GOD AND THE BIG BANG

Antony Flew

Antony Flew asks what might lie beyond the big bang, and questions the assumption that we must choose between two options: either God created it, or it popped into existence for no reason.

Metaphysical arguments for the existence of God – arguments such as the Five Ways presented by St. Thomas Aquinas – all belong to a period when there was no good scientific reason for believing that the Universe had a beginning. They were therefore intended to demonstrate the existence and activities of God as a sustaining rather than an initiating cause of the Universe and of everything that is in it, and they employed for this purpose Aristotle's pre-Newtonian scientific ideas of the need for supernatural support for the operation of the order of nature. In the last thirty or so years, however, a consensus has emerged among cosmologists on the correctness of the Big Bang theory. So now in the debates organised on the campuses of American universities by the Campus Crusade for Christ such intellectually formidable spokespersons for theism as Dr. William Lane Craig challenge opponents to choose between admitting that the Big Bang was caused by God and maintaining that everything 'popped into existence without a cause'.

A further argument drawn from the findings of the physical sciences for the same conclusion has emerged more recently. Taking what are presently believed to be the most basic laws of physics as given it has been calculated that, if the value of even one of the fundamental physical constants had been to the very slightest degree different, then no planet capable of permitting the evolution of human life could have evolved.

Whatever may be the merits of the Big Bang Argument and this so-called Fine Tuning Argument in the context of the attempt to construct a natural (as opposed to revealed) theology, it must at once be allowed that it is reasonable for those who believe that they have good evidencing reasons for

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

accepting the teachings of any one of the three great theistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – to see these two arguments as providing substantial confirmation for their antecedent religious beliefs. For all these three systems maintain both that the Universe was created in the beginning by God and that God had a particular interest in human behaviour in that creation.

But the Aristotelian arguments which Aquinas adopted for inclusion in his Five Ways do not provide any support for either of these two contentions. The first of these deficiencies was noticed by one of his contemporaries. Apparently there were then murmurings that the later to be canonised Aquinas had on this matter lapsed into heresy. He responded by publishing what would now be called a pamphlet *de aeterniate mundi, contra murmurantes* (concerning the eternity of the Universe, against the murmurers). In this he argued that although he could not demonstrate that the Universe must have had a beginning, he himself, of course, believed that it had had since this was an essential teaching of the Catholic faith.

We have no reason to believe that any contemporaries of Aquinas raised any objections on the second count. But it is in this respect that the God whose existence might be thought to have been proved by Aristotelian arguments differs most drastically from the God of any of the three great revealed monotheisms. For, as has just been emphasised, these all see God as having 'a particular interest in human behaviour'. Yet to anyone who was for the first time and without prejudice entertaining the hypothesis that our Universe is the creation of an omnipotent and omniscient God it would surely appear obvious that everything which occurs or does not occur within it must, by the hypothesis, be precisely and only what its Creator wants, indeed causes, to occur or not to occur. What scope is there for creatures in such a Universe to defy the will of their Creator? What room even for a concept of such defiance? For a Creator to punish creatures for what by the hypothesis he necessarily and as such (ultimately) causes them to do would be the most monstrous, perverse, unjust, and sadistic of performances. Absent revelation to the contrary, the expecta-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tions of natural reason must surely be that such a Creator God would be as detached and uninvolved as the gods of Epicurus. Indeed some Indian religious thinkers not prejudiced by any present or previous Mosaic commitments are said to describe their monotheistic God as being, essentially and in the nature of the case, 'beyond good and evil'.

The writings of Aristotle himself contain no concept of a single omnipotent and omniscient personal being, making demands on His human beings for our obedience, much less threatening us with an eternity of extreme torture for our (by Him) unforgiven perceived (by Him) disobedience. The closest which Aristotle's God comes in either the *Nichomachean Ethics* or the *Politics* to prescribing or proscribing any sort of human conduct – and it is very far from close – is when in the former work he tells us that 'the divine life, which surpasses all other in blessedness, consists in contemplation' (X, viii, 7). So when we find Aquinas concluding, after presenting an Aristotelian argument for a First Cause or a Prime Mover, that 'This we call God' we may well agree, but only with the caveat.' Yes, but perhaps not in quite the same sense of the word "God".'

Swinburne's definition of the word 'God', a definition which has become the agreed starting point for most philosophical discussion of God's existence, not only in the United kingdom but also more generally throughout the English-speaking world, reads: 'A person without a body (i.e. a spirit), present everywhere, the creator and sustainer of the universe, able to do everything (i.e. omnipotent), knowing all things, perfectly good, a source of moral obligation, immutable, eternal, a necessary being, holy and worthy of worship.' (Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1977, p. 2.)

By no means all of the defining characteristics listed here are necessarily connected, and several should also provoke questions of interpretation. Crucially, if some Being created the Universe 'in the beginning' then that Being is not necessarily and by the same token its sustainer; even if sustaining is supposed to be required. Much less need such a Being be a either a 'necessary being', or 'holy and worthy of worship'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nor is it by any means obvious even what it is to be either 'a source of moral obligation' or 'a necessary being' or 'worthy of worship'. Only one of these defining characteristics – that of being a necessary Being – is explicitly and unequivocally a characteristic of Aristotle's God.

There is, therefore, room for substantially different senses of the word 'God', senses in which that word is defined in terms of some but not all the characteristics listed as defining by Swinburne. This being so it is important for us to recognise that what might be a good, even a sufficient, evidencing reason for believing in the existence of one God defined in terms of some of the defining characteristics listed by Swinburne might not constitute any evidence at all for the existence of another God defined in terms of another such characteristic or other such characteristics.

Even if and when it had been allowed that there must have been a cause for the Big Bang, and that a cause which could not be discovered by the researches of physicists, we would still be a very long way from securing an adequate justification for concluding that that cause must or even could have been 'A person without a body (i.e. a spirit), present everywhere', and endowed with all the other characteristics embraced in Swinburne's definition.

For a start there is an enormous yet very rarely recognised difficulty with the very conception of 'A person without a body (i.e. a spirit).' The idea that the Universe was created and is sustained by a Superbeing of this kind originally became established among peoples who were convinced that the Universe is full of such incorporeal personal spirits. And still today, throughout the whole world, a great many people believe that their own individual personal spirits could conceivably, and perhaps actually will, survive their own individual personal deaths.

Certainly the familiarity and the intelligibility of talk about minds and about souls does entitle us to infer that we possess both a concept of mind and a concept of soul. But these particular semantic possessions are most emphatically not

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

what is needed if doctrines of the possible independent existence and perhaps the immortality of souls or of minds are to be cognitively meaningful.

The crux is that, in their everyday understandings, the words 'minds' and 'souls' are not words for sorts of what philosophers call substances. They are not, that is to say, words for entities which could significantly be said to survive the deaths and dissolutions of those flesh and blood persons whose minds or souls they were. For to construe the question whether she has a mind of her own, or the assertion that he is a mean-souled man, as a question, or an assertion, about hypothesised incorporeal substances is like taking the loss of the Red Queen's dog's temper as if this was on all fours with his loss of his bone, or like looking for the grin remaining after the Cheshire Cat itself has disappeared.

If we now want to approach the question of the existence of the Mosaic God – the God, that is, of what Islam knows as 'the peoples of the Book' – without prejudice, as we should approach all such disputed questions, then we need to try to approach it as if we, as fully grown adults, were meeting the concept of that God, also fully developed, for the first time, and as if we were now, also for the first time, wondering whether that concept does in fact have actual application. For it is, surely, significant that almost everyone who has ever given sustained attention to this question has treated it as being about the concept of the logically presupposed source of putative self-revelations that have been handed down and made familiar to these questioners through generations of parents and pedagogues, of priests and rabbis, of imams and ayatollahs.

I myself acquired this insight only as a result of conversations with the very promising Chinese student who acted as my extremely competent and considerate 'minder' during a visit to the Institute of Foreign Philosophy in the University of Peking, Beijing during the summer of 1991. Certainly he was in 1991 already familiar with a Mosaic conception of God. But he had met it only as today anyone anywhere might hap-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pen to come upon the notions of Aphrodite or Poseidon. He had never had occasion to confront it as what William James called a 'live option', as something in which there was a live possibility of his coming to believe, any more than, for any of our contemporaries anywhere, belief in the actual existence of Olympians constitutes such a live possibility.

(I shall not easily forget his Chinese reaction to the Cartesian insistence that the idea of God is impressed on every human soul at birth as, as it were, the Maker's trademark. He himself went on to protest that the putative Maker of Descartes has apparently failed to imprint his trademark on Chinese souls. I forbear from exploring the implications of this failure, and will instead content myself with referring to the seventeenth-century Jesuit mission to China. At first, wisely seeking as far as possible to sinicize their message, these missionaries attempted to identify the Christian God with the Confucian Heaven, Ti'en. But once this expedient was reported back to Rome it was forthwith forbidden, for the simple yet abundantly sufficient reason that Heaven possesses few if any of the defining characteristics of that God. If this Ti'en had really been the Chinese equivalent of 'God' the militantly anti-religious Communist party of China would certainly not continue to hold its party and government celebrations in a vast square embracing the word 'God' into its very name.)

Suppose now that we are confronted with the Craig challenge to choose between, on the one hand, accepting that the Big Bang was produced by God (as defined by Richard Swinburne) and, on the other hand, maintaining that the Universe just 'popped into existence without a cause.' And suppose too that we have freed ourselves from all inherited cultural prejudices and have studiously open minds. Then our immediate response ought to be to ask why these two options are supposed to be not only mutually exclusive, as they obviously are, but also together exhaustive, as they certainly are not. For the most obvious third option is to suggest that the Big Bang might or must have had physical causes, albeit ones which human physicists, whose researches are necessarily

confined with the (or perhaps it is only our) Universe may never be able to discover.

The great merit of this third option is that it is what is most unequivocally suggested by everything we know about operations in and of the Universe subsequent to the Big Bang. For, so far as we know, the most complicated kind of objects, and the kind with the greatest potentialities is our own species: and that kind, like every other kind, seems in the end to be a product of exclusively physical causes.

Some lines from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are more revealing here than perhaps the authoress herself recognised. For, unlike the Yankee Miss Ophelia, poor country girl Topsy had never been theologically indoctrinated by either parent or preacher. Yet she had had abundant opportunity to learn from rural observation what in my young day urban fathers used to reveal to schoolbound sons as 'the facts of life'. So it is Topsy who answers for unprejudiced common-sense and common experience:

> 'Do you know who made you?' 'Nobody, as far as I knows on,' said the child with a short laugh. The idea appeared to amuse her considerably; for her eyes twinkled, and she added 'I s'pect I grow'd. Don't thin nobody every made me.' (Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, New York: Books Inc., undated), p. 97.)

Antony Flew is a longtime emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Reading. He is presently composing a substantive new introduction for a third and final reprint of his God and Philosophy *(Hutchinson).*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175600000580 Published online by Cambridge University Press