

“ON SUFFICIENT REASON AS AN EXPLANATORY THESIS”

There has been a persistent tendency in thought to attempt to explain existence by an appeal to something beyond existence, beyond the contingent connections of natural events. This tendency has taken at least two usually inter-related forms: (1) the refusal to recognize that scientific explanation of contingent events is a valid, and in itself a methodologically complete (and only) system of explanation, and (2) the belief in the existence of another realm untouched and unnoticed by science, yet nevertheless in some way a more fundamental and more real existence captured in understanding only through a special kind of illumination, insight, mystical intuition and secondarily by faith. Rational science deals with natural phenomena and thereby deals with only *one* facet of a dual world, the other being the supernatural, or the supranatural, or the spiritual, which serves as the true ground and cause of the origin and continuance of the order and patterned change in the world.

I would like to argue that this persistent tendency in thought for a transcendental or even *immanent*, “ground” or supra-being, is logically irrelevant to explanation. All you can get, or have, in explanation is contingency of events to one another, and any reference to something outside that interconnection of contingent events does not serve any explanatory function. Indeed such reference can be shown epistemologically to be based on self-projection. My argument shall be limited to three points.

1. *Any valid explanation cannot be compatible with contradictory states of existence.* (I would also be prepared to argue that if an explanation is compatible with *any and all* states of existence, then it is not, and cannot be, a proper form of explanation; if every and any situation can be construed to be an example of an explanation, then you don't have an explanation. There is no way of showing the explanation to be true *or* false. And if an explanation is to be an explanation, it must *not* say, or be able to say,

some things about some things. Its explanatory value stems from its not being all-inclusive, and from the existence of contrasts *to which*, and *from which*, its meaning and operations are obtained).

Take the contradictory states of affairs: the universe has *no* First-Absolute-Beginning-Point; the universe *has* a First-Absolute-Beginning-Point. The universe is an infinite series of beginnings or causes; the universe is *not* an infinite series of beginnings or causes.

The notion of a ground of being is compatible with either part of this contradiction—(and with any other statement that you might want it to support). If there is a First-Absolute-Beginning-Point to the universe, then the ground of being is: the (*a*) beginner, or originator, of the series, and/or: (*b*) the necessary being which keeps the patterned process what it is, rather than allowing it to become something else.

If there is *no* First-Absolute-Beginning-Point to the universe, then the ground of being can still be retained as (*b*) above. In this situation the ground of being is the “source”, (*a*) above, *not* of the Beginning-Point of the series, but of the infinite series itself—in the sense of serving as the ground, or cause, of the continuation and preservation of *this* infinite series, rather than some *other* infinite series¹.

Because of this total compatibility of the notion of a ground of being with *any* state of existence, and with even contradictory states, and because it thus has no descriptive, predictive, clarificatory and problem-solving functions, the notion of a ground of being has no explanatory value, and is not an explanatory hypothesis.

2. *Explanation can only take place by relating an ordered system of contingent events with other orders of contingent events.* Finite relations

1. It sounds unintelligible to me to speak of the “source” of an infinite series as existing in some other causal series, or ground *for* that series. If an infinite series of beginnings, or causes, is an infinite series of beginnings, or causes, then there (i) is no necessity for it to be (or not to be) what it is rather than some other infinite series, since *it is the* infinite series (which entails all possibilities), and (ii) thus it is what series it is because this is what it is and cannot be any other kind of “infinite series”—for if it could be it would not be an “infinite series” but some finite series within an infinite one.

can only be explained in terms of other finite relations, of lower or higher generality and/or systems. There can be no reference to something outside the natural order of these contingent events, and when there is such a reference it can be only in the sense of an abstraction or general law which is thought of as being a linguistic-mathematical formulation and not an external causal agency for the contingent events.

Let us suppose a book entitled *The Elements of Geometry* to have existed eternally, one edition having always been copied from the preceding; it is evident then that, although you can account for the present copy by a reference to the past copy which it reproduces, yet, however, far back you go in this series of reproductions, you can never arrive at a complete examination, since you always will have to ask why at all times these books have existed, that is, why there have been any books at all and why this book in particular. What is true concerning these books is equally true concerning the diverse states of the world, for here too the following state is in some way a copy of the preceding one (although changed according to certain laws). However far you turn back to antecedent states, you will never discover in any or all of these states the full reason why there is a world rather than nothing, nor why it is such as it is².

According to Leibniz's point-of-view, we can account for any present cause, or effect, by relating that cause, or effect, to previous actually occurring causes and effects of the same contingent order. Now assuming that there is an infinite series of causes in the universe we would *never* come to a complete reason for the infinite series of causes.

But the reason we cannot reach any complete reason for the infinite series is *not* because we can ask *why* does such an infinite series of causes exist, and why *this* one rather than another, but because if the universe is

2. G.W. Leibniz, "On the Ultimate Origination of the Universe" in *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*, trans. Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker (Library of Liberal Arts; Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc. 1965), pp. 84—85.

an infinite, eternal series of causes, then there cannot be any complete reason for it. *A completed reason* for it can never be reached. All that can be reached are "completed reasons" for *any* contingent members in the series, and perhaps for *all* contingent members in the series at any given moment and/or given moments in a finite time. Asking for a complete reason for the existence of an infinite series is asking for something logically impossible.

3. *And any appeal to anything outside the relationship of contingent events, begs the question :*

Besides the World, that is, besides the aggregate of finite things, there is some dominant unit, not only as my soul is in myself, or rather as my ego itself is in my body, but manifesting a much higher reason. For the one being which dominates the universe not only rules the world, it also makes or creates it. It is superior to the world and, so to speak, beyond the world, and is therefore the ultimate reason of things. Neither in any single thing, nor in the total aggregate and series of things, can the sufficient reason for their existence be discovered.

The reasons for the world are therefore concealed in some entity outside the world, which is different from the chain or series of things, the aggregate of which constitutes the world³.

Whether or not there *is* such a being apart from the world, which being does contain the reason for the world being what it is, is the very point at issue. But supposing it were possible to determine the reason for the world, from another realm outside the succession of its states, or its sum-total. This reason itself would presumably involve some descriptive knowledge and/or philosophical analysis related to the contingent events, otherwise the reason would be irrelevant and/or vacuous. And once this happens then we do not have any sufficient reason for the world

3. *Ibid.*, p. 84 and 85.

which is *apart* from the world, but a reason which is very much *a part* of the world.⁴

- 3.1. Since therefore the ultimate root of the world must be in something which exists of metaphysical necessity, and since furthermore the reason for any existent can be only another existent, it follows that a unique entity must exist of metaphysical necessity, that is, that there is a being whose essence implies existence. Hence there exists a being which is different from the plurality of beings, that is, from the world; for it has been granted and proved that the world does not exist of metaphysical necessity.⁵

It is true that the reason for any existent can be only another existent, but it does not necessarily follow that a unique entity must exist, independent of existence, whose essence implies existence. For it could very well be that the very essence of the universe is existence: the universe itself does not depend upon any other ground, being, or universe (for those things would then be part of the universe too). It is its own sufficient reason. But everything *in* the universe, everything which is a part of the universe, must, and does, depend for its specific existence as an event, or entity, on an interaction with other contingent events, or entities.

3.2. Disregarding this answer in terms of the essence of the world being existence—which is the only answer I believe can be given—what *would* a sufficient reason *beyond* the world, for the existence of the world be like? There would be none primarily because a question such as this could have *any* answer one cared to devise for it. Any answer would be as valid as

4. And this is Leibniz's *tendency* through and through, for example in such sentences as :

From the fact that something rather than nothing exists, it follows that in possible things, or in their possibility of essence itself, there is a certain demand or (so to speak) a claim for existence ; in short, that essence tends by itself toward existence. From this it follows, furthermore, that everything possible, that is, all that expresses a possible essence or reality, tends with equal right toward existence, the degree of this tendency being proportionate to the quantity of essence or reality, that is, to the degree of perfection of the possible involved. (Leibniz, *op. cit.* p. 86).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 85—6

any other, since the answer to this kind of question does not depend upon, or stem from, the describable contingent events and their relationships. And a question such as this would not by its very nature allow any answer other than one which did refer to something beyond the series of natural events. Questions such as these are unanswerable in any methodological sense because they are not questions requesting explanatory, conceptual description, but they request, demand and commit one to an attitude which goes beyond what is there in the contingent world, and arises from what is basically psychologically desired of the world—that it make complete sense (in an anthropomorphic sense). And of any sufficient reason which might be found, the same question of *its* reason can very well be asked, *ad infinitum*.