

# If God created the universe, what created God?



## Introduction

---

The existence of God is an enduring and popular philosophical problem. Many arguments claiming to prove the existence of God have been proposed throughout the centuries, often on the basis of some feature of the natural world. There have also been attempts to disprove the existence of God, which is a more complex task. Consider how much easier it is to establish that there is a black swan somewhere on the Earth compared to establishing that there isn't one. G.K. Chesterton made this point: "Atheism is the most daring of all dogmas, for it is the assertion of a universal negative."<sup>1</sup>

Popular arguments for the existence of God include the cosmological argument, the ontological argument, the moral law argument, the argument from Design. The argument from Design is a more general version of the narrower perspective about irreducible complexity that forms the core of the Intelligent Design movement. Each of these arguments supports a certain belief in a creator. The response to many of these arguments, however, is:

"If God created the world, what created God?"

This is a reply that requires serious consideration. It suggests that certain arguments for God's existence only push the question of beginnings one step farther back. It also suggests that any God complex enough to account for all of creation would necessarily be complex enough to require an explanation. Richard Dawkins is one of the strongest proponents of this argument.

## An Answer From Doctrine?

---

In many faiths, God's origin is straightforward. Christian doctrine teaches that God is eternal and thus had no beginning. The [Psalms](#) speak clearly about God's eternal nature, affirming, but never defending God's existence:

“Before the mountains were born or you gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.” <sup>2</sup>

“For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night.” <sup>3</sup>

These verses, and many others like them, highlight the complexity of God's relation to time. Theologians have debated the relationship of God to time for centuries and no doubt will continue to do so. It is a question that we probably cannot answer. In one thoughtful response, God is the creator of time itself, and thus exists outside of time seeing all of history at once. Verses like those above are often used to support this view. On the other hand, this view is often critiqued by Biblical scholars including Clarke Pinnock, John Sanders and Gregory Boyd<sup>4</sup>, who point out that God is portrayed in scripture as acting in time. For example, when God is negotiating the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah with Abraham ([Genesis 18](#)), or lamenting having created humans at the time of Noah ([Genesis 6:5-8](#)), God certainly seems to be in time and responding to the unfolding course of events. But of course, given the difficulty our time-limited minds have in grasping this philosophical problem, there is no compelling reason that God could not be both outside of time and capable of acting within it.

## An Answer From Definition?

---

Answers from religious doctrine are rarely adequate for nonbelievers. In fact, many fervent believers in God reject the argument about God's timelessness because even timeless beings need explanations for their existence. But if God is the creator of all things, and yet also requires cause, we face an infinite regress of causes. The only way to avoid this infinite regress problem is to state — as Christian theology has always done — that God is the first cause and is entirely self

existent, meaning the reason for God's existence is contained within the very definition of God.

While this viewpoint certainly may be attractive, it still fails to convince skeptics who are more likely to favor the idea that the universe contains within itself the reason for its own existence. If that could be true of God, why couldn't it be true of the universe? There is certainly reason to be skeptical about the common sense intuition that everything must have a cause or that everything must have a reason to be as it is. This perennial assumption has been challenged by the physics of the 20th century that uncovered a mysterious quantum world where things often do not appear to have reason to be the way they are.

The common sense assumption that everything must have a cause or a reason to be as it is also suffers from what is called the fallacy of composition. This fallacy comes about when we assume that properties of the parts apply to the whole. For example, just because every member of the human race has a mother, we cannot infer that the human race itself has a mother. Similarly, a collection of spherical things would not itself have to be spherical. In discussions about the origins of the universe, we would say that just because every individual part of the universe has a cause, that does not mean that the entire universe has a cause.

The realization that our universe had some sort of beginning has opened up exciting new conversations about origins. In some ways, a universe with a beginning seems to beg for a cause. But if the universe came into being from nothing, it becomes deeply problematic to speak of anything having caused the universe to exist. Some cosmologists would argue that our universe is the result of an uncaused quantum fluctuation. Such fluctuations do not have causes in the traditional sense, so they argue this does away with our universe needing a cause. But there is a significant problem that the vacuum that fluctuates is not nothing. Quantum vacuums — which are what you get when you remove from space all the particles and energy — are real. They have activity, laws and rules. Our universe may have fluctuated into existence from such a vacuum, but the vacuum remains unexplained.

Cosmologist Lee Smolin suggests in *Life of the Cosmos*, that black holes can give birth to new universes.<sup>5</sup> He proposes that our present universe emerged out of a black hole in some other "meta-universe." And perhaps our universe is presently birthing new universes. Such a process, while clearly speculative, provides a caution against extrapolating from common sense notions of causality to philosophical conclusions about the nature of all of reality.

## An Answer From Plausibility

---

The difference between the theist and atheist positions on this topic is that by assuming that

everything — including the universe — has to have a cause, then the atheist is left with a dilemma of what or who that first cause might have been. For the theist, the answer is God, but a satisfactory reason must be found why God should be exempt for the need for a cause. Such a response is available through the Augustinian concept that God is not limited in space and time, and therefore the argument of needing a first cause loses its power.

On the other hand, if not everything needs to have a cause, the theist and atheist have no grounds for arguing this part of their case.

But the argument can be reframed in a way that is more sensitive to postmodern intuitions about causation and the importance of starting points. Suppose as a religious believer you ask the question, “What kind of a universe is most compatible with my belief in an eternal God?” In this case the response affirms but does not prove the reality of God. The universe that we experience appears to have had a beginning; it appears to be finely tuned for life; it appears to have a place for love and purpose. These appearances affirm as plausible your prior belief in God.

Now suppose you start from the atheist assumption. In this case the universe must not really be as it appears. It cannot have a real beginning, be tuned for life and love, and purpose can’t be anything other than illusory epiphenomena — the curious byproducts of chemistry and physics. The whole picture has a claustrophobic bleakness.

Bertrand Russell, one of the most brilliant and ruthlessly honest atheists of the 20th century, captured this sense of despair in *A Free Man’s Worship*:

“That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins — all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's salvation henceforth be safely built.“<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to this view, the theist can affirm that the wonders encountered in the world are real, that they belong, and are a reflection of the glory of the creator whose mysterious power upholds everything.

# Conclusion

---

The world disclosed by modern science is far subtler and nuanced than the world in which philosophers and theologians have lived for the past few centuries while formulating their arguments about the mysterious relationship between God, the physical world, time and causality. Nevertheless, no development in contemporary science poses a particular challenge to the view that God is creator. And some developments, like the discovery of fine-tuning in the physical laws, are supportive of traditional affirmations. The common-sense assumptions that have historically undergirded this entire discussion, however, need reconsideration in the face of recent scientific developments. We must be intellectually humble in making claims about God as creator. But we can also state confidently that denials that God is creator are fraught with even more unresolvable difficulties and ultimately provide a far less satisfactory grounding for a worldview in which meaning and purpose play important roles.

## **Consulted Experts:**

*The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of [Alister McGrath](#) in drafting this response.*

# Notes

---

1. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1908; Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2004).
2. Psalm 90:2 (New American Standard Bible).
3. Psalm 90:4 (New American Standard Bible).
4. Richard Rice, Clark Pinnock, William Hasker, David Basinger, and John Sanders, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2007).
5. Lee Smolin, *The Life of the Cosmos* (Oxford University Press, 1999).
6. Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1917), 47-48.

# Further Reading

---

## Lectures

---

- The Faraday Institute of Science and Religion. [Cosmology and Physics.](#)

## Articles

---

- Philosophy of Religion. ["The Cosmological Argument."](#)
- 
- 

Copyright © 2009 The BioLogos Foundation.