the world, as he is on my view, he is surely source of wonder enough; we could hardly 'know' such a being, in the circumstances of the present life at least, in anything but a very remote and indirect manner.

- 1 Brian Davies O P, 'The Intelligible Universe' (*New Blackfriars* Sept 1982, pp 381-389).
- 2 *The Presumption of Atheism*, London 1976, p 53; *Critique of Pure Reason*, section 3 of chapter III of the Transcendental Dialectic.
- 3 I would not count Kant's so-called 'moral' argument as establishing a case for a rational theism in this sense, even granted that it is sound as far as it goes.
- 4 I concede this to fideists, atheists and agnostics for the purpose of the present argument. But of course it does leave out of account the recent and rather sensational claims of Professors Fred Hoyle and Chandra Wickramasinge, that the postulated mechanisms fail to account for life as we know it.
- 5 Fr Davies cites with approval Fr Herbert McCabe's putting of the traditional question, why is there anything at all? But I am afraid that I agree with those sceptics who deny that this is a proper question, at least in that form. As T Penelhum neatly puts it, 'There can be nothing not mentioned in the question to bring in to explain what is mentioned in the question' ('Divine Necessity', in D Burrill (ed), *The Cosmological Arguments* (New York, 1967, pp 154-5).
- 6 In conversation.
- 7 One disadvantage is that Kant takes it to be particularly characteristic of cosmological arguments that they combine *a priori* and *a posteriori* elements; and this is certainly true of the 'epistemological' argument. Kant regards this feature as a defect, but I think he is wrong. Cf *The Intelligible Universe* (London 1982, pp 10-12; 105).
- 8 *Summa Theologica*, I, questions 2 and 3.