

# The Contingency Argument for God's Existence

Jason Dulle

Something exists. For all but radical skeptics, this much is clear. But *why* does something exist rather than nothing at all?<sup>1</sup> There is, after all, nothing logically incoherent about the concept of non-existence. It seems logically possible for there to be nothing at all. So why is there something rather than nothing?<sup>2</sup>

For millennia, secular and religious philosophers and scientists have tried to say the universe existed eternally as a brute fact.<sup>3</sup> As Bertrand Russell famously quipped, “The universe is just there, and that’s all.”<sup>4</sup> It just exists. There is no reason it exists – no explanation. There’s no answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing. The perceived philosophical payoff of this view is that if the universe never began to exist, the question of what caused the universe can be avoided, and thus the question of God’s existence can be avoided.<sup>5</sup> But as David Berlinski observed, “While an eternal universe makes it meaningless to ask *when* the universe began to exist, since its existence is not necessary it is still meaningful to ask *why* it exists.” Even if the universe is eternal, it still needs a cause for the simple reason that the universe is contingent rather than metaphysically necessary.<sup>6</sup>

## Objective

The objective of the contingency argument is to demonstrate that an eternal, necessary being like God is required to explain why the universe exists. Every existing thing requires an explanation for why it exists. The explanation for why the universe exists is that it is caused to exist by God. This argument demonstrates not only that God does exist, but that God must exist.

Unlike the kalam cosmological argument, the contingency argument does not argue for or assume that the universe had a beginning. The contingency argument argues that God must exist to explain the existence of a temporal or eternal universe.

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<sup>1</sup>One could argue that this question is misconceived because it treats nothing as a genuine alternative to “something”: either nothing exists, or something exists (A or B). But “nothing” is not a state of existence. It’s utter non-existence. Non-existence cannot be a possible state of existence because nothing is not-even-a-state. Nothing is the absence of any and all reality. See Bede Rundle explain this point of view at <http://www.closetotruth.com/video-profile/Why-is-There-Something-Rather-than-Nothing-Bede-Rundle-/368>.

<sup>2</sup>Nothingness does not need an explanation, because there is nothing to explain. Only existence needs an explanation.

<sup>3</sup>A brute fact is a fact not characterized by (lacking) reason. It is arational. There is no explanation for it (inexplicable).

<sup>4</sup>Bertrand Russell during his 1948 BBC radio debate with Frederick C. Coppleston, available from <http://www.bringyou.to/apologetics/p20.htm>; Internet; accessed 02 May 2009. Other have made similar comments. Nobel laureate physicist and MIT professor, Frank Wilczek explains, “The universe appears to be just one of those things.” Quoted in David Berlinski, *The Devil’s Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions* (New York: Crown Forum, 2008), 139.

<sup>5</sup>Even if the universe was eternal, it would not be evidence for atheism. God and the universe could be co-eternal. One still has to supply evidence against theism and for atheism to justify an atheistic conclusion.

<sup>6</sup>Being eternal is necessary, but not sufficient for being a necessary being. Some eternal things could be contingent, like the depression in a pillow being contingent on an eternal ball resting on an eternal pillow. To exist necessarily a thing must exist in every possible world. A ball and pillow, or even our universe, do not exist in every possible world.

## Key to the Argument

The keys to persuading someone by this argument is to convince them that an infinite regress of causes and explanations is impossible, and that all contingent beings (including the universe) require an external cause for their existence.

## Concepts to understand

### *Contingency and necessity*

There are two types of beings: those that exist contingently and those that exist necessarily. Something exists contingently if it has not always existed<sup>7</sup> or does not need to exist, and its existence is derived from a source outside of itself. Contingent beings exist in virtue of something else that caused them to come into being.<sup>8</sup> Their existence can only be explained in terms of that prior causal agent.

Virtually all, if not all, contingent things begin to exist. That is to say that some *X* is contingent if (1) *X* exists at time *t*<sub>2</sub> but did not exist at time *t*<sub>1</sub>. If it was necessary, it must exist at all times, and thus it would be impossible to ever find a time at which *X* did not exist.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, something is necessary if it cannot not exist.<sup>10</sup> Necessary beings must exist, and thus are eternal. A necessary being is self-existent. Its existence is not derived from an external source, but it has being in itself. They are eternal, and cannot not exist. This kind of being must exist in every possible world (e.g. laws of logic, numbers).<sup>11,12</sup> If God exists, He is a necessary being. God is the greatest conceivable being. Since it is greater to exist necessarily than contingently, God's existence must be necessary.

### *Principle of sufficient reason*

Gottfried Leibnitz was the first to articulate the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). He stated the principle as follows: "No fact can be real or existent, no statement true, unless there be a sufficient reason why it is so, and not otherwise"<sup>13</sup> His principle came under fire from other philosophers, however, because Leibnitz included every fact or truth in the PSR which is demonstrably false. As William Lane Craig writes:

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<sup>7</sup>Contingent beings are not eternal but begin to exist. Anything that isn't eternal is contingent.

<sup>8</sup>"Being" often connotes consciousness in modern parlance. That's not what philosophers have in mind when they speak of contingent beings. The term could just as easily be expressed as "contingent thing."

<sup>9</sup>Modal logic would define a contingent being as any being that does not exist in all possible worlds (it may exist in the actual world, but so long as there is even one possible world in which it does not exist, it exists contingently).

<sup>10</sup>To say something is necessary is to say it must be; it cannot not be. A necessary being is one whose existence is eternal and uncaused, and whose non-existence is not possible (it exists in every possible world). A necessary being is an eternal, uncaused, indestructible, and incorruptible being. Something that is necessary cannot not exist. It must exist in all possible worlds. For example, the truths that everything that has a shape has a size, *P* or not *P*, and mathematical truths are necessary.

<sup>11</sup>Modal logic would define a necessary being as any being that exists in all possible worlds.

<sup>12</sup>For example, philosopher E. J. Lowe writes, "[I]t seems incontrovertible that abstract mathematical objects..., if they exist at all, are *necessary* rather than contingent beings. After all, mathematics is supposed to be a body of *necessary* truths, which apparently requires its objects to be necessary beings."-- E. J. Lowe, "Naturalism, Theism, and Objects of Reason," *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 15, Number 1, 2013, 41."

<sup>13</sup>Leibniz, *Monadology*.

But not every fact, it seems, can have an explanation, for there cannot be an explanation of what Alexander Pruss calls the Big Contingent Conjunctive Fact (BCCF) which is itself the conjunction of all the contingent facts there are. ... For if the explanation of the BCCF is contingent, then it, too, must have a further explanation, which is impossible, since the BCCF includes all the contingent facts there are. On the other hand if the explanation of the BCCF is necessary, then the fact explained by it must also be necessary, which is impossible, since the BCCF is contingent.<sup>14</sup>

This does not mean the PSR is false, but rather than Leibniz's strong formulation of it is wrong. Craig has formulated more modest versions of the PSR that do not succumb to the criticisms of Leibniz's formulation. These include:

1. For any contingently existing thing, there is an explanation for why that thing exists.
2. In the case of any contingent state of affairs there is either an explanation for why that state of affairs obtains, or else there is an explanation for why no explanation is needed.<sup>15</sup>
3. Everything that exists has an explanation for why it exists, either in the necessity of its own nature, or in an external cause.

The principle of sufficient reason holds that everything that exists, exists for a reason. So for any  $p$ ,  $p$  exists in virtue of an external cause that brought it into being (contingent being), or  $p$  exists in virtue of the necessity of its own nature (necessary being).

Any  $p$  that *comes into being* exists contingently (it need not exist, and indeed at one point in time, it did not exist), and contingent beings depend on some external cause for their existence because things do not pop into existence from nothing wholly uncaused. Another way of saying this would be to say that anything that need not exist, either (1) doesn't exist, or (2) if it does exist, it began to exist at time  $t = 0$  or later, contingent upon some cause  $x$ .

Likewise, any  $p$  that exists eternally exists necessarily.<sup>16</sup> Because  $p$  never begins to exist, it obviates the possibility of, and need for an external cause.  $P$ 's existence is not contingent on some cause  $x$ , but has its being necessarily. The very nature of  $p$  necessitates its existence. It cannot not exist.

One could claim that there is no reason for  $p$  (inexplicable, brute fact), but in that case they must explain why no explanation is needed or possible. One example of something for which no explanation is needed is acts of volition. Free agents simply decide. Their acts are not caused by anything, and hence there is no reason why  $p$  acted the way it did. This is not to say that agents do not have reasons for acting the way they do, but that their actions are not necessitated by or caused by any of those reasons.

### *Infinite regress*

An infinite regress is a series with no first member that initiates the series or no last member that terminates the series. A bottomless pit would be an example of an infinite regress, as well as an infinite staircase. No matter how many stairs you descend, you would never reach the bottom of the stairs

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<sup>14</sup>William Lane Craig, "Leibniz's Cosmological Argument and the PSR"; available from <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/leibnizs-cosmological-argument-and-the-psr>; Internet; accessed 27 October 2009.

<sup>15</sup>An example of something for which no explanation is needed is acts of volition. Free agents simply decide. Their acts are not caused by anything.

<sup>16</sup>One could dispute this. It's logically possible for there to exist some eternal  $X$  that exists contingently as the eternal effect of some other eternal and necessary being. So I am not claiming that it is logically impossible for there to exist an eternal contingent being, although I have no reason to think that such a being exists in the actual world.

because it regresses for infinity. There is no last step. If the past is eternal, it would also form an infinite regress since one could never arrive at the first moment of time even if one were travelling backwards in time for infinite amount of time.

### **The argument stated briefly**

The essence of the contingency argument is that things which don't have to exist, but do, can only be explained by something that does have to exist, namely God. There are at least three different ways one could convey this idea in the form of a simple argument.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Version 1*

The first way of formulating the argument from contingency contains four steps:

- (1) Anything which does not have to exist must be caused to exist by something outside of itself
- (2) The universe did not have to exist
- (3) Therefore, the universe must be caused to exist by something outside of itself
- (4) The cause of the universe must be immaterial, eternal, and spaceless<sup>18</sup>

This way of formulating the argument starts with a definition of contingent beings, posits that the universe is an example of such a being, and then concludes that the universe has an explanation in an external cause. This is followed by a brief case for the nature of that cause.

#### *Version 2*

Another way of formulating the argument is to define the two kinds of beings, and then argue that the universe is a clear example of a contingent being which means the reason for its existence is to be found in an external cause, namely God:

- (1) Everything that exists, exists for a reason. Either it's self-existing and necessary, or it was caused to exist by something else (contingent).
- (2) Since the universe did not have to exist<sup>19</sup>, it must be caused by something else — by something that does have to exist.
- (3) God is the something that must exist, and who causes the universe to exist.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>William Lane Craig's version of the argument is as follows:

- (1) Any *thing* that exists has an explanation for its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature, or in an external cause
- (2) If the universe has an explanation, that explanation is God (external cause)
- (3) The universe exists

*from 1 and 3 it logically follows that:*

- (4) The universe has an explanation of its existence.

*from 2 and 4 the conclusion logically follows that:*

- (5) The explanation of the existence of the universe is God

<sup>18</sup>Because the universe entails all physical reality – matter, space, time – the cause cannot be material, spatial, or temporal.

<sup>19</sup>Even if the universe is eternal, there is nothing about the universe that makes its existence necessary. It could have not existed, or a different universe could have existed.

<sup>20</sup>Only an immaterial, eternal, non-spatial, powerful, intelligent, and personal being like God can explain why the universe exists. God must exist because His very nature is pure being. He must exist as the source for every other existing thing.

### Version 3

The third way of formulating the argument is as follows:

- (1) Anything that didn't have to exist needs an external cause.
- (2) The universe didn't have to exist, so it has a cause.
- (3) There are no physical causes external to the universe, so the cause of the universe must be something supernatural.

This way of formulating the argument has the advantage of avoiding terms and concepts that may be difficult to understand. It also simplifies the identity of the cause to "something supernatural" rather than trying to identify particular properties of that cause as properties of God. This more generic conclusion regarding the explanation for the universe is enough to falsify naturalism, but is not so bold as to immediately commit the person to theism.

### The argument in detail

Now that we have examined the concepts critical to understanding the contingency argument as well as a couple of brief formulations of the argument, let's take a look at the argument in a bit more detail.

Everything we see is a contingent being: trees, rocks, planets, stars, and even the universe itself. Because by their very nature contingent beings do not have to exist, we must ask ourselves why these contingent beings do exist. What is the reason they exist? What can explain their existence?

To explain why most contingent beings exist we just have to point to some prior contingent being. For example, to explain why I exist I can point to the existence of my two parents. But this cannot go on *ad infinitum* because an infinite regress is logically absurd. The regress has to stop somewhere. In the case of explaining my existence, the regress stops with my parents. But this is an example of just one particular contingent being. The most pertinent question is not why any one particular example of a contingent being exists, but why the whole collection of contingent beings exists (what we call "the universe")? While most contingent beings within the universe can be explained by appealing to another contingent being that came before it, the entire set of contingent beings cannot be explained by appealing to another contingent being because – as the set of *all contingent beings* to – there aren't any additional contingent beings to appeal to.

If the universe is the sum total of every physical thing, and every physical thing is a contingent being, then it follows that the universe itself is contingent. If a wall is made of bricks, and every brick in the wall is red, then it follows that the wall is red. The property of the parts applies to the whole. The same is true of the universe. If everything in the universe is contingent, the universe is contingent.

Not every property that applies to a part necessarily applies to the whole, however. For example, while the tail of an elephant is light in weight, the whole elephant is not. So why should we think that just because each being within the universe is contingent, the universe itself is also contingent? Why couldn't the universe be a necessary being? To answer this question we need to be clear on what it means to say the universe is a necessary being. To claim the universe is necessary is to say the universe not only must exist, but that it could not have been different than it is. It must exist in precisely the way it does. Clearly, this is not true of the universe. As a matter of historical fact, the universe has changed

over time. The macro objects within the universe such as stars and planets did not exist at one point in time. What about the fundamental elements of the universe such as quarks and protons? While such particles may have existed forever, there is no reason to think that they must have existed. We can imagine a universe constituted by different fundamental elements, or even a physically empty universe. To claim that our universe is metaphysically necessary not only entails that it must be constituted by quarks and protons, but also that the number (and possibly even the arrangement) of those quarks and protons could not be different either. This is obviously not true. We can imagine a world in which the number and arrangement of fundamental particles is different, or a world in which physical reality is constituted by different fundamental particles and different laws.<sup>21</sup>

If the universe is contingent, then why does it exist? There are only two possibilities: there is no explanation (brute fact), or God is the explanation. Let's look at each option in turn.

### *Brute Fact*

There are scientists and philosophers who do not think there is any explanation for why the universe exists. It is just a brute, inexplicable fact that it does exist. We should not concern ourselves with questions as to why it exists because the question is either meaningless or unanswerable. The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Bertrand Russell, held this view. He asserted that "the universe is just there, and that's all."<sup>22</sup> He's not alone. Philosopher Thomas Senor also thinks the universe does not need an explanation, even though he recognizes that the universe is a contingent being: "I do not find the bare existence of a contingent universe to be something that *obviously* needs explaining. ... [T]here may be features of the universe that do clearly beg for explanation (its being fine-tuned for life, say), but the fact that there is something contingent rather than nothing at all does not strike me as one of them."<sup>23</sup>

Will this suffice? No. First, no principled reason for exempting the universe from the PSR is ever offered that does not presuppose the truth of atheism or materialism. It appears to be a case of special pleading.

These same individuals believe that every existent other than the universe has an explanation for its existence, so why make a one exception for the universe? It appears that the exception is being made because the universe is the only contingent being that cannot be explained on a materialistic or atheistic worldview. Given the centrality of the PSR in reason and experience (including scientific reasoning), wouldn't it be more reasonable to question one's atheistic or materialistic presuppositions rather than abandon the PSR precisely at the place where it is needed most?

Senor is making a distinction between contingent facts that do and do not require explanations, but as Timothy O'Connor pointed out, on what principled basis can such a distinction be made.<sup>24</sup> The naturalist seems to want to limit the facts that do not require an explanation to the most basic facts of natural

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<sup>21</sup>This is unlike necessary beings such as the laws of logic and numbers. It is impossible to conceive of a world lacking these beings. They must appear in every possible world, and thus are necessary beings.

<sup>22</sup>Bertrand Russell during his 1948 BBC radio debate with Frederick C. Copleston, available from <http://www.bringyou.to/apologetics/p20.htm>; Internet; accessed 02 May 2009. Other have made similar comments. Nobel laureate physicist and MIT professor, Frank Wilczek explains, "The universe appears to be just one of those things." Quoted in David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions* (New York: Crown Forum, 2008), 139.

<sup>23</sup>Thomas D. Senor, "On the Tenability of Brute Naturalism and the Implications of Brute Naturalism," *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 12, Number 2 (2010): 277-8.

<sup>24</sup>Timothy O'Connor, "Is God's Necessity Necessary?: Replies to Senor, Oppy, McCann, and Almeida," *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 12, Number 2 (2010): 309-10.

reality, including the laws of physics and the origin of the universe itself. Doesn't it seem a wee-bit suspicious that the one contingent fact they don't see a need to explain is the one contingent fact that their worldview seems incapable of explaining and the one thing that would imply the existence of a Being their worldview does not want to acknowledge?

Secondly, the exemption is inconsistent. Atheists would not accept this kind of answer for anything else. Indeed, atheists often challenge theists to explain why God exists, and are unwilling to accept the answer that He exists inexplicably. They rightly demand that His existence be explained, so on what grounds are they justified in exempting the universe from explanation?

There's no reason to think anything at all is explicable unless we have reason to believe that everything is explicable. It's our belief that all existents have explanations that drives our belief that any existent has an explanation. And it would be arbitrary to say one thing or one kind of thing does not have an explanation, whereas all other things do.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, if brute facts can exist, then there is no reason for thinking that anything has a cause. It's possible that everything is just a brute fact. And when we seem to see a causal relationship between things, it could just be a brute fact that they are that way and there really is no cause. This would undermine the basis for scientific exploration. Brute facts, then, are "science stoppers." Edward Feser writes:

In short, either everything has an explanation or we can have no justification for thinking that anything does. No purported middle ground position, on which some things have genuine explanations while others are "brute facts," can coherently be made out. If there really could be unintelligible "brute facts," then even the things we think are not brute facts may in fact be brute facts, and the fact that it falsely seems otherwise to us may itself be yet another brute fact. We could have no reason to believe anything. Rejecting PSR entails the most radical skepticism – including skepticism about any reasoning that could make this skepticism itself intelligible. Again, the view simply cannot coherently be made out.<sup>26</sup>

Thirdly, it makes no more sense to say the universe *just* exists than it does to say a space shuttle *just* exists. The universe is merely a collection of contingent beings. If each individual contingent beings needs an explanation, then surely the whole collection does as well.<sup>27</sup> Imagine walking through the forest and coming upon a translucent ball off the beaten path. Would it be relevant to ask why it exists, and from whence it came? Of course. An explanation of its existence is in order. Would an explanation still be required if we increased the size of the ball to the size of a continent? Yes. What if we increased the size of the ball to that of a planet? Yes, the need for explanation remains. Even if we increased its size to that of the whole universe, the need for explanation remains. Size is irrelevant to explicability. Likewise, the universe begs for an explanation. Its size does not exempt it from the causal principle.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>See Edward Feser, "Della Rocca on PSR"; available from <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2014/10/della-rocca-on-psr.html>; Internet; accessed 17 February 2016.

<sup>26</sup>Edward Feser, "An Exchange with Keith Parsons, Part IV"; available from <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2014/03/an-exchange-with-keith-parsons-part-iv.html>; Internet; accessed 17 February 2016.

<sup>27</sup>See my article "Belief in Brute Facts is Not Rational: An Argument in Defense of the Principle of Sufficient Reason and the Cosmological Argument Based on the Existence of Contingent Beings" for a defense of the principle of sufficient reason and an argument against the possibility of brute facts. Available from <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2014/12/19/belief-in-brute-facts-is-not-rational-an-argument-in-defense-of-the-principle-of-sufficient-reason-and-the-cosmological-argument-based-on-the-existence-of-contingent-beings/>; Internet; accessed 20 January 2016.

<sup>28</sup>This analogy is derived from William Lane Craig.

Identifying the existence of the universe as a brute fact, then, will not do. Contingent beings, by their very nature, do not have to exist and, therefore, must have a reason why they do exist. The only other plausible explanation for the existence of the universe is found in a necessary being that transcends the universe.

### *Necessary Being*

If the PSR is true, then there is a reason the universe exists. For the universe to have an explanation, something must exist beyond the universe. One cannot appeal to any particular contingent thing *within* the universe to explain why the universe exists because that contingent being is part of the universe, and thus part of what needs to be explained. If it is part of what needs to be explained, it cannot serve as the explanation. One could appeal to some contingent being *outside* of the universe (such as the multiverse generator) to explain why the universe exists, but that being would also need to be explained so we merely push the explanatory problem back one step further. Admitting a multiverse just expands the scope of what needs to be explained from a single universe to an infinity of universes. We would still have to ask what explains why the multiverse exists, and it is impossible to some other physical, contingent being to explain it because the multiverse would be the collection of all physical, contingent beings and there cannot be any physical, contingent being outside of the collection of *all* physical, contingent beings. The PSR leads us to conclude that reality cannot be exhausted by *physical* reality since the explanation of the universe cannot be a physical explanation.

Ultimately, to explain why any and all contingent beings exist one must appeal to a necessary being who must exist and who gives existence to all other beings. What is this necessary being like? As the cause of matter, space, and time, He cannot be material, spatial, or temporal but must be immaterial, non-spatial, and eternal. He must also have immense power. These descriptions are consistent with what theists have traditionally understood God to be. We conclude, then, that God is the necessary being who carries within Himself the sufficient reason for His own existence, and constitutes the sufficient reason for the existence of everything else.<sup>29</sup> He does not derive His being from some external source, but has being in Himself in virtue of the kind of being He is. God's nature, then, provides the explanation for His existence, and God's being provides the explanation for the existence of everything else.

### **Conclusion**

To return to our original question, why is there something rather than nothing? The answer depends on what we mean by "something." If "something" refers more generally to anything at all, then the answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing is because the very nature of God necessitates His existence. It is impossible that He not exist.<sup>30</sup> If "something" refers more specifically to the universe, then the answer to the question is that it was caused to exist by a necessary being (God).

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<sup>29</sup>Some atheists will not like this explanation. They will insist that we identify the source or cause of God's being. Not only does this demonstrate their failure to grasp the kind of being God is understood to be, but it also reveals that they have failed to grasp the contingency argument since the argument demonstrates the need for a being that has no external cause or source of being. And that being is what we call "God." A necessary being exists solely in virtue of its own nature. Furthermore, it seems strange that an atheist who is willing to say the universe just exists without explanation would demand to know why God exists. If one can believe the universe could exist without reason or cause, then why think God must have a reason or cause for His existence.

<sup>30</sup>If nothingness is not possible, then something must exist necessarily. This takes us back to the contingency argument, because if something must exist, then there is a necessary being, and yet the universe can't be that necessary being because there is nothing necessary about the universe.



There cannot be an infinite regress of things that require a cause external to themselves. There must be a termination of the causal chain. Whatever terminates the causal chain cannot itself be something that requires a cause external to itself, but must be a necessary being from which all contingent beings derive their existence. Even if the universe was truly eternal, it would still require a cause since it is not metaphysically necessary. If the universe encompasses all physical reality, including matter, time, and space, then the cause of the universe must be immaterial, eternal, and spaceless. This argument gives you a necessary being who is creator of all.

One can deny the existence of God but only at the expense of denying rationality. To reject God as the best explanation for why the universe exists in favor of saying it's just a brute fact is to abandon reason. There is no reason to opt for this conclusion apart from an a priori commitment to atheism since it has no explanatory power and denies the PSR. While identifying the existence of the universe as a brute fact is consistent with atheism, it is not consistent with what we know about contingent beings. Contingent beings, by their very nature, do not have to exist. There must be a reason for why they exist, and a cause for their being. There are no brute facts. The universe is explicable, and its explanation is found in God.

### **Tactics**

A catchy way of conveying the contingency argument (or at least introducing it) is to say, "God must exist because we exist" or "If God did not exist, you could not exist." Both statements convey the metaphysical necessity of God. Only God can explain the existence of all the things that do not have to exist. Once you have piqued their curiosity, then you can flesh the argument out a bit more.

There are also some great ways to illustrate the need for terminating an explanatory regress in a necessary being. I'll offer three.

### *Book*

I'll lay this illustration out in the form of a dialogue to make it easier to understand.

**Theist:** "Let's say I asked you if I could borrow a particular book. You say you don't have it, but your friend John might. You'll ask him to loan it to you, and then you'll loan it to me in turn. But you ask John and he says that while he doesn't have it, his friend Sally might. If so, she'll loan it to John, John will loan it to you, and you'll loan it to me. But Sally doesn't have it either, so she asks her friend Brady if he has it. If he does, then Brady will loan it to Sally, Sally will loan it to John, John will loan it to you, and you'll loan it to me. But let's say Brady doesn't have it either, and the requests to friends of friends of friends continues on forever with no one ever actually having the book. How long would it take for me to receive the book?"

**Seeker:** "Never."

**Theist:** "Right. I would never receive it because I cannot borrow what does not exist. The same is true of contingent beings. If there is no necessary being from which to derive being, then no contingent beings would exist. But let's say eventually I did receive the book. That would mean a friend of a friend of a friend must have had the book.

**Seeker:** "Right."

**Theist:** “Similarly, if contingent beings exist, it can only be because there is a necessary being that is the source of existence from which all other existents derive (borrow) their existence. This necessary being does not derive its existence from some external source, but exists by a necessity of its own nature and provides the ontological source for all contingent beings. As Philosopher Richard Purtill noted, ‘Consider any contingent reality. ... If the process of everything getting its existence from something else went on to infinity, then the thing in question would never have existence. And if the thing has existence, then the process can’t have gone on to infinity. There was something that had existence without having to receive it from something else.’<sup>31</sup>

Nothing we observe in the universe has necessary existence (everything is contingent). Everything has to derive its existence from something that existed prior to it. Clearly this process cannot continue on for an infinite time in the past for the same reason the process of borrowing a book cannot continue for an infinite time in the past. If nothing in the past has existence in itself (necessary existence), then no contingent beings would exist in the present. Since contingent beings do exist in the present, there must be a necessary being from whom they derive their existence—a being that does derive its existence from anything else, but has existence in itself.”

**Seeker:** “That makes sense.”

**Theist:** “Not only do we know that a necessary being exists, but we can also know something about the nature of such a being. It cannot be part of the physical realm because all physical entities are contingent beings. The necessary being must transcend the physical realm, acting as its cause. Since time, space, and matter are what need to be explained, the cause cannot itself be temporal, spatial, or material, but must be eternal, non-spatial, and immaterial. It must also be immensely powerful to cause the universe. These attributes are typical of what theists mean by ‘God,’ and thus it makes sense to identify God as the cause of the universe.”

### *Train*

A train also serves as a great analogy for the contingency argument. If you saw an infinite train passing by, you would rightly wonder why it was moving. It would be rather easy to explain why any particular boxcar is moving: boxcar Z is moving because it is being pulled by boxcar Y, and boxcar Y is moving because it is being pulled by car X, etc. But clearly this cannot explain why all of the boxcars are moving since boxcars do not possess a mechanism to generate motion. If the infinite train consisted of boxcars alone it would be motionless. The fact that the boxcars are in motion tells us that at least one of the cars in the infinite train is not a boxcar, but an engine that contains within itself the power to generate motion. Likewise, the fact that contingent beings exist demonstrates that there is some non-contingent being that gives being to all other beings. For if there was no source of being, no contingent beings could exist. But they do exist, hence a necessary being must exist. To assert that contingent beings could exist apart from a source that possesses being in and of itself is (a necessary being) like suggesting that an infinite number of boxcars in an infinitely long train can be in a state of motion without an engine to pull them.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Richard Purtill, quoted by Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 2001), 358-359.

<sup>32</sup>This illustration comes from Rabbi Adam Jacobs. He writes: “Say you were driving along the quiet and bucolic countryside when you’re forced to (patiently) wait at a train crossing. All you see is a series of flatbed cars that seems to go on for miles. After an uncomfortably long wait you realize that this is an infinite series of flatbed rail cars! Would it then be logical

## *Bear in Mirrors*

Imagine you saw an infinite chain of mirrors reflecting one to the other, such that the image in mirror *P* reflected onto mirror *Q*, and the image in mirror *Q* reflected onto mirror *R*, and the image in mirror *R* reflected onto mirror *S*, and so on *ad infinitum*. Now imagine that within each mirror you saw the image of a bear. Why is the image of the bear in each mirror? Would it make any sense to say the reflections go on forever without a real bear? No. The infinite series of bear images can only be explained by the existence of an actual bear that exists beyond any mirror, whose image is reflected in a mirror, that is then reflected to all the other mirrors. We need a real bear who started the infinite chain of reflective images. Likewise, since being only comes from being, the existence of anything requires the existence of a necessary being who has being in himself and is capable of giving being to everything else.<sup>33</sup>

## **Objections**

**Objection #1:** “If you can say God is necessary, why not just say the universe is necessary as well?”<sup>34</sup>

**Response #1:** This objection is represented by scientist Victor Stenger and philosopher David Hume. Stenger writes:

[C]osmology now strongly suggests that a “multiverse” exists in which our universe is just one member. So, the real issue is not where our particular universe came from but where the multiverse came from. This question has an easy answer: the multiverse is eternal. So, since it always was, it didn’t have to come from anything. And, to bring religion into the picture, one could ask: Why is there God rather than nothing? Once theologians assert that there is a God (as opposed to nothing), they can’t turn around and ask a cosmologist why there is a universe (as opposed to nothing). They claim God is a necessary entity. But then, why can’t a godless multiverse be a necessary entity?

Likewise, David Hume wrote in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (part 9):

It is pretended that the Deity is a necessarily existent being.... [W]hy may not the material universe be the necessarily existent Being...? [I]n tracing an eternal succession of objects, it seems absurd to inquire for a general cause or first author. How can any thing that exists from eternity have a cause, since that relation implies a priority in time, and a beginning of existence?<sup>35</sup>

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to conclude that there is nothing actually pulling these cars – no locomotive? That would clearly be absurd, as you know very well that flatbed rail cars have no power of locomotion, i.e., they are contingent/dependent on an outside force to move. As such, you can (and must) conclude that even if there are an infinite number of these cars – or of anything (any series of contingencies) -- there must be an original, non-contingent force that is doing the moving, a force that has not been, and cannot be influenced by any other. This force is God.” See Rabbi Adam Jacobs, “An Iron-Clad Proof of God”; available from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-adam-jacobs/an-ironclad-proof-of-god\\_b\\_2567870.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=religion](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-adam-jacobs/an-ironclad-proof-of-god_b_2567870.html?utm_hp_ref=religion); Internet; accessed 29 January 2013.

<sup>33</sup>This illustration comes from Rabbi Adam Jacobs. He writes: “[L]et’s say that there were an infinite array of mirrors reflecting one to the other and an image of a bear in each mirror. Would it be possible to suggest that the image of the bear stretches on infinitely with no actual bear to start the reflections reflecting? Surely not. Even if there were an infinite number of mirrors, there would still need to be a real bear (a cause) who initiated the reflective series.” See Rabbi Adam Jacobs, “An Iron-Clad Proof of God”; available from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-adam-jacobs/an-ironclad-proof-of-god\\_b\\_2567870.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=religion](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-adam-jacobs/an-ironclad-proof-of-god_b_2567870.html?utm_hp_ref=religion); Internet; accessed 29 January 2013.

<sup>34</sup>See <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2012/06/11/is-postulating-an-eternal-god-explanatorily-equivalent-to-positing-an-eternal-universe/> for an explanation as to why an eternal universe does not have equal explanatory power to an eternal God.

<sup>35</sup>[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dialogues\\_Concerning\\_Natural\\_Religion/Part\\_9](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Dialogues_Concerning_Natural_Religion/Part_9)

This objection fails to grasp the argument from contingency. We are not just asserting that God is a necessary being, but making an argument for this conclusion. We are arguing that something must exist necessarily to explain all of the things that exist contingently. The argument also provides reasons for thinking that the universe is not a necessary being, but one of the contingent beings that needs to be explained. You would be hard pressed to find a philosopher who thinks the universe exists necessarily, and for good reason. What could possibly be necessary about our universe? It cannot be the macroscopic objects of the universe since they have not always existed. At one time they existed as pure energy. Neither could it be the microscopic objects of the universe such as the fundamental particles of matter—quarks, neutrons, electrons, etc. If such objects were necessary, that would mean it is metaphysically impossible for reality to be constituted by a different set of fundamental particles (say of whatchamacallits and thingymajgits). Not only must reality be constituted by quarks and the like, but each of those fundamental particles must exist in the precise number and arrangement that they do as well. There would be no answer to the question as to why there are  $p$  number of fundamental particles in the universe rather than  $p+1$  or  $p-1$ . It just has to be that way, and there is no reason why.

If the universe exists by a necessity of its own nature, that would mean the universe must exist in exactly the way it does. That entails the impossibility of conceiving of a world different from our own. It would mean there is only one possible world: the actual world. This is preposterous, for we can conceive all sorts of different kinds of universes existing, or even no universe at all.<sup>36</sup> It is logically possible that the kind or number of fundamental particles could have been different, or arranged differently, or operating by different physical laws. It is even logically possible for there to be an empty universe containing nothing but space.<sup>37</sup> So modal logic alone demonstrates that the universe is not necessary. It is contingent, meaning it is metaphysically possible that it might have never been.

If there is nothing in or about the universe that exists necessarily, then it follows that the universe is contingent, and thus it requires a cause. That cause must be a necessary being, whose attributes are identical to those traditionally ascribed to God in theistic traditions. So there is a good reason for identifying God as the necessary being rather than the universe.

**Objection #2:** *“The universe and God are equally satisfying explanations for why something exists rather than nothing. There is no reason to prefer the theistic explanation.”*

**Response #2:** They are not equal in explanatory value. The universe cannot explain why anything at all exists because it is contingent. Everything in the universe is contingent, and you cannot get to a necessary being by adding one contingent thing to another anymore than you can get a blue wall by adding on red brick to another. God, on the other hand, if He exists at all, must exist necessarily. How can a contingent universe and a necessarily existing God be equally satisfying explanations for why something exists rather than nothing when what needs to be explained is the existence of contingent beings? The universe cannot explain itself, whereas God’s existence is self-explanatory.

At best, one could say the existence of the contingent universe is just a brute fact that has no explanation, but clearly this is not explanatorily equivalent to the God hypothesis. God—as a

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<sup>36</sup>Alvin Plantinga cautions that the universe could exist necessarily even though it is not self-evident in the same way that it is not self-evident that God exists necessarily (though He does). See *Philosophia Christi*, Vol. 11, Number 1, 2009, p. 118.

<sup>37</sup>See <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2008/10/15/existence-and-necessity/> and <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2008/10/15/why-is-there-something-rather-than-nothing/>.

metaphysically necessary being—provides an explanation for both His own existence and that of the contingent world. The brute existence of the universe explains nothing. Only God can answer the question of why something exists rather than nothing.

**Objection #3:** *“If the universe cannot be self-caused, why can God be?”*

**Response #3:** The theist does not claim God is self-caused (which is logically absurd), but rather that God’s existence is self-explanatory. Nothing can be self-caused for the simple fact that in order to cause one’s self to come into existence they must exist. One cannot exist before they exist.

Theists hold that as an eternal and necessary being, God has no cause. While there is no cause of God’s existence, that does not mean there is no explanation for why God exists. Philosopher Edward Feser explains the distinction between causes and explanations:

Note that the notion of being self-explanatory is not to be confused with the notion of being self-caused, which is incoherent. Causation is a *metaphysical* notion, having to do with the source from which a thing derives some aspect of its being. But explanation is a *logical* notion, having to do with the way in which we *understand or make sense of* some aspect of a thing’s being. We cannot coherently say that a thing *derives its existence from* itself or its nature, for that would entail, absurdly, that the thing or its nature exists prior to itself, in an ontological sense even if not a temporal sense. But we can coherently say that a thing’s existence can be *made sense of* in terms of its nature, for that has to do, not with where a thing “gets” its existence from -- an absolutely necessary being doesn’t get it from anywhere -- but rather with how we can make intelligible or understand its existence.<sup>38</sup>

While there is no cause of God’s existence, there is an explanation for why He exists, namely the kind of being that He is requires that He exist.<sup>39</sup> God’s nature provides the explanation for His existence, and the existence of every contingent being as well.

**Objection #4:** *“This argument is guilty of the fallacy of composition because it assumes that since everything in the universe is contingent, that the universe is also contingent. A property of each part does not necessarily apply to the whole.”*

**Response #4:** While parts-to-whole reasoning can be guilty of the composition fallacy, not all parts-to-whole reasoning is fallacious. Whether the fallacy is committed depends on the property under consideration. Some properties are such that they apply equally to both the parts and the whole, while others do not. For example, the property of weight does not apply to the whole. While each part of an elephant might be light in weight, the whole elephant is not light in weight. If the property under consideration is color, however, clearly the property of the parts does apply to the whole. If each brick on the wall is brown, then the whole wall must be brown as well. The nature of color is such that the property of the parts transfers to the property of the whole, but the same is not true regarding the property of weight.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Ed Feser, “Greene on Nozick on nothing”; available from <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2011/12/greene-on-nozick-on-nothing.html>; Internet; accessed 03 January 2012.

<sup>39</sup>See Jason Dulle, “Causes vs. Explanations”; available from <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2010/10/28/causes-vs-explanations/>; Internet; accessed 20 January 2016.

<sup>40</sup>Likewise, properties such as length, size, and number do not apply to the whole whereas properties such as shape and wetness do.

To determine whether the contingency argument commits the fallacy of composition, then, we must determine whether the property of contingency is more akin to color or weight. I would argue that it is more akin to the property of color. After all, how could it be that while every part of *X* is contingent, *X* itself is necessary? From whence would it get such a property? It makes sense to say that a property belonging to a part does not apply to the whole, but it makes little sense to say a property that none of the parts possess is somehow possessed by the whole. If each being within the universe is contingent, the universe as a whole cannot magically acquire the property of necessary existence.

Parts-to-wholes reasoning can be fallacious when it comes to *properties*, but not when it comes to *explanations*. If a part requires an explanation, then surely the whole also requires an explanation. If each part of a watch needs an explanation, then surely the whole watch needs to be explained. Edward Feser explains:

One objection often raised against them [first cause arguments] is that they commit a fallacy of composition. In particular, it is claimed that they fallaciously infer from the premise that the various objects that make up the universe are contingent to the conclusion that the universe as a whole is contingent. What is true of the parts of a whole is not necessarily true of the whole itself: If each brick in a wall of Legos is an inch long, it doesn't follow that the wall as a whole is an inch long. Similarly, even if each object in the universe is contingent, why suppose that the universe as a whole is? ... It is hard to see how; indeed, anyone willing to concede that Lego blocks, tables, chairs, rocks, trees, and the like are individually contingent is surely going to concede that any arbitrary group of these things is no less contingent. And why should the inference to the contingency of such collections stop when we get to the universe as a whole? It seems a natural extension of the reasoning, and the burden of proof is surely on the critic of such an argument to show that the universe as a whole is somehow non-contingent, given that the parts, and collections of parts smaller than the universe as a whole, are contingent. ... Another problem is that it isn't obvious that the sort of cosmological argument that takes as a premise the contingency of the universe *needs* to rely on such part-to-whole reasoning in the first place. When we judge that a book, an apple, or a typewriter is contingent, do we do so only *after* first judging that each page of the book, each seed in the apple, each key of the typewriter, and indeed each particle making up any of these things is contingent? Surely not; we can just consider the book, apple, or typewriter itself, directly and without reference to the contingency of its parts. So why should things be any different for the universe as a whole?<sup>41</sup>

While it's true that a property of each part of the universe does not necessarily apply to the universe as a whole, it's clear that the property of contingency applies to the whole universe if it applies to each of its parts.

**Objection #5:** *"While the principle of sufficient reason holds for every existent within the universe, it does not hold for the universe itself. It is the lone exception; the only brute fact."*

**Response #5:** Crispin Wright and Bob Hale represent this objection. They agree that explicability (the PSR) is the default position, but think there can be exceptions to this principle and that the universe is one such exception. Wright and Hale hold that if one wants to exempt a particular being from the PSR, they must explain why no explanation is needed or possible. What is there reason for claiming the universe is inexplicable? They say it's because the explanation for any physical state of affairs must revert to a causally prior physical state of affairs. They believe the universe had a beginning, and thus

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<sup>41</sup>Edward Feser, "Hume, cosmological arguments, and the fallacy of composition"  
<http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2010/12/hume-cosmological-arguments-and-fallacy.html#more>; Internet; accessed 03 February 2011.

there is no prior physical state to appeal to as an explanation. The universe, therefore, is exempted from the requirement of explicability.<sup>42</sup>

Naturalistic philosopher John Post similarly there can be no cause of the universe because “by definition the universe contains everything there is or ever will be. ... The singularity cannot be caused by some earlier natural event or process,” thus “the universe has an uncaused beginning.”<sup>43</sup> All three men are begging the question by assuming the truth of materialism and atheism. If the universe is all that exists, then clearly the universe can’t have a cause or explanation because there is no causally prior state of affairs to serve as the cause/explanation.<sup>44,45</sup> But why think that materialism/atheism is true rather than theism? If theism is true, then there is an entity that is causally prior to the universe that can explain the existence of the universe.

**Objection #6:** *“While it’s necessary that something exists, the something that exists need not exist necessarily.”*

**Response #6:** This argument is best represented by Bede Rundell.<sup>46</sup> Rundell argues that while it is metaphysically necessary that some being exist, the being that exists is arbitrary. It could be a contingent being. Different contingent beings could exist in different worlds, but there must be at least one contingent being in every possible world, including the real world.

Philosopher Alexander Pruss has responded to Rundell’s argument by noting that if necessarily, some contingent being must exist in every possible world – even if that contingent being is different in each possible world – that would mean the non-existence of all possible contingent beings except for *X* entails that *X* must exist. But it makes no sense to think a conjunction of claims about the nonexistence of all beings other than *X* can possibly entail that *X* exists. For example, the conjunction of claims that there are no flying pigs, centaurs, polka-dotted zebras, *ad infinitum* could not possibly entail the existence of a frog (assuming it was the only entity not included in the conjunction). Only a necessary being can exist necessarily, and provide a reason for why something exists rather than nothing.

**Objection #7:** *“The reason something exists rather than nothing is because it is more probable for something to exist than nothing g. There are an infinite number of ways for something to exist, but only one way for nothing to exist.”*

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<sup>42</sup>As discussed by William Lane Craig in his lecture on “God, Time, and Creation” at Biola University. Disc 1:12-13, as well as the end of 1:15 and the beginning of 1:16.

<sup>43</sup>John Post, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 85, 87, as quoted in *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis*, eds. William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland (n.c.: Routledge, 2000), 237, as found at <http://books.google.com/books?id=7zhXEMmcvQC&pg=PA216&lpg=PA216&dq=%22the+universe+was+regarded+as+fixed%22&source=web&ots=nokGB2mxl2&sig=HvclUjdOqFm9Dq31j-4Rmdp2m0Q&hl=en>; Internet; accessed 02 April 2008.

<sup>44</sup>As discussed by William Lane Craig in his lecture on “God, Time, and Creation” at Biola University. Disc 1:12-13, as well as the end of 1:15 and the beginning of 1:16.

<sup>45</sup>Others will argue that there can be no cause of the universe because cause and effect only occur within time, but this assumes temporal causation is the only form of causation. In addition to temporal causal priority, there is also logical causal priority. Kant exemplified this type of causal priority with a ball resting eternally on a pillow. He pointed out that the concavity (indentation) of the pillow would be caused by the ball, and yet there is no temporal priority of the ball over the pillow (the indentation never began to exist). It is logically prior, only. Likewise, God is logically prior to the universe, not temporally prior. The act of creation would be the first instance of time. “Prior” to this God existed changelessly.

<sup>46</sup>See <http://www.closetototruth.com/video-profile/Why-is-There-Something-Rather-than-Nothing-Bede-Rundell-/368>.

**Response #7:** This is the position of Douglas Jesseph. While he admits this is a bit of a joke argument, Peter van Inwagen of Notre Dame takes it seriously.

The problem with this “alternative” explanation is that it isn’t really an explanation. It avoids answering question of how something came into being, or what makes it more probable than nothing.

**Objection #8:** *“The PSR holds that every existing thing has an explanation of its existence, and thus the universe must have an explanation. However, this presumes that the universe is a thing. The universe is not an object in itself, but the designation for the collection of all material things. We only need an explanation for each object within the universe, and each object could plausibly be explained by some other object.”*

**Response #8:** Where do all of these objects exist? They exist somewhere, and it wouldn’t make any sense to say they exist in themselves. We rightly say they exist in the universe, but this shows that the universe, while partly constituted by each object, is not wholly exhausted by each object.

The whole collection of material objects has properties that do not exist in its constituent parts, demonstrating that the universe is metaphysically distinct from its constituent parts. William Lane Craig writes, “the universe has all sorts of properties unique to it, like a certain spacetime curvature, a certain density, a certain temperature, a certain expansion rate, and so on, enough for it to count as an object, just like the ball. But never mind: even if the universe is not now an object, it certainly was in the past, when it was so dense that it was shrunk down to subatomic proportions. Maybe it was once an object which has now blown to bits.”<sup>47</sup>

Even if we agreed that “the universe” is not an object that exists but is merely a mental abstraction, an explanation is still needed for the collection of all objects that we call the universe. It is not possible to explain the existence of each object in terms of another object. Philosopher, David Conway, writes, “the causal explanations of the parts of any such whole in terms of other parts cannot add up to a causal explanation of the whole, if the items mentioned as causes are items whose own existence stands in need of a causal explanation.”<sup>48</sup>

Even if we conceive of these objects existing in an eternal block universe such that there is no first object, there still cannot be causal closure because it would create a causal loop in which Z is explained by Y, Y is explained by X, X is explained by W...B is explained by A, and A is explained by Z. This is circular. It is like saying I give birth to myself.

Anthony Flew illustrates this with a virus analogy. If you have 100 computers that are infected with a self-replicating virus, you can explain how each computer became infected in terms of one of the other computers, but in so doing you still have not explained the origin of the virus itself. One can explain all objects in the collection by appealing to a former object, but ultimately one must come to a first object for which there is no prior physical explanation. One can only explain the existence of that object by a transcendent source.

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<sup>47</sup>William Lane Craig, “Is the Universe an Object and Does It Matter?”; available from <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-the-universe-an-object-and-does-it-matter#ixzz45khhhhYB>; Internet; accessed 13 April 2016.

<sup>48</sup>David Conway, *The Rediscovery of Wisdom* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 12.