

## Basic Contra-Theism

An age-old ploy in the attempt to validate god-belief involves the supposition that the universe needed a creator. Arguments to this end have been formalized in numerous variations, but the basic argument makes the claim that the universe is something that "began to exist," and ends by positing a deity which is said to have created the universe, allegedly by *speaking* or *wishing* it into existence. This conclusion we are expected to accept as knowledge. Unfortunately, most if not all variations of this kind of argument that I have come across, do not state the working definition of 'universe' they assume in their premises, even though this is one of the key terms at issue in such arguments. Of course, if one is hoping to defend a position that is rationally indefensible, it's best to veer away from committing oneself to firm definitions. Nevertheless, the argument that the universe needs a creator, and that creator happens to be the one which defenders of such arguments worship, serves as a typical fall-back position when the going gets rough after other apologetic devices have been deployed.

In [the comments section of a blog recently posted by Steve Hays of Triablogue](#), we find an exchange, between John Loftus of [Debunking Christianity](#) and a commenter who has chosen to remain anonymous, on this very issue. The anonymous commenter rolled out a stripped down version of this argument, shorn of the sophisticated embellishments that modern apologists usually heap onto it. With this we find the customary false dichotomies that usually accompany the deployment of such arguments. And as is all too typically the case, the defender of this argument does not provide a working definition for the concept 'universe'. After reviewing arguments like this, even those which are far more sophisticated than the one presented here, I'm convinced that such arguments are not defensible on a coherent definition of 'universe'. Below I will show that a coherent definition of 'universe' invalidates such arguments. I will also show that such arguments, whether their defenders realize it or not, commit them to the primacy of consciousness metaphysics, which invalidates itself.

Let's look at the exchange.

John Loftus wrote:

What I'm saying is that I have never seen an event in my experience which requires a supernatural explanation--that is, something which science cannot explain based upon the laws of nature.

An anonymous commenter responded:

Sure you do, you see it every day, it's called the universe, which science has no explanation for. It's called life, which science has no explanation for. If you claim they do then you obviously don't understand the proper use of the term. Unsupported foundational assumptions are philosophy, not science. Also principles of operation are not an explanation of causes.

Consider John's statement: he stated that he has not witnessed any *event* "which science cannot explain based upon the laws of nature," i.e., an *event* which necessitates a leap beyond nature to explanation by reference to the so-called "supernatural." The anonymous commenter, presumably a theist, pointed to the universe as such a candidate. But the universe is not an *event*, and it is not science's task to produce an explanation for the universe as such. I will touch more on this individual's misconceptions about the universe below.

For the present moment, observe that the anonymous commenter also pointed to life as a example of something "which science has no explanation for." It's not clear what content the anonymous commenter is looking for in a satisfactory explanation, but the science of biology has given men great understanding about the nature of life, and new discoveries are constantly being made. He suggests that the claim that science has an explanation for life means "you obviously don't understand the proper use of the term." So apparently there are underlying assumptions here which are serving to reinforce the anonymous commenter's presupposition that science cannot offer an explanation for life, regardless of what discoveries scientists actually make. What specifically those underlying assumptions might be are anyone's guess, for the anonymous commenter does not identify them. At this point it has become obvious that there is in theism a vested interest in seeing ignorance of science prevail, for therein lies the gap that theism finds its opportunity to pontificate. Without that gap of ignorance, there's no footing for theistic nonsense. And still theists insist that they do not oppose scientific developments.

To preempt a common countermove by theistic apologists (e.g., "Biologists can't create life in a laboratory!"), we should keep in mind that there is a profound difference between having an explanation for X and being able to repeat X. Seismic geology, for instance, can explain the causality behind earthquakes, but this is not the same as being able to recreate them. So while science enables us to formulate rational explanations for many things having to do with living matter, this is not tantamount

to the claim to being able to recreate living organisms in a sterile test tube. If the question is as simple as "Where did life come from?" I have a simple and incontrovertible answer: life came from existence. Anyone who wants to claim that life came from non-existence, is free to present his case any time.

In response to the anonymous commenter's statement, John Loftus wrote:

Anon, good points, because it is astounding to me that this universe exists. But to call it a miracle is prejudicial in favor of a God. How about we call the existence of this universe strange or unexplainable as of yet. Heidegger said "the fundamental philosophical question is why does something exist rather than nothing at all." That would include your God or the universe. Why does something exist? You can only call it a miracle if you can also explain why it is that an eternal uncreated God exists. but since you can't, then this universe is....is....strangely wonderful.

An anonymous commenter (perhaps the same as above) wrote:

Well, you're either left with an uncaused effect, or a Creator who made it from nothing. Either way it's not natural; hence must be supernatural. Matter does not create itself. So one is left with the problem of the inability of natural laws to explain its existence. If left with a choice between self-generating matter and an intelligent Creator the rational one is decidedly not matter generating itself. That's a pretty big argument in favor of God. So rationally the preference would be in favor of God.

The procedure of the case presented here is quite simple: First, present two options, namely theism and an alternative to theism. Then construe the alternative to theism to be so implausible that theism prevails by default (rather than on any actual demonstrable merits in its favor). If one accepts the premises implicit throughout the case, then theism will surely seem the better of the two. But are the premises which this procedure assumes rationally defensible? I submit that they are not.

The first point that needs correction is the characterization of the universe as an "effect." Just as the universe is not an "event," the universe is also not an effect, whether caused or uncaused. The universe is the sum totality of all that exists. (Compare [Merriam-Webster's definition of universe](#): "the whole body of things and phenomena observed or postulated.") By virtue of the universe's inherent all-inclusiveness, it would be self-contradictory to assert that something can or does exist "outside the universe." Since existence exists and only existence exists, to suppose that something exists outside the sum totality of existence is necessarily incoherent. Consequently there can be no "outside" the totality, and thus nothing "outside the universe."

Another reason why the notion that the universe is an "effect" has to do with the concept 'effect' itself. The concept 'effect' necessarily implies a cause which would have to precede the effect in question in order to bring it about and make it a part of reality. But causality necessarily presupposes existence. It would be incoherent to assert that something is caused while denying the existence of any thing or things which do the causing. So existence is a precondition to causality, not the other way around. Therefore, by implication, rather than being an "effect" of some prior cause, the universe - that is, the sum total of existence - is preconditional to any cause and effect to begin with. Thus to call the universe an "effect" commits a logical reversal. That is, to call the universe an effect is to posit causality outside the context of the universe, which means: to use the concept 'causality' while denying or ignoring its genetic roots, namely existence. This error is known as the fallacy of the stolen concept, and it is the fundamental error of theistic creationism.

It is true that matter does not "create" itself. Indeed, what necessitates the supposition that matter is "created" in the first place, if not the mystical premises borne on stolen concepts like the one assumed above? Moreover - and topical to theistic apologetics - we should ask: *What validates the claim that matter was created by an act of consciousness?* This is the basic presupposition of theistic creationism, but can those who endorse such a notion present any evidence in support of it? Yes, we can *imagine* something popping into existence at the whim of a consciousness which possesses powers which our imagination can attribute to it with abandon, such as we might see in a [cartoon](#). But imagination does not substitute for fact, and what the theist needs in order to validate this presupposition which is so integral to theism, is not merely what he can imagine (for it is readily granted that the religious imagination is abundantly fecund), but facts which bear on the matter at hand. Since there are no empirical facts which can serve as evidence conclusively supporting the theist's claims, and since the facts that do bear on the matter in fact show theism to be a contradiction, theists have no choice but to resort either to appeals to emotion, psychological or physical threats, or a semblance of argumentation to defend their faith stance. And this is where they open the door to frequently undetected cognitive errors, such as the stolen concept pointed out above.

The anonymous commenter explicitly repeats the basic procedure of his case when he writes:

If left with a choice between self-generating matter and an intelligent Creator the rational one is decidedly not matter generating itself.

If we limit ourselves to these two scenarios - "between self-generating matter and an intelligent Creator" - then I submit that we have already given rationality short-shrift. As a result, affirming one or the other horn of this false dichotomy cannot be considered rational. Rationality is the commitment to reason as one's only means of discovering and validating knowledge, and his only guide to action. Reason is the faculty which identifies and integrates what we perceive via our senses, and indispensable to this is the ability of man's mind to form concepts on the basis of objective inputs supplied by sense perception. Our senses are our primary and only direct means of awareness of reality. To discover what is "out there" (i.e., in the world, in the universe), we do not start by turning inward and consulting our imagination. The initial inputs of reason cannot be our imagination, for our imagination itself needs content, and this ultimately comes from what we perceive as well. No examples of consciousness in nature are examples of consciousnesses which create their objects ex nihilo. But theistic creationism posits precisely this idea: that the whole universe was created ex nihilo by an act of consciousness. Essentially, it holds that a ruling consciousness *wished* the universe into existence. But theists cannot objectively substantiate this claim; the most they can do is disparage alternatives to their view and hope for the best - that is, hope that their illicit premises are accepted uncritically.

Since existence exists independent of consciousness, and consciousness is consciousness of existence, the task of consciousness is not to *create* its own objects (which is the essence of metaphysical subjectivism), but to perceive and identify them. Do we not all begin as ignorant infants perceiving the world for the first time and constantly struggling to discover and identify everything around us as we mature? I know I did. Can an honest man claim otherwise? Also, since reason is the means by which we conceptualize what we perceive, a rational worldview is one which does not attempt to fake reality by supposing that it is a creation of consciousness; rather, a rational worldview is the systematic application of reason to the task of discovering fundamental truths (i.e., rational principles) and developing a comprehensive view of reality and life. Already we should see how profoundly incongruous theism is to this project, for it affirms the very opposite view - that the universe, reality, and the objects we perceive are ultimately dependent on and conform to someone's consciousness intentions, that is, to the ruling consciousness' wishing.

As the anonymous commenter apparently assumes, there are no good reasons to suppose that matter is "self-generating." But an alternative to theism does not require that matter be self-generating. Only if we *begin with non-existence* would we need to invent such notions, and since existence exists, the proper place to start is with *existence*, not with non-existence. So the basic procedure errs by limiting the alternatives to two fundamentally flawed positions and by arbitrarily affirming one while rejecting the other. (Of course, if one is willing to retreat so far from reason as to posit a ruling consciousness which can materialize its wishes at will, it is unclear how one could rule out the possibility of self-generating matter and keep a straight face in the first place.)

As we have seen, theistic creationism itself consists of two fundamental errors, namely that something exists "outside the universe" (that's one error), and that this extra-universal thing is a form of consciousness which *wished* the universe into existence (there's a second error). Thus in the final analysis, theistic creationism is presented as an explanation on the basis of the misguided notion that two wrongs make a right, and this simply does not fly.

Interestingly, theists typically claim that their god was not created, that it exists "necessarily" - which is essentially taken to mean that it does not require an explanation beyond itself. We have only their say so on this, for there is nothing they can point to in the world which conclusively validates such claims. Why not begin with the universe, which we know exists, and build our worldview on the basis of this incontrovertible and objective fact? Theists typically do not dispute the need for a starting point, they just want it to be some form of consciousness which serves as back-up to their feigned authority and which is thought to have created the universe according to their preconceived notions, ever expanding the ruling consciousness' role as an explanatory terminus which, like a malleable goo, can be troweled into any gap or crevice that momentarily stops the mind in its pursuit for further discovery. The problem for theism is that, as man's knowledge of the universe grows, the role that theism's ruling consciousness can play in plausible explanations can only evaporate.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [12:00 PM](#)

### 3 Comments:

[John W. Loftus](#) said...

Thanks for the commentary. I liked it and will refer them to it!

[May 04, 2006 2:18 PM](#)

[John W. Loftus](#) said...

This post has been removed by the author.

[May 04, 2006 2:18 PM](#)

[Frank Walton](#) said...

Another useless post. But you know what, an age-old ploy in the attempt to validate non-belief in God involves the supposition that the universe didn't need a creator.

[May 09, 2006 12:57 AM](#)