

Surveying Answers to an Ancient Question

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ABSTRACT

The focal point of this project is the famous and ancient question: “why is there anything at all?” The goal of this project is to find the most compelling answers to this question and assess their respective merits. To find these answers, philosophers from the medieval, early modern, and analytic traditions will be cross-examined. Among these philosophers are St. Anselm, David Hume, René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, and Bertrand Russell.

INTRODUCTION

Why is there anything at all? This is a question many of us naturally come to ask ourselves. We tend to share an understanding of the world that posits that events generally have causal explanations. We can ask “why did xyz happen?”, or, “why is xyz the way it is?” and very often, we can obtain a satisfactory explanation. The belief that this fact holds universally about the world is called the **Principle of Sufficient Reason** or **PSR** for short (Stanford). Put more precisely, the **PSR** states that “something cannot come from nothing.” When we draw our attention to the universality of the **PSR**, curiosity may encourage us to push the principle to its limit. This is precisely where we get our question: “why is there anything at all?”. It should be noted that we can ask similar questions: “why is there something rather than nothing?”, “where did everything come from?”, etc. The differences in these formulations will be discussed later. For the sake of clarity within this paper, I will refer to the philosophical problem which these questions aim at as the **Existence Question** or **EQ** for short.

Given how significant the **EQ** has been since the dawn of human thought, it is only natural that a multitude of philosophically distinct approaches have been taken to address it. Generally speaking, it is analyzed in one of two ways. The first way is by taking the question at face-value and attempting to provide an answer. Two views falling under this category will be discussed in this paper at length, namely: monotheism and pantheism. Both monotheists and pantheists alike claim to believe in “God.” Both will claim that God serves as the ultimate explanation for the state of the world. Apart from these surface-level similarities, these views are quite distinct from one another. The distinction lies in their respective characterizations of what they call “God.” Traditional forms of monotheism describe God as a being that possesses infinite power, wisdom, generosity, and existential presence. In particular, monotheists tend to think of God as a being with the same sort of agency as rational persons do.

Pantheism, by contrast, describes God as being identical with all of reality, or the underlying substance which constitutes and unifies reality. In particular, pantheists do not think of God as having any sort of personal agency. Monotheists and pantheists would both agree that answering the **EQ** requires a special sort of explanation. They are each in pursuit of something which simultaneously explains the existence of the world while also accounting for its own existence. A monotheist and pantheist would each see the statement: “the universe began with the big bang” as an unsatisfactory answer to the **EQ**. The reason why is their shared commitment to the **PSR**. “Why did the big bang happen?” they would press.

This brings us to the other way of attacking the **EQ**: taking a closer look at the question itself. What is it really asking? As stated earlier, there are multiple formulations of the **EQ**. Even picking one, such as “why is there something rather than nothing?”, there is a lack of clarity. What exactly is meant by “nothing”? Is it a void of space? Would space count as “something”? These are only a few among many questions we could ask that demonstrate the

ambiguity of this formulation. What if we instead say “where did everything come from?”. Once again, there are ambiguities. What exactly does “everything” mean? Although we usually ask “where did x come from?” without issue, that is presumably because there is a “something else” for x to “come from”. What exactly is the “something else” we should appeal to if our x is “everything”? It seems unclear. What is also unclear is what exactly is meant by the **PSR**. What does it mean for an explanation to be obtainable or satisfactory?

In this paper, I will argue that for the formulations of the **EQ** which can be answered, monotheism is an unsatisfactory approach due to several compelling objections, among which is the famous “existence is not a predicate” objection originally introduced by Kant. Additionally, I will argue that this objection is unsuccessful in refuting the pantheistic ontological argument, and that pantheism is therefore a superior approach to the **EQ** than monotheism. Finally, with these remarks in mind, I will argue that regardless of how one epistemologically understands the **PSR**, the **EQ** can be shown to be a fallacy of composition through a qualification of our causal principle.

FORMULATIONS OF THE QUESTION AND THE PSR

As previously stated, the **EQ** can be formulated in several distinct ways. Furthermore, for each of these formulations, multiple interpretations can follow. I will begin with the formulation “where did everything come from?” with an understanding that “everything” refers to “the universe.” Even committing to this understanding of the term “everything,” however, we still must give some sort of characterization of “the universe.” In particular, we must assess the way that the **PSR** applies to “the universe” as a phenomenon to be explained. To do this, let us first recall some things about how causal explanations ordinarily go.

When we say “ x causes y ,” we infer (from experience) that this means that x has a particular temporal relationship with y , i.e., that the presence of x comes *before* the presence of y . Using this understanding of causal explanations and having “the universe” playing the role of y , we must identify an x whose presence comes *before* “the universe.” Unfortunately, an issue arises. How exactly does time relate to the universe? Is the universe an object within time? Or is time an object within the universe? Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity regards the universe as a 4-Dimensional spacetime manifold. In other words, time is (in scientific terms) not understood as an evermoving force behaving independently of the universe, but instead as a thing whose behavior is dependent on the state of the universe. If time is thought of in this manner, then it appears impossible that our desired cause x will exist “before” the universe. Under this Einsteinian understanding of time, the term “before” would only be meaningful in reference to things within the universe. If we accept the Einsteinian model as a definite part of our metaphysical view, we effectively embrace the view of **eternalism** (Emery). This is the view that the past and future both exist as a part of the universe in the same way that other points in space “exist.” All moments in time are equally, “eternally” real.

Eternalism will no doubt seem peculiar, if not altogether unacceptable to some. How can we say that moments in the future are as real as the present moment? It seems evident from experience that this is not the case. I can see things in the present, but I cannot see things in the future. If we accept our own understanding of time as our metaphysical view, we embrace **presentism** (Emery). This is the intuitive view that the past is “gone,” the present is “here,” and the future is “yet to be.” Note that for the presentist, the question of “where did the universe come from?” would only be acceptably answered by something that exists in time outside of the universe.

Why are these views important to consider? Until now, we have made no significant distinction between a “cause,” and a “sufficient reason.” In short: a cause is a sufficient reason, but a sufficient reason need not be a cause. We might say that the sufficient reason for “ $1 + 1 = 2$ ” is the combination of the concepts of 1, 2, addition, and equality. We would not, however, say that these concepts “cause” the statement to be true. In general, we think of a “cause” as something fundamentally pertaining to two “real objects.” Therefore, the sufficient reason for a real object can only be contained in another real object. Being that **presentism** and **eternalism** both make claims about what objects are actually “real,” the view we ascribe to will determine “where” we ought to look for the sufficient reason or “cause” of real objects.

But why should we look for these causes? Why trust that the causes are necessarily everywhere? Why trust that the **PSR** is anything more than a convenient principle for making sense of our experiences? David Hume was an empiricist philosopher who argued that we cannot arrive at the **PSR** through reason alone. His argument goes as follows:

“It is impossible ever to comprehend through reason how something could be a cause or have a force, rather these relations must be taken solely from experience. For the rule of our reason extends only to comparison in accordance with *identity* and *contradiction*. But, in so far as something is a cause, then, through *something*, something *else* is posited, and there is thus no connection in virtue of agreement to be found—just as no contradiction will ever arise if I wish to view the former not as a cause, because there is no contradiction [in the supposition that] if something is posited, something else is cancelled. Therefore, if they are not derived from experience, the fundamental concepts of things as causes, of forces and activities, are completely arbitrary and can neither be proved nor refuted.” (Hume).

In other words, it is not *reason* that compels us to think that causes actually reside within nature (and not just in our minds). From this, Hume concludes that the notion that all things must have a cause is nothing more than an intuition. Others have argued that the **PSR** can, in fact, be arrived at through reason. If one understands the concept of “nothing,” they will understand that it cannot produce anything. Therefore, since the **PSR** is true, causal principles must also be true. This, in addition to the widespread predictive success of scientific modeling alone is, for many philosophers, what elevates “the uniformity of nature” from an intuitive presupposition to a justifiable assumption about the nature of reality. More will be said about these epistemological concerns throughout the paper. With these remarks in mind, we will proceed with an evaluation of monotheism as an answer to the **EQ**.

MONOTHEISM PART I: THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

As established in the previous section, the **EQ** is predicated on the legitimacy of the **PSR**. So too is one of the famous arguments for the God of monotheism: the cosmological argument, otherwise known as: the argument from contingency. In this section, I will present objections to this argument, and further argue that popular responses to these objections are unsatisfactory. To discuss the argument, I will analyze excerpts from the debate between Bertrand Russell and F.C. Copleston on the existence of God. In this debate, F.C. Copleston articulated the cosmological argument in the following manner:

“First of all, I should say, we know that there are at least some beings in the world which do not contain in themselves the reason for their existence. For example, I depend on my parents, and now on the air, and on food, and so on. Now, secondly, the world is simply the real or imagined totality or aggregate of individual objects, none of which contain in themselves alone the reason for their existence. There isn't any world distinct from the objects which form it, any more than the human race is something apart from the members. Therefore, I should say, since objects or events exist, and since no object of experience contains within itself the reason of its existence, this reason, the totality of objects, must have a reason external to itself. That reason must be an existent being. Well, this being is either itself the reason for its own existence, or it is not. If it is, well and good. If it is not, then we must proceed farther. But if we proceed to infinity in that sense, then there's no explanation of existence at all. So, I should say, in order to explain existence, we must come to a being which contains within itself the reason for its own existence, that is to say, which cannot not exist.” (“Russell-Copleston Debate on God's Existence,” 2018)

Although Copleston does not cite it by name, the **PSR** is implicit within his jump from “we know there are at least some beings in the world which do not contain in themselves the reason for their existence...” to “since objects or events exist, and since no object of experience contains within itself the reason of its existence, this reason, the

totality of objects, must have a reason external to itself.” In order to make this jump, one must also believe that “all objects/events have a reason for existing, and this reason must be internal or external to the object/event” which is simply a reformulation of the **PSR** that adds a clause regarding internality/externality.

In crafting this argument for the existence of God, the monotheist is simultaneously attempting to provide an answer to the **EQ**. The monotheist distinguishes God from typical contingent causes by claiming that God, essentially, cannot have failed to exist. Regardless of its success as an argument for the existence of God, what this argument *does* seem to definitively show is that (for someone who fully ascribes to the **PSR**) to give a satisfactory explanation of the existence of the world, one must instantiate a “necessarily existent being.” This, however, may seem like a rather odd thing to assert; not just about God, but about any object. What does it really mean to say “*x* could not have failed to exist,” or “*x* exists necessarily”? To understand, we must analyze two terms: “existence,” and “necessity.”

We begin with the former term: existence. It might initially appear that this word has an abundantly clear meaning. Everyone, after all, understands the difference in the statements: “a unicorn exists,” and “no unicorns exist.” How would the distinction between these statements be any different than the distinction between “a unicorn is red,” and “no unicorns are red.”? Would the terms “exist” and “red” not function as adjectives in essentially the same way? Well, they certainly would in a grammatical sense, but there is an important *logical* difference between the two terms. Consider the concept: “a unicorn.” Now, in your mind, simply add the property of “redness” to this concept. If all goes well, you should be left with the concept of “a unicorn that is red.” This all seems well and good. As expected, there is a clearly meaningful difference between the concept of a unicorn, and the concept of a unicorn with the property of “redness” added to it. Can we say the same of the property of “existence”? What is the difference between the concept of “a unicorn” and the concept of “a unicorn which exists?” The point here is this: whenever we conceptualize the possibility of an object, we automatically consider it as an *existent* object. This apparent peculiarity of the term “existence” has been leveraged as an objection to the cosmological argument. According to this objection, there is no meaningful difference between the concept of “a being who exists,” and “a being.”

We proceed with the other term: necessity. To do this, we can look at Russell's response to Copleston in the debate.

“The word ‘necessary’ I should maintain, can only be applied significantly to propositions. And, in fact, only to such as are analytic – that is to say – such as it is self-contradictory to deny... to my mind, a ‘necessary proposition’ has got to be analytic. I don’t see what else it can mean.” (“Russell-Copleston Debate on God's Existence,” 2018)

In this response, Russell invokes an epistemic categorization of propositions with a long tradition. Analytic propositions are, as Russell states, those which are self-contradictory to deny. The proposition “a square is a square” is analytic. Denying it would involve a contradiction. These propositions generally correspond to what Leibniz called “truths of reason,” what Hume called “relations of ideas.” Analytic propositions can be called *a priori* judgments.

Synthetic propositions, on the other hand, are propositional claims about the state of the world. They generally correspond to what Leibniz called “truths of fact” and what Hume called “matters of fact.” They follow from empirical observations. They are, in other words, *a posteriori* judgments.

This distinction is crucial for evaluating the cosmological argument, as it attempts to establish the truth of monotheism on an *a posteriori* basis. To Russell, it is impossible to arrive at necessary truths through means of an *a posteriori* understanding of a concept. Put differently, we can only arrive at a necessary truth about something if we understand its essence. For example: establishing the necessity of “triangles have three sides” requires that one first establishes the essence of a triangle. Russell claims that we can only *define* the essence of a thing, we cannot *discover* it. Copleston does not claim that he or anyone has a full understanding of God’s essence, but nonetheless maintains that we can discover certain things about His essence through reasoning about *a posteriori* knowledge:

“... It is only a posteriori through our experience of the world that we come to knowledge of the existence of that being (God). And then one argues, the essence and existence must be identical. Because if God's essence and God's existence were not identical, then some sufficient reason for this existence would have to be found beyond God.” (“Russell-Copleston Debate on God's Existence,” 2018)

Why does experience lead us to the existence of God? To Copleston, it is because God is the only thing which would explain the totality of contingent things: the universe. God does not belong to this set of contingent things. God is, according to Copleston and other monotheists, essentially external to the universe. As Russell points out, this could only follow from a particular understanding of the term “contingent.”

“The whole concept of cause is one we derive from our observation of particular things; I see no reason whatsoever to suppose that the total has any cause whatsoever.” (“Russell-Copleston Debate on God's Existence,” 2018)

The term “contingency,” for Copleston, is always logically identical to “in need of an external explanation,” or “not internally necessary.” Russell, however, does not accept that contingency has any logical meaning in the context of the universe. Russell regards the term “contingency” as useful for describing phenomena we can *experience*. Since the universe is beyond something we could possibly experience, Russell claims that the universe is beyond the domain of that which the term “contingent” can be definitively said to describe. Therefore, Russell argues, the cosmological argument is a fallacy of composition. As Russell puts it:

“I can illustrate what seems to me your fallacy. Every man who exists has a mother, and it seems to me your argument is that therefore the human race must have a mother, but obviously the human race hasn't a mother – that's a different logical sphere.” (“Russell-Copleston Debate on God's Existence,” 2018)

This is an argument by analogy that one could critique by arguing that there exist significant disanalogies between biological relations and causal relations, as well as between “the human race” and “the universe” as objects. This alone, however, would not demonstrate that the cosmological argument is not fallacious. To do that, the monotheist would need to show that contingency is a property which is not fallacious to generalize from particular events to the whole of all events. The monotheist would claim that this follows from their understanding of “contingency.” They claim that we generalize our own causal principle from the metaphysical reality of the **PSR**, not the other way around.

This marks a fundamental epistemological disagreement between Russell's agnosticism and Copleston's monotheism. Russell takes a Humean approach, claiming that the **PSR**, and the metaphysical notions of contingency and necessity we derive from it, cannot be reasonably generalized beyond how we practically understand experienced phenomena. What if, however, we do not accept the causal skepticism of Hume and Russell, and are inclined instead to think that the **PSR** is valid in a more general context? Are we then forced to believe that the term “contingency” is a generalizable property, as Copleston does? Just as before, this only follows from a particular understanding of contingency.

We can still understand the **PSR** as generalizing beyond that which we can possibly experience *without* making the *additional* claim that it fully generalizes to the totality of the world in the same way it does to any particular parts of the world. As Copleston understands the **PSR**, “contingency” is logically equivalent to “in need of an explanation.” What if we merely adjust this definition to “in need of a *real* explanation”? That is, an “explanation” that is *contained within reality*. If we simply understand “the universe” as equivalent to “reality,” it follows that there cannot be a “real” causal explanation for the universe existing outside the universe, because whatever is *real* is contained within “reality,” i.e., the universe. More will be said about this in the section defending pantheism.

Copleston's formulation (borrowed from Leibniz) of the cosmological argument is not the only formulation that monotheists have developed. Another version of the argument is the Kalam cosmological argument. The major difference between these formulations is their respective definitions of contingency. According to proponents of the

Kalam formulation, contingent things are best understood as “things which *begin* to exist,” and then argue that the God of monotheism is not contingent due to His eternal nature. Although distinct from Copleston’s formulation, the Kalam formulation is equally problematic. Firstly, it implicitly commits us to a **presentist** understanding of causation. Second, it leaves us with an important problem: how exactly can God be eternal? God is seen as a being with personal attributes, and proponents of this argument must also account for how God is also “a thing which never began to exist.” This will prove troublesome for any monotheist, as the class of personal beings with which we are all familiar: persons, are all clearly “things which began to exist” as defined by the Kalam proponent. Is it possible to generalize our notion of personhood to the context of eternity? While some theologians claim that it is, I will argue in the next section that it is not.

In this section, I have shown that the cosmological argument for monotheism is problematic. It argues for the necessary existence of a being external to the world and causally responsible for the world. It claims to establish the necessity of this existence through *a posteriori* knowledge. This is a problem, as it seems clear that only the essence of a thing can help to establish necessary truths about it, and it is not all clear that we can understand the essence of a thing *a posteriori*. The formulations of the cosmological argument presented here are only as good as their respective (and notably distinct) *a posteriori* understandings of the term “contingency.” With more qualified understandings of the term “contingency,” we can just as easily conclude that expecting “a cause of the world external to the world” is fallacious at best, and self-contradictory at worst.

MONOTHEISM PART II: THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

In the previous section, it was argued that the cosmological argument is insufficient in demonstrating the necessary existence of an external cause of the world. As Russell argued, “necessary” is a term which only applies to analytic propositions. The necessity of an analytic proposition is grounded in the essence of the concept(s) within said proposition. The proposition “squares have the same number of sides as trapezoids” expresses a necessity because squares and trapezoids each have the property of “four sides” contained within their definition. We saw in the previous section that the term “existence” is not so easily added to the definitions of concepts. Unlike the property of “having four sides,” the property of “having existence” is not so easily understood. Still, just because the addition of a particular property is difficult to understand, it does not follow that such an addition is nonsensical altogether. If we reject this assessment of the property of “existence,” we can try to establish the truth of monotheism analytically, or *a priori*. We can do this through an ontological argument for monotheism. The most famous of these arguments is Anselm’s formulation (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy) which, roughly, goes as follows:

1. By definition, God is a being than which none greater can be imagined.
2. A being that necessarily exists in reality is greater than a being that does not necessarily exist.
3. Thus, by definition, if God exists as an idea in the mind but does not necessarily exist in reality, then we can imagine something that is greater than God.
4. But we cannot imagine something that is greater than God.
5. Thus, if God exists in the mind as an idea, then God necessarily exists in reality.
6. God exists in the mind as an idea.
7. Therefore, God necessarily exists in reality.

This is a valid argument. If we are to challenge its truth *without* challenging the use of the term “existence,” we must challenge one or more of the argument’s premises. Premise 1 of the argument defines “God” as “a being than which none greater can be imagined.” If we are to admit that such a notion of “God” is “imaginable,” or “in the set of imaginable beings,” we inadvertently commit to the claim that “the set of imaginable beings has a ‘greatest’ element.” This commitment is itself committed to a claim which seems to me rather unfounded. One is that there is some definitive and comprehensive metric of “greatness” such that for any two distinct imaginable beings A and B,

it is either the case that A is “greater than” B, B is “greater than” A, or A and B are “equally great.” It is not at all obvious that such a metric would or even *could* (logically) exist. “Greatness,” after all, is a term that is usually applied to measure an attribute of a specified class of imaginable things, and not to the whole essence of all imaginable things. How does one compare the greatness of an imagined square versus an imagined dolphin? The comparison clearly seems absurd. Since it is not at all obvious that the desired “greatness” metric is obtainable, it is not at all obvious that the concept of “a being than which none greater can be imagined” has any meaning whatsoever.

Despite this apparent ambiguity in the term “greatness,” monotheists have attempted to give this notion a meaning. As previously mentioned, monotheists traditionally characterize “God” or “a being than which none greater can be imagined,” as an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnibenevolent being. Many monotheists attribute a personal agency to the greatest imaginable being, because, in their view, a *lack* of personal agency would be a limitation: something God cannot have. Monotheists subsequently isolate the attributes of power, wisdom, existential presence, and generosity as those which collectively determine the greatness of agents or persons. The most powerful person imaginable would have all-encompassing power (omnipotence). The most wise person imaginable would have all-encompassing wisdom (omniscience). The most existentially present person imaginable would have all-encompassing existence, they would exist at all places and all times (omnipresence). The most generous imaginable person would be incapable of doing anything wrong (omnibenevolence). To be the greatest imaginable person, one must simultaneously be the most powerful, wise, existentially-present, and generous person imaginable.

Even if we accept this definition of “a being than which none greater can be imagined” as meaningful, and we further accept premises 2-5, premise 7 only follows if premise 6 “God exists in the mind as an idea” is true. To determine if the “God” so-defined by monotheists exists in the mind as a concept, it must (at minimum) be established that this concept is logically possible. Equivalently, if this definition of God is determined to be logically impossible, then this concept will have been determined to not exist in the mind. The logical impossibility of a person simultaneously being more powerful, wise, existentially-present, and generous than any other imaginable person can be established in one of two general ways. One way is through showing that it is logically impossible for a person to possess any *one* of these attributes. Alternatively, it suffices to show that simultaneously possessing any *group* of these attributes is logically impossible.

I will begin by arguing that it is impossible for a being to be both personal and eternal. By “personal being,” I mean a being with a continuously changing state of mind, i.e., a being that is, at minimum, *capable* of thought. Why this definition? Because this is one of the features which every individual thing we call a “person” shares. It is only natural that we regard it as an essential feature of personhood. I cannot see any rational motivation for regarding “personhood” as somehow encompassing a larger category of things than some subset of the collection of beings with continuously changing mental states. This change from one mental state to another is where persons develop an understanding of time. While the metaphysical nature of time is up for debate, one thing is agreeable to eternalists and presentists alike: whatever time *really* is, it is at least partially responsible for the dynamic nature of our mental lives. So, if God is alleged to have a dynamic mental life, the existence time is at least partially responsible for this fact. It is either the case that God, like other persons, had a *first* thought, or somehow did not. If the former is true, what are we to make of time “before” this first thought? Is this time finite or infinite? Surely, since God’s existential presence is the greatest imaginable, and therefore eternal, we must admit that God spent an infinite amount of time without thinking. Again, this all follows logically from the assumption that God had a first thought. Since an “infinite amount of time” literally means “unending amount of time,” it is obviously absurd to say “God didn’t think for an infinite amount of time, and this time ended when God had his first thought.” But this is precisely the conclusion that we have reached. Hence, it was wrong to assume that God had a first thought. If, on the other hand, we assume that God never had a first thought, then we are forced to admit that God does not think. If God does not think, then God is not personal.

An objection to the reasoning above may rest on one of two things: that the definition of personhood is somehow incorrect, or that the reasoning following after is incorrect. I do not find either of these counterpoints compelling. The definition of personhood stated above has already been justified. If there is any shortcoming to the

definition, it is that it is too broad. The definition as stated may, after all, be applicable to what we consider impersonal animals. This is irrelevant, however, as the argument which followed would only have failed based on this definition if the definition was too narrow. As for the reasoning following this definition, it is legitimate insofar as dynamic minds imply time, and that time implies a certain ontological ordinality to mental states. From the temporal ordering of the instances of conscious mental states in a person, we also get a causal ordering of the entire existence of a person. Insofar as God is personal, the same must be true of God. If we try to analyze this ordering in the case of God we reach the aforesaid contradictions.

There are many similar arguments that illustrate the difficulty in reconciling the attribute of personhood with any sort of infinite. What does it mean for a person to be infinitely powerful? Can they make $2+2$ equal 5 ? Can they create a stone they cannot lift? To these sorts of questions, monotheists have responded that “God is all-powerful, but his power only extends over that which is logically possible.” To accept Swinburne’s response, we must admit that our perfect being is somehow restricted by something, namely: logical laws. The monotheist would need to make sense of this restriction, especially in conjunction with a typical monotheistic claim: that nothing exists independently of God’s will.

As another example: what does it mean for a thinking person to have infinite wisdom? One of the main reasons we think is due to a lack of wisdom. Furthermore, we usually devote our attention to one thought at a time. Is the same true of God? Does God have infinitely many thoughts happening simultaneously? If this is true, do his thoughts ever change? It seems unclear.

There are, additionally, a number of arguments that illustrate issues in a person simultaneously possessing multiple of the aforesaid attributes. Take, for example, the previous example regarding omniscience. Suppose we accept that God has infinitely many thoughts simultaneously. Now, let us suppose that God is also omnibenevolent and omniscient. Are any of God’s infinite thoughts immoral? If so, can we call him omnibenevolent? If not, can we call him omnipotent (because an inability to think immoral thoughts is a limitation)? The most famous example of these sorts of arguments, perhaps, is the Problem of Evil (Stanford). If God has all the power, wisdom, and moral goodness imaginable, why is there so much evil in the world? Put more succinctly: if the world has a perfect creator, why does our world seem so imperfect?

If we accept any of these arguments, then premise 6 must be false. The existence of these sorts of problems have been long-known to monotheistic philosophers, and as such, it is notable that some clever responses have been crafted. There is something that these responses rarely point out: why the problems are generally so difficult, and why there are so many of them? A common way to address this is by asserting something to the effect of “God’s perfection is impossible for us finite beings to understand,” but this is merely begging the question. The response is effectively saying “the reason you think the existent God is nonsensical is because his existence is infinitely complex, and therefore beyond your understanding. Hence, your arguments are invalid, and God still exists.” It starts with the premise that God exists and concludes that God exists.

Even if this counterpoint weren’t begging the question, it still gets the epistemology of things quite wrong. Substance, for example, is a complex concept which we have developed through scientific and philosophical inquiry. There are many dilemmas in analyzing what exactly “substance” is, conceptually. If, however, someone tried to tell you that the difficulties in analyzing “substance” were sufficient for demonstrating that “substance” does not exist, that would be absurd! This is because *epistemically*, we *start* with a thing in the world which we experience: substance, and attempt to idealize it from there. With God, however, we have done the opposite. We have started with an “idea” and have reduced it to several logical impossibilities. To understand *why* these logical impossibilities so easily arise, we can simply accept that perfection and personhood are logically incompatible concepts. Perfection is essentially “maximal greatness,” and it is conceivable that perfection might be maintained in a setting where the term “greatness” refers to a limited list of related attributes. It seems far less conceivable, however, that maximal greatness can be maintained simultaneously across all significant personal attributes. This ought to be expected, as personal attributes are, at times, at odds with one another. Additionally, persons are always finite, and this is a good reason to assume that personhood essentially involves a sort of finitude that divine perfection would not allow.

Premise 6 has thus been shown to be deeply problematic. Although a monotheist may argue that the multitude of previously-shown absurdities are not indicative of any underlying issue with the concept of God, I believe it is clear that it does. I find it unlikely that they would arise so easily and so often if not for such a logical issue being present. Since monotheistic ontological arguments rest on this concept being legitimate, its illegitimacy is sufficient in showing that ontological arguments for monotheism are invalid.

This section and the one previous do not amount to an exhaustive refutation of every monotheistic argument. In addition to the ontological and cosmological arguments, there are also teleological and moral arguments for the existence of the monotheistic God. The premises of these other arguments, however, are not relevant to answering the **EQ**. The troublesome nature of the **EQ** is something which is addressed directly by the premises of the cosmological and ontological argument, because these premises speak of necessary existence. By contrast, these concerns are only indirectly addressed by the teleological and moral arguments for God. They may be rejected without much regard to the **PSR** or **EQ**. If, on the other hand, we try to establish the existence of God in an attempt to address the **EQ**, we must subsequently address a great many equally-daunting problems. Being that monotheism creates more problems than it solves, the remainder of the paper will focus on the merit of pantheism.

PANTHEISM AS AN ANSWER TO THE EXISTENCE QUESTION

In the previous two sections, we saw the shortcomings of monotheism as an answer to the **EQ**. If we ask “where did everything come from?” the monotheist answers “God.” Why are they permitted to answer in this way without further inquiry? As Copleston argued, it is because the monotheistic God cannot be contingent. It follows from the **PSR** that there *must* be something which is not contingent, and if there is such a thing, it *must* be a perfect being, i.e., the monotheistic God. In the section on the monotheistic ontological argument, it was argued that personhood is a concept which is logically incompatible with absolute perfection. Insofar as this is the case, monotheists cannot claim that the arguments from Copleston or Anselm establish the existence of a personal God, as both of them rely on the existence of a perfect *and* personal being. What if we reject the latter clause of personhood? Although monotheists claim that a lack of personhood implies that something has a limitation, we are now in a position to be skeptical of this judgment. As argued in the last section, the basic features of personhood may actually necessitate limitations.

There is a more indirect, but equally relevant way in which someone may reject that personhood can be incorporated into the concept of God. The monotheist’s conclusion from Anselm’s argument is that there is a person whose essence it is to exist. That is, a person who, when we try to imagine them as non-existent, we force ourselves to conceptualize a different person. This seems odd, as it seems that for any known example of a person, we can imagine them as not existing. Additionally, if we picture the God of monotheism in any particular way, it seems trivial to imagine this God as nonexistent. How, then, can we say that there is a person whose essence it is to exist? Though the monotheist may claim that our picture of God is simply incorrect (hence why we imagine this picture as nonexistent), we have already seen that this counterpoint begs the question.

We might proceed with the following assertion: in order for some property to be in the essence of a thing, it must be the case that this thing cannot be imagined as lacking said property. The property of “three-sidedness” is in the essence of a triangle because we cannot imagine a triangle as lacking this property. Such was the way that the rationalist philosopher and pantheist Baruch Spinoza was inclined to think. In his most famous work *The Ethics*, Spinoza includes a relevant version of this assertion as his 7th axiom:

“If a thing can be conceived as non-existing, its essence does not involve existence.” (Spinoza).

Recall that pantheism is the view that God (which Spinoza calls “Nature”) is “all of reality.” Since the terms “reality” and “existence” are synonyms, it follows that “all of reality” is a thing whose essence it is to exist. So, to the question “where did everything come from?” Spinoza answers “from itself.” This answer may be puzzling, if not clearly unsatisfactory to some. We never explain an object’s existence through itself, so why should we expect that

it should be possible to explain Nature through itself? To understand this, we must further analyze what exactly we mean by “explaining an object’s existence.” Say I have an object: x . What is the sufficient reason for the existence of x ? What is it that we expect in opposition to the claim “ x explains itself,” and why, according to Spinoza, should we expect anything else if our object x is Nature?

The reason why, in the case of an ordinary object x , we are dissatisfied with saying “ x explains itself” is because there are two features of x that are mysterious: the stuff which x is ultimately made of, and the way that stuff is arranged. The “stuff which x is ultimately made of” is what Spinoza calls “substance,” which he defines as follows:

“By substance, I mean that which exists in itself, and is conceived through, or by means of itself; i.e., the conception of which does not require its formaton the conception of anything else.” (Spinoza).

Moreover, for what we called “the way that stuff is arranged,” Spinoza defines “mode” as follows:

“By mode, I understand the affections of substance, or that which exists in something else, through which it is conceived.” (Spinoza).

Let’s say our object x is the moon. To explain why the stuff of the moon is arranged the way it is, cosmologists will appeal to the laws of physics and the starting conditions of the universe. Having posited these laws and conditions, the cosmologist will be able to provide scientific models that can help us reason with how the starting conditions of the universe could have led to the formation of the moon. Although the cosmologist will presumably never give an exhaustive account of the precise molecular arrangement of the moon, this is still an explanatory domain in which we seem to be able to make traceable progress. As we gather more information about the starting conditions of the universe, and we sharpen our understanding of the laws of physics, we will progress in our understanding of why the stuff of the moon is arranged the way it is.

To explain the stuff which the moon is ultimately made of, the cosmologist can appeal to molecules of matter which were once contained in asteroids, which themselves were once contained in stars, etc. The issue, however, is that no matter how long this chain of explanation goes, we can still repeatedly ask “what is x made of?”. If we affirm the **PSR**, then we can only answer this question with “ x is made of x ,” or “ x is made of something else.

Of course, for practical purposes, by “stuff that x is made of,” we typically mean “matter.” Therefore, we tend to think of an explanation for the existence of “the stuff x is made of” as equivalent to “the matter of x is made of.” From this, we *mistakenly* think that in accounting for “the matter of y transforming into the matter of x ,” we are giving an account of “the stuff x is ultimately made of,” but we are not. We can merely ask the same question about the matter y is made of, and therefore the question of what x is *ultimately* made of remains unanswered.

In Spinoza’s terms, an object’s molecules are not the substance of the object, but rather, a mode of the object. Molecules are conceived through atoms, and atoms through subatomic particles, but seldom do physicists claim that subatomic particles are “made of themselves.” If, on the other hand, they *did* claim that subatomic particles are made of themselves, Spinoza would see this as equivalent to the claim that subatomic particles are “substance.” This is a crucial distinction for how we generalize our understanding of causal phenomena. Before, we saw that Copleston claimed the world is made of objects which do not contain in themselves the reason for their existence, but with Spinoza’s terms, we have a more nuanced way of evaluating the situation at hand. Objects do, in fact, contain in themselves one part of what explains their existence: their substance. The modes of this substance, or the way which x is configured, is explained by other modes. In other words: the arrangement of atoms is only fully explained in terms of other preexisting atoms. The substance which ultimately underlies atoms, however, does not depend on something preexisting. Copleston and other monotheists have, under Spinoza’s view, made the mistake of assuming that the substance of an object is subject to the same line of inquiry as the modes of an object, but it is not. It does not exist through anything but itself.

There remains an important issue, one which we have already seen. In order for Spinoza’s view to work, we must establish the legitimacy of the property of “existence.” As we’ve already discussed, the use of this term can be problematic. The objections against Copleston seen previously from Russell follow largely in the tradition of

Immanuel Kant. In bringing attention to this point about “existence,” Kant aimed to refute ontological arguments for the existence of God. This goes for monotheistic and pantheistic arguments alike. We have already seen how “necessary existence” as applied to personal entities is problematic. In the following quote, Kant presents what he takes to be the pantheistic approach:

“Now [the argument proceeds] ‘all reality’ includes existence; existence is therefore contained in the concept of a thing that is possible. If then, this thing is rejected, the internal possibility of the thing is rejected—which is self-contradictory.” (Kant).

He subsequently provides his response to this argument:

“My answer is as follows. There is already a contradiction in introducing the concept of existence—no matter under what title it may be disguised—into the concept of a thing which we profess to be thinking solely in reference to its possibility.” (Kant).

Kant argues that whenever we think of a concept like “God,” our conception of it as a “possible” thing is no different than our conception of it as a “real” thing.

Let us first try to understand what makes this sort of response so effective in the case of the monotheistic argument. The monotheists’ ontological argument can be summarized briefly as “God has the property of perfection, nonexistence is an imperfection, therefore God has the property of existence.” Here, the God we *initially* entertain as a mere possibility is said, in virtue of some conceptual property, to necessarily have the property of existence. Kant calls this inference fallacious on the grounds that “existence” is not an isolated property we can add to a concept like “redness.” Kant claims: “... all existential propositions are synthetic...” (Kant) which is to say that a proposition about the existence of a thing can never be shown as true through an analytic statement.

Therefore, according to both Kant and Russell, there are no meaningful existence statements which can be necessarily true. To them, “necessity” is only applicable to tautologies. Something can only be necessary if it is undeniable on logical grounds. Tautologies are fundamentally un insightful. In saying “existence exists,” Kant and Russell claim that Spinoza is not saying anything that could provide anyone any insight. But is Spinoza merely stating a tautology? Is there nothing more to the claim that Nature must exist?

Spinoza’s thinking was influenced by another rationalist philosopher: Descartes. Descartes famously asserted the *cogito*, the statement “I think, therefore I exist.” It is seen in his Second Meditation:

“I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed.” (Cottingham, et al. 1984).

According to Descartes, this is supposed to be a statement which is self-contradictory to deny. According to Kant and Russell, however, this could only be self-contradictory to deny if it was a tautology. Thus, according to them, Descartes *must* be entertaining a thing which is merely possible, the thinking “I,” and fallaciously presupposing that “existence” is contained in this possibility. But is this really what Descartes is doing? Is Descartes familiarizing himself with the thinking “I,” in the same way that monotheists familiarize themselves with their concept of God? I would argue that the two approaches are quite different.

Descartes’ *cogito* does not owe its necessity to it being a mere tautology, but it being a “self-evident” fact. It is self-evident insofar as the **PSR** is self-evident. Descartes has thoughts which cannot be composed of nothing, and hence he concludes there is something, the “I”, that is producing these thoughts. Spinoza claims that this is also true of that which we experience. Spinoza has perceptions which cannot ultimately be composed of nothing, and so there must be something, or “substance” that is producing these perceptions. So much is self-evident from an understanding of the **PSR**.

Here there exists a fundamental disagreement: whereas Descartes and Spinoza believe that there are self-evident facts that are undeniable, Kant and Russell claim that undeniability (or necessity) is never present anywhere unless in tautological expressions. Nothing is ever “self-evident,” or “necessary,” except if through pure logic. To them, anything beyond a tautology is an intuition which we ought not to trust. Arguing at length for which of these two views is favorable would be a complex epistemological and meta-epistemological discussion that is beyond the scope of this paper. As such, it will be left to the reader to decide which of these views on “necessity” is more reasonable.

CONCLUSION

The **EQ** is undoubtedly a question that challenges the very foundation of how we understand the world. More specifically, it challenges the way in which we understand causal relationships. In this paper, I have argued that monotheism is a problematic way of answering this question. This view, unlike that of pantheism and causal skepticism, asserted that the cause of “everything” must come from outside itself, namely: a perfect and personal being. Why was this problematic? Well, for the same reason that the existence of the universe seems problematic, we can still ask where this “thing outside the universe” came from? Whether through means of *a priori* or *a posteriori* arguments, the monotheist claims that we have made a mistake in presuming that their God could fail to exist, because existence is a part of the essence of their God.

We saw that this approach was problematic for two reasons: firstly, existence is a property of *perceived* things, it cannot be contained in something for which we only have a *conceived* referent. Furthermore, it seems impossible that there would ever be a “person” whose nonexistence is unimaginable. It is less clear that the pantheistic argument can be objected to on these grounds. This is because we are imagining the set of all perceivable things as a subset of God or Nature. The set of things which can meaningfully be said to exist is a part of Nature, meaning (according to the pantheist) that Nature must exist. Unlike the case of monotheism, there seems to be an intuitive reason to think that the God of pantheism is one whose non-existence is unimaginable.

Pantheism will certainly seem like an unsatisfactory view if our temptation is to say that “everything” has a cause outside of itself. This temptation, however, only follows from a fallacious understanding of the **PSR** and physical causation. The understanding makes two mistakes. It first presumes that physical objects contain nothing about the reason for their own existence, and this reason must therefore be contained in something else. Then, based on this first mistake, claims that the totality of all physical objects must also have a cause contained in something else.

Spinoza tells us that the first assertion follows from a misunderstanding of substance and causal explanations. The only thing we truly take as unexplained about objects is their arrangement. The fact that the object exists is not the true mystery. We directly understand that perceived objects must be substantiated by a thing which is made of itself. Even if these perceptions are illusions, these illusions must be substantiated by thought. The arrangement of the object, on the other hand, is only knowable through an understanding of things outside the object. We do not account for the substance of an object, only why the substance was modified into the object. The mistake of the monotheist, then, is in assuming that causal explanations need to account for the existence of substance, and that this account can only be given by things outside the substance. In reality, there is nothing “outside of substance,” there are only modes external to other modes.

This Spinozistic analysis of the monotheist’s mistake rests on the **PSR** being self-evident. Even if we reject the necessity of what appears “self-evident,” as Kant and Russell do, then we will reject that the **PSR** is a necessary truth. In so doing, we effectively delegitimize the seeming universality of our causal principle, namely, that “physical objects have an external cause.” If this generality does not hold, then there is no definite reason why we should think that the totality of physical objects is something with an external cause.

Despite having entirely different epistemological approaches to the **PSR**, both the causal skepticism of Hume, Kant, and Russell as well as the pantheism of Spinoza eventually conclude that the expectation of the world having an external cause is a fallacy of composition. These views each invoke a restriction on the domain of possible causal

explanations. The former view asserts that because we can only know causality to be an intuitive feature of the way we understand objects of our experience, we cannot expect it to apply to an object which is not an object of experience. The latter view asserts that we can know that causation is a feature of the world through the appearance of objects and the self-evidential nature of the **PSR**. In accounting for the existence of objects, we typically refer to other objects. The fallacy of composition comes when we take this to mean that the world is an object whose existence must be explained by other objects. For ordinary objects, we understand that the substance underlying the object was arranged or modified as a different object. When our object is the world, however, we mistakenly treat substance as though it is a modification or arrangement.

It should not be surprising that answering the **EQ** requires that we reconsider our understanding of causation. If it did not require this, then there would be no philosophical issue in answering “where did everything come from?”, it would be no different than asking “where did the earth come from?” Clearly, however, this is not the case. The monotheist mistakenly thinks that there must be an object that breaks the causal rule: God. As we have seen, however, this leads to all sorts of contradictions. There are far fewer blatant contradictions in the direction of causal skepticism and pantheism. For that reason, although their epistemological assertions differ, I believe that both of these views are correct in addressing this question through a more careful analysis of the causal principle with which we understand objects of experience. It is only through these analyses that we can come to understand exactly why the **EQ** is a fallacy of composition.

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