

Copleston vs Russell



In 1947 there was a famous BBC radio debate between the Christian philosopher Copleston and the famous atheist Russell. The key aspects of their arguments are summarised below.

Copleston's version of the Cosmological argument

Copleston's version of the Cosmological argument is similar in reasoning to that of Aquinas.

1. Copleston begins by pointing out the obvious truth that *many things in the universe are contingent*: that is, they are *dependent on something else* for their own existence and so are not self-explanatory. For example, people depend on their parents to exist - they might not have existed.
2. Copleston then claims that *the universe as a whole can be seen as a collection of contingent objects*. None of the objects within the universe contain within themselves the reason for their own existence - they are all dependent on other things.
3. Since all things within the universe are contingent objects, *the ultimate explanation for their existence must be external to the universe*. Copleston here is following Aquinas' principle of the Unmoved Mover / Uncaused Cause / Non-contingent Being. The explanation for all contingent objects within the universe is God - the only existent thing that is not contingent.
4. Copleston argues that *God is self-explanatory*. This means that *God is a being which contains within itself the reason for its own existence*; in other words, God is not dependent on anything else for His existence. Copleston refers to God as a '*necessary being*': unlike everything else within the universe, *God has to exist*. A '*necessary being*' according to Copleston is '*a being that must and cannot-not exist*'.

Russell's Criticisms of the Cosmological Arguments

Russell refused to accept two key underlying assumptions of the Cosmological argument:

1. the assumption that the universe is contingent or dependent on something outside the universe for its existence

- Russell refused to use the terms 'contingent' and 'dependence' with reference to the universe. He famously argued:

"I should say that the universe is just there, and that is all."

What he meant by this was that he accepted the existence of the universe as just a brute fact - he felt no need to ask *why* it is there or *what caused it* to be there.

- Russell also pointed out a logical problem with Copleston's argument about contingency. Copleston claimed that because everything within the universe is contingent or dependent, then the universe as a whole must also have a cause external to it. Russell argued that this was like moving from saying that every human being has a mother to the claim that the human race as a whole also has a mother. His point was that you cannot move from individual causes to the claim that the totality of everything also has a cause.

2. the assumption that there must be a complete explanation for the existence of the universe (in Leibniz's terms, a 'sufficient reason')

By arguing that the existence of the universe should just be accepted as a fact that requires no further explanation, Russell rejected the idea that there has to be a complete explanation for the universe. Russell did not reject the idea that things in the universe depend on other things for their existence (e.g. people and parents). But he did refuse to follow this argument through and ask the same kind of questions that are asked by the Cosmological argument such as 'What started the chain of dependency in the first place?'. Russell did not feel the need to enquire any further than the brute, material existence of the universe. He believed that things in the universe 'just are': everything does not require an explanation.

Copleston`s Response

Copleston claimed that Russell`s arguments were simplistic. To simply accept the existence of the universe as a brute fact, without asking further questions about how it got there, meant that Russell was not taking part in the debate about God`s existence. Copleston said that there was nothing he could say to defeat Russell in the argument if he refused to enter into a discussion about what caused the universe in the first place:

"If one refuses to even sit down at the chess board and make a move, one cannot, of course, be checkmated."



Russell`s Counter-response

Russell, however, argued that this was precisely the point he was making. There was no mileage in the debate because the whole debate about the Cosmological argument depends upon your willingness to ask the question `Why is the universe here?`. Copleston was willing to ask the question because he believed it was a meaningful question; Russell was not because, to him, it is a meaningless question.

If Russell had been prepared to go along with Copleston in the debate, accepting that the universe requires a complete explanation, there are a number of things he could have said to defeat Copleston:

i) Russell could have argued, like Hume, that the idea of an infinite chain of regress was just as plausible an explanation for the universe as the idea that God created it.

ii) Russell could have rejected the claim that God provides a complete explanation for the universe. He could have asked: "If everything requires an explanation, what is the explanation for God?". Why should God be seen as self-explanatory (a `necessary being`) in a way that the universe itself is not? Why should we stop asking questions when we get to God?

