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THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT WITHOUT THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

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We formulate a version of the Cosmological Argument that deploys an epistemic principle of explanation in place of the traditional Principle of Sufficient Reason. The epistemic principle asserts that if there is a possible explanation of a fact, and some proposition is entailed by that explanation and by every other possible explanation of that fact, it is reasonable to accept that proposition. We try to show that there is a possible explanation of the fact that there are contingent beings and that any possible explanation of this fact presupposes that there is a necessary being. We conclude that it is reasonable to believe that there is a necessary being.

A central component of traditional forms of the Cosmological Argument, especially of its eighteenth-century versions, is the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). Thus, for example, Samuel Clarke's version of the argument contends that if every being that exists, or ever existed, were a dependent being, then there would be certain existential facts that could not be explained. Invoking PSR, the argument goes on to conclude that the supposition that there are only dependent beings must be mistaken, so that there must be a necessary being, a being that "exists by an absolute necessity originally in the nature of the thing itself".[1]

William Rowe has ably defended Clarke's argument against a number of traditional objections, objections that question whether it is appropriate, or even coherent, to ask for an explanation of the relevant existential facts.[2] Nevertheless, Rowe thinks that the argument is unsuccessful because it contains an unproven assumption, namely, PSR. In fact, we may distinguish different versions of PSR. Rowe argues that a strong form of PSR, which says

> (PSR1) Every actual state of affairs has a reason either within itself or in some other state of affairs.

is false, because it conflicts with the claim that it is a contingent fact that there are contingent beings.[3] According to Rowe, however, the Cosmological Argument does not require a version of PSR as strong as PSR1; rather a version which says

> (PSR2) Every existing thing has a reason for its existence either

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> in the necessity of its own nature or in the causal efficacy of some other being.

is sufficient. Is PSR2 true? Rowe does not think that we can show that it is false; but at the same time he maintains that we do not know that it is true.

We accept Rowe's contention concerning both versions of PSR but think that it is possible to develop a version of the Cosmological Argument that does not rely on that principle. In what follows, we try to set out an argument that shares several important features of Clarke's argument but avoids PSR. The conclusion of Clarke's argument is that there is a necessary being. The conclusion of the argument we develop is the somewhat weaker claim that it is reasonable to believe that there is a necessary being; and to reach that conclusion we deploy an epistemic principle that may be redolent of PSR but is, we think, a good deal more plausible.

One further preliminary remark. In what follows, we assume that it is epistemically possible that there is a God as conceived in monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam and, in particular, that there is a unique necessary being who brought about the existence of everything other than itself by willing that these other things should exist. In other words, we assume that the proposition that there is such a being is not known to be false. Of course, various philosophers have, for one reason or another, raised doubts about this assumption. It is, however, beyond the scope of the present paper to defend it. And in any case, even someone who rejects this assumption may find it interesting to see how it can be deployed in support of the conclusion that it is reasonable to believe that there is a necessary being.

I

By a *contingent being* we mean a concrete individual that actually exists but might not have existed; thus, it is true of any contingent being that under certain circumstances, it would not have existed. On the other hand, by a *necessary being* we mean a concrete individual that both exists and must exist; so if there is such a being, it is one that would have existed no matter what the circumstances. Using the current idiom, we might say that a contingent being is an individual that exists at least in the actual world but not in every possible world; a necessary being is one that exists in every possible world.

Though it is clear that there are contingent beings, one might ask why this is so. The question we have in mind is not one specifically directed to a particular contingent thing, say the solar system; rather it is: Why are there any contingent beings whatsoever? A true answer to that question is an explanation of the fact that there are contingent beings. According to strong versions of PSR, for example, PSR1, there is an explanation for every positive fact, in which case there is an explanation of the fact that there are contingent beings. We do not assume that any version of PSR is true and, in particular, do not assume that there must be an explanation of this fact. We do, however, think that there could be

such an explanation. Let us say that a *possible explanation* of some fact is a proposition (i) which might be true, in the sense that we do not know it to be false, and (ii) which, if true, would explain why that fact obtains. Hence, a possible explanation of the fact that there are contingent beings is a proposition which might be true and which, if true, would constitute a correct answer to the question, Why are there any contingent beings whatsoever? Perhaps there is no true answer to that question and, hence, no explanation of the fact that there are contingent beings. But the religions we referred to earlier—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—include as a tenet a proposition that purports to answer that question, namely: that there is a unique necessary being who brought about the existence of everything other than itself by willing that these other beings should exist. Clearly this proposition, if true, does constitute an intelligible answer to the question of why there are any contingent beings; but then,

> (1) The proposition that there is a unique necessary being who brought about the existence of everything other than itself by willing that the other beings should exist, would, if true, explain why there are contingent beings.

Given our assumption that it is epistemically possible that there is such a being, we may infer that

> (2) There is a possible explanation of the fact that there are contingent beings.

Are there other possible explanations of the fact in question? Certainly the explanation proposed in (1) is far from complete, and one can imagine various ways in which it might be filled out. For example, someone might claim that the necessary being that brought other things into existence by its volition exists timelessly, or that this being brought other things into existence at some time in the remote though finite past. Of course there may be other possible explanations that depart from the relevant religious tradition: for example, one might explain the existence of contingent beings by Plotinian emanation from a necessary being. But are there other possible explanations that do not presuppose that there is a necessary being? We contend that on the assumption that there are only contingent beings, one cannot explain the fact that there are contingent beings, in other words,

> (3) There is no proposition consistent with the claim that there are *only* contingent beings which, if true, would explain why there are contingent beings.

It follows from (3), of course, that any proposition that might explain why there are contingent beings—that is, any proposition which might be true and which, if true, would explain this fact—entails that it is false that there are only contingent things. But if it is false that there are only contingent beings, then since there obviously are contingent beings and

since any being that is not contingent is necessary, there must be a necessary being. Accordingly, it follows from (3) that

> (4) Any possible explanation of the fact that there are contingent beings entails that there is a necessary being.

Given an appropriate version of PSR, one could proceed forthwith to the conclusion that there is a necessary being. We maintain, however, that one can do without this principle. In its place, we have the following epistemic principle regarding possible explanations:

> (PPE) Given that (i) there is a possible explanation of the fact that *F* and (ii) any possible explanation of the fact that *F* entails *P*, it is reasonable to believe that *P*.

If we let *F* be the fact that there are contingent beings and *P* be the proposition that there is a necessary being, we see that (2) and (4) ensure that conditions (i) and (ii) are satisfied, so we may infer that

> (5) It is reasonable to believe that there is a necessary being.

II

The foregoing argument rests on statements (1) and (3), together with the principle (PPE). From (1) and (3), we may infer (2) and (4), respectively; and in the presence of (PPE), (2) and (4) imply (5). We shall discuss each of (1), (3), and (PPE) in turn.

According to (1), the claim that there is a unique necessary being that brought about the existence of everything other than itself by willing that the other things should exist, if true, would explain why there are contingent beings. As we have already indicated, this explanation, like most, leaves room for elaboration; one might specify further detail in a number of different ways.[4] Such more elaborate explanations would be versions of the explanation given in (1). If any of the more elaborate versions explains why there are contingent beings, then so does the more abstract version given in (1).

Someone might, however, object that (1) fails to provide even a possible explanation of the fact that there are contingent beings, on the grounds that the putative explanans— namely, that there is a unique necessary being who brought about the existence of everything other than itself by willing that the other beings should exist—has no explanation. Since it is a contingent fact that there are contingent beings, the putative explanans must also be a contingent fact, if a fact at all, for whatever explains a contingent truth must itself be a contingent truth. But given several plausible theological assumptions, the explanans can have no explanation, for any explanation would consist either of facts concerning the nature of the necessary being or facts about matters external to its nature: the former alternative threatens to turn the explanans into a necessary truth, while the latter threatens the freedom

of the necessary being. Thus, we have explained why there are contingent things by means of another contingent fact, but one that itself has no explanation.

The premises of this argument may be true, but it does not follow that (1) fails as possible explanation of why there are contingent beings. (1) does not propose a possible explanation of the totality of contingent facts; rather it proposes an explanation of one particular contingent fact, namely, that there are contingent beings. It is entirely consistent with (1) that there be certain contingent facts that have no explanation. And it may be that the fact described by the explanans of (1) is such a fact. This, however, does not undermine the claim that this explanans, if true, would explain why there are contingent beings.

The possible explanation proposed in (1) would, if true, explain why there are contingent beings by tracing their origin to the causal efficacy of a necessary being. One might, of course, ask for an explanation of why this being willed that there should be contingent beings, that is, for an account of that being's reason or purpose for so willing. Considerations such as those mentioned earlier suggest that there may be no good answer to this question. However this may be, our argument has nothing to do with an explanation of this further sort.

A related point, worth mentioning, is that it is also entirely consistent with (1) that there be certain necessary facts that have no explanation. In particular, (1) by itself does not entail that there is an explanation for the fact, if it is one, that there is a necessary being. Since proponents of traditional versions of the Cosmological Argument, like Samuel Clarke, assume some version of PSR, they are committed to the view that every existing thing has an explanation of its existence; but, of course, if there is such an explanation for every existing thing, then there is an explanation for the existence of any necessary being. Thus, Clarke maintains that the nature of a necessary being would explain its existence. Some philosophers have objected that this is an obscure notion, at best. But this objection, whatever its merits, does not count against the present argument, for this argument does not assume any version of PSR and, so, does not assume that every existing thing has an explanation. Accordingly, the premises of the present argument, taken together, are consistent with the supposition that the putative fact that there is a necessary being has no explanation.

Though the proposition that there is a unique necessary being who brought about the existence of everything other than itself by willing that the other beings should exist would, if true, explain why there are contingent beings, it would not be a possible explanation if it were known to be false. For as we understand the notion of a possible explanation, the explanans must be epistemically possible. The proposition that there is a giant glass dome covering Algonquin Park, if true, would explain why it has not rained there for the past month; but one may safely dismiss this as a possible explanation for the obvious reason that it is known to be false. Of course, should anyone know that the explanans proposed in (1) is false, we would not be warranted in inferring (2) from (1). But we do not think that anyone knows such a thing. (To be sure, if

we are mistaken about this, our argument has a serious defect.)

III

We now turn to premise (3), which asserts that if there are only contingent beings, then there is no explanation of why there are contingent beings. Someone might suppose that an explanation of the existence of some contingent being—a pet cat named `Willy', for example—would also be an explanation of the general existential fact that there are contingent beings. After all, if we can explain why Willy exists—which presumably we can in terms of the causal activity of his parents—then surely we have explained why some contingent being exists. Willy's parents, of course, are also contingent beings. Accordingly, it would seem that we have explained why there are any contingent beings and have done so without making reference to anything other than contingent beings.

We agree that one can explain why Willy exists in terms of his parents and their doings, but this by itself does not explain why there are contingent beings. Consider the question, Why are there tigers in India? It is clear that any possible explanation of the fact in question must ultimately refer to the causal efficacy of something that either is not a tiger or not in India. One might venture an answer to the question of why there are tigers in India by citing certain facts about how tigers evolved or certain facts about their movements; but one does not provide an answer to that question simply by citing an antecedent Indian tiger. Or again, consider the question, Why are there any cats whatsoever? Clearly, an explanation of why Willy exists in terms of the causal activities of other cats does not by itself explain why there are any cats whatsoever. Any possible explanation of the general fact that there are cats will, like the explanation offered by evolutionary theory, make reference to something other than cats.

Is it generally true that in order to explain why there are *K*'s one must refer to things that are not *K*'s? Clearly not. If there is a being that, to use Clarke's phrase, "exists by an absolute necessity originally in the nature of the thing itself", that is, a being whose existence is explained by the nature of the being, then that being is a necessary being. And if there is such a being, then its nature explains not only why it exists but also why there are necessary beings. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to suppose that in order to explain why there are necessary beings one must refer to something that is not a necessary being. But this case is special in that the existential fact, if it is one, is not contingent; that is, it is necessarily true, if it is true at all, that there are necessary beings.

Things are different, however, when it comes to explaining contingent existential facts of the form, there are *K*'s. Here it seems one must look to something other than a *K*. Accordingly, we may assert the following principle:

> If the fact that there are *K*'s is contingent, then if it has an explanation at all, the explanans must make reference to the causal efficacy of something that is not a *K*.

Now consider the fact that there are contingent things. It is reasonably clear that there might not have been any contingent beings whatsoever; that is, there is a possible world in which nothing contingent exists. Hence, it is a contingent truth that there are contingent things. Accordingly, it follows from the principle just cited that if there is an explanation for the fact that there are contingent beings, the explanans must make reference to the causal efficacy of something that is not itself contingent. But in that case, (3) is true.

IV

The assumptions embodied in (1) and (3), above, are of course familiar, much discussed, features of the Cosmological Argument. What is perhaps new in the version that we are proposing is our epistemic principle regarding possible explanations, PPE. What is there to be said in its favour?

There are tracks of a certain sort in the sand; they constitute evidence for what explains them, that a deer passed by recently. How could we determine that this is the explanation of the tracks without first knowing that it is true? We accept that possible explanation because it would, if true, explain the tracks, and in the absence of any other possible explanation, it is reasonable to accept that one. Of course, there is always more than one possible explanation for some fact; for example, the tracks may be the result of an elaborate hoax, they may be the work of extraterrestrial creatures, and so on. Thus, we cannot conclude that a proposition is true simply because it is a possible explanation of the relevant phenomenon; we must show that it is the best of the available candidates.

Inferences to the best explanation are extremely common both in science and in everyday life. The biologist infers the theory of natural selection because this is the best explanation of why nature contains organisms well-suited to survival. The physician infers that his patient is suffering from angina because this is the best explanation of the patient's symptoms. The police infer that the murderer is left-handed because this is the best explanation of the shape and direction of the victim's wound. The general form of such reasoning is this: Of the available and competing possible explanations of the fact that F, E is the best according to certain criteria for choosing among possible explanations. Thus, we may prefer one explanation over another on the grounds of simplicity, parsimony, explanatory power, or even familiarity.

Our principle (PPE) is related to inference to the best explanation in a fairly obvious way. If a certain possible explanation for some fact has a presupposition for its truth, then if it is reasonable to believe that this possible explanation is *the* explanation of the fact, it is also reasonable to accept the presupposition. (PPE), however, does not require that we come to any conclusion about which is the best explanation of various rival candidates. For if every possible explanation of some fact presupposes a certain proposition, then, if it is reasonable to suppose that one of those possible explanations is correct, it is reasonable to accept that presupposition, regardless of which of the possible explanations is the

best one. Thus, (PPE) addresses itself to a situation in which there is a possible explanation of a fact, and some proposition is entailed by that explanation and by every other possible explanation of that fact. So if it is reasonable to conclude that the fact has an explanation, it is reasonable to accept that proposition.

But now it may look as though (PPE) simply assumes that every fact has an explanation; otherwise, it seems that we could have no grounds for supposing that the fact in question does have one. This conclusion, however, would be a mistake, for (PPE) is consistent with claim that there are facts of one sort or another that do not have any explanation. The principle does, however, assume that under certain circumstances it is reasonable for us to believe that a certain fact has an explanation, even when we do not know what that explanation is. (And this, it would seem, is an assumption that it shares with inference to the best explanation.) A possible explanation of some fact, as we are using that notion, is a proposition which, for all we know, is true and which, if true, would explain the fact in question. Underlying (PPE) is the observation that given one or more possible explanations of a given fact, one is entitled to believe that the fact does have an explanation (though of course we may not know what that explanation is). In other words, (PPE) assumes that in the presence of various possible explanations for some fact we have good reason for believing that there is an explanation of the fact. Given this contention, (PPE) follows directly: if it is reasonable to believe that a certain fact has an explanation and if all possible explanations of that fact have a common presupposition, then it is reasonable to believe that presupposition.

Someone might, however, object that even if there are possible explanations of some fact, *F*, it may nevertheless be possible that *F* has no explanation; but then, it would seem to be no more reasonable to suppose that *F* has an explanation than that it does not. We agree that one may consistently hold that there are possible explanations for some fact and yet that it is possible that the fact in question has no explanation. But the observation that it is possible that a certain fact has no explanation, by itself, provides little, if any, reason for thinking that there is no explanation of that fact. Our argument for (PPE), in any case, does not rest on the idea that it is reasonable to believe that *F* has an explanation given only that it is possible that it has an explanation. Rather it rests on the claim that in the presence of possible explanations of *F*, it is reasonable to believe that *F* has an explanation. In the presence of various possible explanations of *F*, we have live candidates for explaining *F*, and so long as they remain possible, it is reasonable to believe that one of them, or something better, is the explanation of *F*. Accordingly, in the presence of one or more possible explanations, it is reasonable to believe that *F* does have an explanation.

Another objection that might arise concerns the scope of our principle (PPE). The possible explanation proposed in (1), above, does not look like a contingent proposition (since if there are no necessary beings it is necessarily false). Someone might contend that (PPE) applies only to propositions known to be contingent and, hence, does not apply to the

likes of the explanation mentioned in (1). There is, however, no reason to suppose that (PPE) is so limited. (PPE) makes no assumption about the contingency or non-contingency of the possible explanations that it mentions; nor does our defence of that principle. We have urged that in the presence of a possible explanation of some fact, one is entitled to believe that the fact does have an explanation; the question of whether that possible explanation is contingent or not has no bearing on the inference to the conclusion that it is reasonable to believe that the fact under consideration has an explanation. So (PPE), if true, holds both for contingent and non-contingent explanations.

In summary, on the basis of the assumption, common to various forms of the Cosmological Argument, that it is epistemically possible that there is unique necessary being who brought about the existence of everything other than itself by willing that these other things should exist, we have tried to show that there is a possible explanation of the fact that there are contingent beings. We also argued that any explanation of this fact presupposes that there is a necessary being. According to the epistemic principle that we have urged, if there is a possible explanation of some fact, and some proposition is entailed by this and any other possible explanation, it is reasonable to accept that proposition. This shows that given our initial assumption, it is reasonable to believe that there is such a being. And it also shows that one can retain the main insight of the cosmological argument without assuming the Principle of Sufficient Reason.[5]

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NOTES

1. *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, Proposition III.
2. See, for example, "Two Criticisms of the Cosmological Argument," *The Monist*, 54 (1970): 441-59; "The Cosmological Argument, *"Nous,"* 5 (1971): 49-61; *The Cosmological Argument* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); and *Philosophy of Religion* (Encino, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1978), chap. 2.
3. *The Cosmological Argument*, pp. 99-107. James Ross advances an argument against PSR in *Philosophical Theology* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp. 295-304, and Peter van Inwagen criticizes the principle in *Metaphysics* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1993), pp. 104-107.
4. Peter van Inwagen makes a similar point in *Metaphysics*, p. 102.
5. We are grateful to Jack Canfield, Howard Sobel, David Widerker, and anonymous readers for this journal for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this paper.