



'A' Level Philosophy and Ethics Notes The Cosmological Argument Russell and Copleston

These notes are based on a transcript of the Radio Debate between F. C. Copleston and Bertrand Russell broadcast by the BBC in 1948. All quotations are taken from that transcript. The transcript can be found at <http://www.ditext.com/russell/debate.html>.

Copleston begins with a definition of "God"

Copleston: I presume that we mean a supreme personal being -- distinct from the world and creator of the world.

He goes on to argue that without a God there would be no absolute "good", and that there would exist a state of "moral relativism". Russell disagrees with this – he argues that concepts of good and evil can exist without there being a God to "guarantee" the concepts.

Copleston's Argument From Contingency

1. There are some things in the world that do not contain in themselves the reason for their existence.

Copleston: For example, I depend on my parents, and now on the air, and on food, and so on.

2. Copleston defines the "world" as the sum total of things that exist and that look beyond themselves for their existence.
3. Copleston reasons that to explain the reason for the existence of the world, there must be something outside the world that created it.

Copleston: the totality of objects, must have a reason external to itself. That reason must be an existent being.

4. If we try to argue that something created this "creator", then we will have an infinite procession of creators.

Copleston: But if we proceed to infinity in that sense, then there's no explanation of existence at all.

5. So, Copleston concludes, we must argue for a being which is self-existent.

Copleston: that is to say, which cannot not exist.

Russell's Response

Russell starts by addressing the idea of **Necessary Existence**. He argues that the term "Necessary" can only be applied to "analytic propositions" – propositions that would be self-contradictory to deny (for example "bachelors are married"). Russell therefore argues that the only way to argue for the Existence of God would be if it could be shown that God's existence was self-contradictory to deny.

Russell is arguing that the debate has to be based on whether statements about the existence of God are **analytical**.

He gives the following examples:

Irrational animals are animals
This is an analytical statement

This is an animal
This is not!

Copleston and Russell then go on to argue about the nature of analytic statements.

Analytic and Synthetic Statements

An analytic statement is a statement that contains the truth needed to verify it within the statement itself.

A synthetic statement requires external evidence for its verification.

The great Scots philosopher **David Hume** argued that it was meaningless to talk about anything that was not either a synthetic or an analytic statement was **sophistry and illusion**.

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning containing quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning, concerning matter of fact or existence?* No. Commit it to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748)

This means that any statement that cannot be proved true (or false) is meaningless. Consider:

Bachelors are married



You can check the truth of this statement simply by defining the word "bachelor". Clearly the statement is false! However, it **is** a meaningful statement!

Herbert is a bachelor



Go and find Herbert, and research his background. You can prove that Herbert is unmarried. This "external" evidence supports the statement, and makes it meaningful.

You will come across this principle when you come to look at the issue of **Religious Language** (an **A2** Topic).

Russell is basing his argument on this principle. He argues that Copleston is wrong to apply the concept of "Necessary Existence" to objects – the term can only be used in analytic propositions.

Copleston's response to Russell's response

In the first place, Copleston accuses Russell of rejecting an idea simply because it doesn't fit into his personal system. He accuses Russell of being over-dogmatic in applying a single philosophical system to the whole of philosophy.

Copleston defines a contingent being as:

Copleston: a "contingent" being is a being which has not in itself the complete reason for its existence. You know, as well I as I do, that the existence of neither of us can be explained without reference to something or somebody outside us, our parents, for example.

And a necessary being as

Copleston: means a being that must and cannot not exist.

He goes on to argue that questions about existent beings' existence are not meaningless. Since this is the case, then questions about the existence of the cause of the world are just as meaningful.

Russell argues against this as follows:

- "Does the cause of the world exist" **is** a meaningful question.
- The answer "God is the cause of the world" uses "God" as a proper name.

"Herbert exists" cannot be an analytic statement, because the only way that it can be said to be meaningful is by going to find Herbert. The statement is therefore **synthetic**. Russell argues that "necessary existence" can only apply to **analytic** statements. Copleston's argument that there **must** be a self-existent being that is responsible for the creation of the world is therefore logically meaningless!

The argument then turned back to the idea of cause. Copleston defines God as a non-caused being.

Copleston: God is His own sufficient reason; and He is not cause of Himself.

Copleston begins to consider the idea of infinite chains of cause and effect.

If God made the world, who made God?

If the world is the sum total of all contingent beings, then something must have caused each contingent being. This does not account for the existence of the world itself – this would require a non-contingent being.

Copleston: if you add up contingent beings to infinity, you still get contingent beings, not a necessary being.

In other words – to account for the existence of the contingent world, you need to look beyond the contingent world. Simply to put cause before cause in an infinite series would leave you with an infinite series of contingent causes, and no explanation for where it all came from.

Russell does not see this at all. He does not see that it is necessary to look for a cause for the whole world.

Russell: No, it doesn't need to be its own cause, what I'm saying is that the concept of cause is not applicable to the total.

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

Russell illustrates his point through the example of parenthood. It is easy to see how individual human beings have mothers and fathers (and therefore causes!). The Human Race as a totality does **not** have a mother!

Copleston responds by arguing that:

Copleston: every object has a phenomenal cause if you insist on the infinity of the series -- but the series of phenomenal causes is an insufficient explanation of the series. Therefore, the series has not a phenomenal cause but a transcendent cause.

However, Russell argues that there is no need to look for a cause for the whole world.

Copleston's response returns to the idea of necessary existence. Either the series of events is caused, or it is not caused!

If it is caused, there must be a cause from outside the series.

If it is not caused, then it is sufficient to itself (which is Copleston's definition of "necessary existence").

The chain of causes cannot be "sufficient to itself" because it is made up of contingent parts. The sum total cannot exist independently of its parts, so the total cannot be "necessary" when its parts are contingent.

Copleston therefore argues that there must be a separate necessary cause for the contingent series of objects that make up our world.

Conclusion

Prof. Copleston argues that we observe a series of causes and effects. This series of contingent events makes up the world that we understand and observe.

He believes that it is legitimate to wonder where this world of contingent events has come from. He does not accept that the cause of the world can be found within the world itself – there must be a self-sufficient cause outside of the world to be its cause.

Lord Russell disputes this on two grounds. In the first place, he argues that Copleston is using faulty logical processes in his argument. He says that self-sufficient existence can only be attributed as part of an analytic statement, whereas Copleston attributes it as part of the synthetic statement "God exists".

Also, Copleston argues that because we observe chains of causes and effects in the world, there must be a cause for the whole world.