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Could God explain the Universe? <i>Peter Byrne</i>	1
Freud, the Scapegoat, and the Eucharist <i>Charles Brock</i>	5
Pilgrimage: Luke/Acts and the World of Religions <i>Martin Forward</i>	9
Berdyayev's Theodicy and the Nature of God <i>Lloyd Caddick</i>	12
BOOK REVIEWS, including Hamish Swanston on R. R. Reuther's <i>Sexism and God-talk</i>	17
FACULTY NEWS Insert	

COULD GOD EXPLAIN THE UNIVERSE?

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Explanation may take many forms and so therefore may explanations of the universe. In one sense the natural sciences seek to explain the universe. They seek to make known in detail how the universe works and thus to render it intelligible to the human mind. This is not the type of explanation that immediately springs to mind when one raises the question 'Could God explain the universe?' A theistic explanation of the universe seems to offer an explanation of why a universe exists at all. In the first instance reference to God seeks to account for the existence of the universe rather than make known in detail its structure and workings.

An explanation of a complex entity that seeks only to make known in detail how it works may render it intelligible without mentioning any other entities beyond the thing to be explained. It may be a purely internal explanation. No explanation of something which seeks to account for that thing's existence can be a purely internal explanation – unless we were prepared to accept the obscure possibility that something could bring itself into existence without the causal influence of any external circumstances. If we leave aside the possibility of self-generation, we are bound to conclude that to offer to account for the very existence of the universe involves describing something beyond it which brings it into being. This is what the attempted theistic explanation of the universe minimally seems to involve.

To allow the possibility of a theistic explanation of the existence of the universe we thus have to think of God and the universe as two distinct entities. This creates the first major obstacle in taking seriously the explanatory enterprise implicit in some versions of theism. For it is tempting to understand by 'the universe' 'everything that exists'. When so understood, it becomes absurd to look for something beyond the universe which brings it into being. D. Z. Phillips in *Religion without Explanation* takes this as his main ground for denying the possibility that belief in God is explanatory of the universe.¹ Phillips also draws from his definition of 'the universe' the consequence that the universe cannot be regarded as an identifiably distinct entity, for it cannot not be contrasted even in thought with anything alongside or beyond it. If the universe is not a particular thing, he argues, it becomes even more absurd to seek something that accounts for its existence.

These arguments seem to me to show more about the incorrectness of the original premiss from which they start than about the mistakenness of explanatory theism. Someone seriously seeking an explanation of the existence of the universe in God will surely be inclined to give a much more restricted definition of 'the universe' than 'everything that exists'. He will think of 'the universe' as the name for the physical cosmos, i.e. the totality of physical things and forces considered as forming an ordered whole. As defenders of explanatory theism have pointed out, we do think of the universe as forming such an ordered, physical whole and when we do we leave open the possibility that there could be entities which are not part of the universe, so defined.² On this account it may be possible to contrast the universe with other conceivable entities. It may be

contrasted, for example, with God conceived as a spiritual being not at all part of the system of physical things and forces. The conception of God as spirit seems to be necessary here if he is to be regarded as an entity distinct from the universe, and anyone who finds this contrast incomprehensible will be left with Phillips' problem of identification through contrast unresolved.

It will be seen that if we are to think of God as accounting for the existence of the universe, we are committed to a cosmic dualism closely analogous to a Cartesian dualism of persons. If God is to account for the existence of the universe, he and the universe must be two distinct entities. But if the universe is the totality of physical things and forces, God's substance must be non-physical. He cannot be one physical force (however grand) interacting with other physical forces if the universe and he are to be two distinct entities. Hence the need to say that God is spirit, which results in a dualism of God and the universe paralleling that between soul and body on a Cartesian view of the self. I wish to argue that such a cosmic dualism cannot provide any explanatory link between God and the existence of the universe. If my argument is correct, the inclination to seek an explanation of the existence of the universe in a God reveals itself to be dialectical, in Kant's sense of that word. It generates contradiction and illusion. This is because the demands of such an explanation force us to think of the universe and God as two distinct entities, but the characterisations we have to give them to regard them as thus distinct forbid our perceiving any explanatory link between them. So we have a dilemma: either God and the universe are not conceived as distinct entities, or they are. In neither case can God account for the existence of the universe.

I hope that the first half of this dilemma has been sufficiently established in the above. The arguments given for the first half of the dilemma do not rule out the possibility that a God who was part of the universe could have *some* explanatory power in relation to it. His activity might be appealed to in explaining the character of the universe as we experience it. But any story relating how the universe as we experience it had arisen or emanated from this God would describe the history of a single complex entity: God-with-the-universe. It would be a description of how some aspects of this complex entity had arisen from more fundamental aspects of the same complex whole. It would not answer the question of why this complex whole came to exist at all.

What needs to be shown now is that the alternative conception of God and the universe as substantially distinct entities is equally incapable of providing an explanation of the very existence of the universe. To do this we need to find an acceptable, general account of what it is for one thing to account for another.

We may turn to science for a general picture of explanation, in the sense of 'accounting for'. For in attempting to make known in detail how the universe works, science seeks to account for how things are as they are. Rom Harré draws from scientific practice the following description of an 'accounting for' explanation: "To explain a phenomenon is to identify its antecedents and to identify or imagine the mechanism by which the antecedents produce or generate the phenomenon."³ This definition of explanation should not be thought of as enshrining the

belief that the only successful explanations are those which present nature as a piece of clockwork. 'Mechanism' here has the more general sense of any kind of connection through which causes are effective.⁴ Harré's definition does at the same time rule out some things as possible explanations of phenomena. Thus, according to this definition, it will not be sufficient to account for a phenomenon simply to show that it was to be expected given certain other things. It follows that, if Harré's definition is correct, the central core of the covering law theory of explanation provides an insufficient idea of what it is to account for a phenomenon. According to Hempel and Oppenheim, showing that a description of the phenomenon can be deduced from a true generalisation and statement of initial conditions does explain because it demonstrates that the phenomenon was to be expected.⁵ One of the things which suggests that this account needs to be supplemented by a definition like Harré's is our realisation that true generalisations about a phenomenon which merely link it to another symptom of an underlying cause may be used to deduce a description of its occurrence, and thus show that the phenomenon 'was to be expected'. An association of this sort between a phenomenon and circumstances which regularly accompany it will not be thought of as an explanation of the phenomenon's occurrence unless we can imagine how these circumstances might generate or produce the phenomenon. This suggests that Harré is right in his description of an ideal, complete explanation: "A set of propositions is only an explanation if it describes the generative mechanisms responsible for the phenomena [to be explained]."⁶

The meaning and plausibility of the above account of explanation will be further explored as we apply it to the alleged explanatory power of theism in relation to the existence of the universe. For it can be shown that if this account of explanation is taken at face value it excludes the possibility of the idea of God explaining why the universe exists.

One of the reasons why this denial of the explanatory power of theism follows from Harré's definition is that this definition entails that *nothing* can account for the existence of the universe. Remembering that the universe is the entire system of physical things and forces, let us accept that to explain the universe will be to identify its antecedents and identify or imagine the mechanism by which those antecedents produce or generate the universe. The difficulty we now see in trying to find something which fulfils these demands is the difficulty of envisaging any such mechanism or antecedents as *distinct* from the universe. To search for an entity which accounts for the very existence of the entire system of physical things and forces is to search for something which is not at all part of that system and yet is also linked to it by a causal, generative mechanism. This is an endeavour to discover a conceptual impossibility. For if we did discover such an entity linked to the present state of the universe by a causal, generative mechanism, we should have sufficient reason to say that we had discovered an older or more fundamental part of the universe itself. We should have shown how one state or part of the universe had produced other states or parts. The universe is, as it were, too big to allow for antecedents and a mechanism beyond it which could generate it.

My conclusions are not meant to rule out the legitimate tasks of cosmology. Amongst the chief of these is

the attempt to account for the present disposition of matter in the universe, i.e. the present order and arrangement of stars and galaxies. Perhaps too, cosmology may seek to account for the present quantity of matter in the universe and for the laws it is presently seem to obey. These are all difficult tasks, but they are not of the same order as attempting to account for the very existence of the universe. The difference may be disguised when the legitimate tasks of cosmology are described in terms of seeking to explain the origins or existence of 'our universe'. This description is appropriate, provided we remember that what is explained is not why a universe exists at all, but why the universe is as it is now. The difference between this and the enterprise I do wish to rule out becomes apparent when we realise that answers to the legitimate questions of cosmology describe forces operating within the universe or primordial states within the history of the universe. It is in terms of these that cosmologists seek to account for the universe's present order, behaviour and appearance. So the search is for the most fundamental mechanisms within the universe and its earliest states, which together might account for the present disposition, quantity and behaviour of matter.

The denial that any antecedents of the universe could be both distinct from it and yet linked to it by a causal, generative mechanism is in a way tacitly acknowledged by the traditional doctrine that the God who created the universe did so *ex nihilo*. This doctrine does not describe in positive terms how God created the universe. Rather, denying as it does the formation of the universe from pre-existent matter, it says that God created the universe and affirms that there is no answer to the question 'How did he create it?' Theologians who have put forward this doctrine have implicitly recognised that the explanation of the existence of the universe in terms of God is radically different from the standard cases of scientific explanation. If there were an answer to the question 'How did God create the universe?' it could only refer to a means or a mechanism. But such a means or mechanism will link God to the universe in a way which will make him and its parts of one complex whole. He will not be entirely distinct from it. So a theism which incorporates the traditional view of God's transcendence forbids an answer to the question: 'How did God's action bring about the existence of the universe?' This means that reference to God's activity cannot fulfil the demands made of any explanation which accounts for something. It does not both identify the antecedents of the universe and identify the mechanism by which the antecedents generate or produce the universe. The possibility of forming even a hypothetical picture of that mechanism is excluded.

We have now presented the argument for the second horn of the dilemma facing explanatory theism: if God and the universe are substantially distinct items there can be no explanatory link between them. We have argued that the first horn of the dilemma is equally unsatisfactory. If God and the universe are *not* substantially distinct items, God cannot account for the universe's very existence. The choice is between a cosmic dualism and a cosmic monism; in neither case can this particular search for explanation be satisfied.

Part of the force behind the rejection of the explanatory power of cosmic dualism lies in our seeing a parallel between the criticisms made of this dualism and criticisms often made of a Cartesian dualism of persons. In

trying to represent God as distinct from the universe, we have to represent him as being of an entirely different substance. Hence we say the universe is material or physical and God spiritual. Similar attempts to represent body and soul as distinct existences attract a similar criticism to that made of cosmic dualism in the above: if these are two entirely different types of substances, how can we conceive of a causal link between them? With regard to both dualisms we shall want to press the question: if there are causal links between these two entities, how can they be wholly distinct in substance? Dissatisfaction with the explanatory power of cosmic dualism does not of itself show that it must be false, no more than a corresponding dissatisfaction with Cartesian dualism shows it must be false. It may be that there is a spiritual deity beyond the universe. All that needs to be shown for our purposes is that this thought has no power to explain the existence of the universe. This will follow if it is granted that the dualism it enshrines forbids us from even beginning to conceive by what means God brought the universe into being.

The argument presented for the second horn of the dilemma facing explanatory theism depends on a particular interpretation of an 'accounting for' explanation. It may be objected that the argument has little force to demolish the explanatory power of theism because the interpretation of explanation employed is question-begging. The interpretation is culled from the natural sciences and to propose its universal adoption is tantamount to saying that all explanations must be like scientific explanations. Yet the form of explanation offered by theism to account for the existence of the universe is radically unlike a scientific explanation. Explanatory theism postulates a spiritual, personal being as the cause of the universe and to account for a phenomenon by referring to the enactment of the intentions of a personal being is radically different from offering a scientific explanation of that thing.⁷

There are a number of things one might point to as establishing that personal explanation is radically different from scientific explanation (one may see the role of general laws as crucial here). However, despite the differences between the two types of explanation, it may be shown that Harre's general interpretation will still fit both and that it does so because it captures the essence of any 'accounting for' explanation.⁸

Suppose we seek to explain something as the result of the activity of a personal agent, how can this be to identify its antecedents and to identify the mechanism by which those antecedents produce or generate it? The answer to this question stems from the fact that, whilst we may not have theories about human powers and potentialities, we do see human beings as bringing about things and events in the world. We see that they are centres of movement and power and we see how they act to produce and change objects. It follows that a personal explanation can meet the requirement of any 'accounting for' explanation in that it describes the generative mechanisms responsible for the phenomenon it purports to explain. Very crudely, in observing how human beings act, we see how they operate as generative mechanisms.

Human beings are, in part at least, physical beings in a physical universe. This fact is surely crucial in understanding why reference to the intentional action of one of these beings can compete with reference to other things in

accounting for physical events. If human beings were not in part physical beings, the very fact that they are able to produce physical events and changes would present itself as an utter mystery. If we could not observe how they acted to produce physical events and changes, reference to the intentions of one of these beings would not explain such events and changes. In the absence of these conditions we could not conceive how the intentions of personal agents could produce change in a physical world or have any consequences in that world. Explanatory theism cannot draw any comfort from the fact that we often account for events in the universe by reference to the intentional actions of personal agents. For we have seen that if God is to account for the existence of the universe a radical cosmic dualism is presupposed, a dualism which forbids us conceiving how God acts upon the universe. This makes appeal to God as an explanation of the universe's existence fundamentally unlike appeal to a human agent as an explanation of an event in the universe.

The defender of explanatory theism who sees merit in the analogy with personal explanation may accept that the analogy is not without problems. He could concede that unless human beings had bodies we might indeed find it hard to comprehend the fact that they can act in a physical world. But such a thinker might see the link between a human agent's intentions and his own bodily movements as the key fact in personal explanation which illuminates God's creation of the universe. In those cases where the enactment of the agent's intentions is direct and unmediated, we may account for his actions by reference to an intention even though we have no conception of a mechanism which intervenes to link the two. If I raise my arm and do so as a basic action, the action may be accounted for by the corresponding intention even though I and others can form no picture of how I enact my intention. In such cases we are able to explain a phenomenon by reference to the intentions of an agent despite having no conception of the means or mechanism the agent uses to bring about that phenomenon.

The model of basic action looks as though it might be extremely fruitful in defending the possibility that God explains the universe. It is employed by R. G. Swinburne in his recent defence of explanatory theism to illuminate the notion of creation *ex nihilo*.⁹ Swinburne argues that reference to the intentions of a God can explain the existence of the universe in the absence of an answer to the question 'How did God bring it about?' This is because creation and control of the universe are quite conceivable as basic acts of God. Here we have an attempt to illuminate God's relation to the universe by employing an analogy with a person's relation to his own body. However, it can be shown that this attempt also fails to take account of the dilemma which all versions of explanatory theism must face. In particular, it ignores the point that if God is to explain the very existence of the universe, he and it must be substantially distinct items. Once this is realised the use of the notion of basic action in this context is seen to be misleading.

It is a fundamental fact about a human being that when he moves his arm he is moving part of himself. He and his arm are not in this way substantially distinct items. This fact surely explains why we are content with the thought that a person can move his arm without employing any means to move it. In understanding human beings to be sources of

power and change, we recognise them to be organisms, animate beings with characteristic powers of movement. So, saying 'His arm moved because he intended to move it' has some minimal explanatory power. It removes the possibility that his arm moved as a result of some external source. It enables us to see it as the direct expression of a capacity of motion and to investigate its background in the agent's intentions.¹⁰ This brief account of basic action implies that there will be something odd in trying to explain God's creation and control of the universe as the unmediated expression of basic acts of his if the universe is thought of as substantially distinct from him. But we have seen that if God is to explain the *existence* of the universe, God has to be thought of as substantially distinct from it. Granted this, God cannot stand in the same relationship to the universe that a person stands to his body, for to talk about a person's body is not to talk about something distinct from him. As a consequence, it is difficult to see how reference to the basic actions of human agents can give the notion of creation *ex nihilo* explanatory power.

Swinburne's awareness of these problems is shown in the way that, appealing to basic action as illustrative of creation, but mindful of God's transcendence, he says that God is only *partially* embodied in the universe. God does not stand in quite the same relation to it that a person stands to his own body.¹¹ This is a crude summary of a subtle and complex piece of argument. We do not need, however, to consider whether this notion of partial embodiment is coherent, or illuminating in some respects, to conclude that it will not give God's bringing the universe into being explanatory power. No appeal to a form of embodiment or basic action will do that. Whatever God is supposed to do in bringing the universe into being cannot be at all like an agent controlling his body, for prior to this activity of God's there is no universe, and hence nothing analogous to a body to control or act upon. Amongst the range of basic actions an agent may have, bringing his own body into existence cannot be one of them. The existence of his body is rather a pre-condition of there being any basic actions for him to perform. Creation *ex nihilo* cannot be a basic action of God and appeal to the notion of basic action cannot illuminate it.

We might take the analogy of human embodiment to its extreme and conceive of the universe as God's body and of him as the soul of the universe. Talk of God might then be explanatory of some things, but not of the very existence of the universe. A pantheistic God of this sort would be too closely bound up with the universe to explain its existence, but he might conceivably figure in explanations of aspects of the universe's behaviour and history. Nothing in this paper shows that that a pantheism must be false.

The appeal to personal explanation will not serve to make the alleged explanatory link between God and the existence of the universe comprehensible. The choice between cosmic dualism and cosmic monism, with their attendant difficulties for this explanatory link, remains. Our brief consideration of personal explanation has revealed no reason why we should abandon Harre's definition of explanation. This leaves us with the definition of an 'accounting for' explanation still standing: "to explain a phenomenon is to identify its antecedents and to identify or imagine the mechanism by which the antecedents produce or generate the phenomenon". If this definition can be accepted, there could be no explanation of the very

existence of the universe and none could be provided by the idea of a deity.

The argument of this paper is not meant to provide a proof of the nonexistence of a transcendent God. It merely denies the explanatory power of this idea of deity, though this denial may weaken one support for the conception of God as a transcendent being. In this respect my conclusion is not wholly negative. It is meant to provide impetus to the examination of opposing conceptions of deity in the philosophy of religion.¹²

1. Oxford: Blackwell, (1976), pp. 19-20.
2. See, eg, R.N. Smart *Philosophers and Religious Truth*, 2nd Ed. London: SCM Press (1969), pp. 86-7.
3. *The Principles of Scientific Thinking*, London: Macmillan, (1970), p. 261.
4. See *Philosophies of Science*, London: Oxford University Press, (1972), p. 228.
5. C.G. Hempel and P. Oppenheim 'Studies in the Logic of Explanation' *Philosophy of Science* Vol. 15, (1948), pp. 135-175.
6. *The Principles of Scientific Thinking*, p. 132.
7. See Smart, *op cit*, p. 90 and R.G. Swinburne *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, (1979), pp. 19-20.
8. I exclude here those contexts where 'to account for' means 'to justify'.
9. See *The Existence of God* pp. 46-50.
10. These remarks about basic action owe much to D.G. Brown *Action* London: Allen and Unwin, (1968), pp. 49-59.
11. See *The Existence of God* pp. 48-50.
12. I am grateful to my colleague Grace Jantzen for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.