JOHN HICK'S COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Gilbert Fulmer
Southwest Texas State University

1. John Hick has offered a new, and cautious, version of the cosmological argument, which he supposes will avoid some of the difficulties which have been pressed against the more traditional versions.[1] I will argue, however, that this new cosmological argument is internally inconsistent, makes it impossible to identify any entity as God, and, moreover, renders the concept of God untenable. It is thus my purpose to stand Hick's argument on its head, and to try to show that if correctly understood it leads to a conclusion diametrically opposite to that for which it was advanced.

The attempt to invert arguments for the existence of God in this way is not of course new. J. N. Findlay once offered what has since been called an "ontological disproof" of God's existence.[2] He argued that . . . we are led on irresistibly, by the demands inherent in religious reverence, to hold that an adequate object of our worship must possess its various qualities in some necessary manner.[3]

But

. . . modern views make it self-evidently absurd (if they don't make it ungrammatical) to speak of such a Being and attribute existence to him. It was indeed an ill day for Anselm when he hit upon his famous proof. For on that day he not only laid bare something that is of the essence of an adequate religious object, but also something that entails its necessary non-existence.[4]

Findlay therefore concludes that an analysis of the conditions for religious worship forces us to recognize that no such object does or possibly could exist. In a somewhat similar fashion, the present paper will attempt to show that Hick's cosmological argument can be turned against its creator.

2. A central tenet of traditional theism is that the entire natural order was created, and is sustained, by God. Thus it is wholly dependent on him, and he is wholly independent of it. Indeed, it is sometimes claimed as a mark of the superiority of western monotheism that it repudiates the worship of anything in the universe and regards only the Creator of the whole as worthy of reverence. Thus the physical universe, including of course its animate inhabitants, is to be understood as owing its existence to the freely exercised creative power of divinity. In arguing this view John Hick has advanced the thesis that original sin consists in treating nature as though it were natural—that is, capable of independent existence.[5] Kant thus ". . . regarding the world as an independent order with its own inherent structure and laws"[6] all but inevitably places man in estrangement from God. Prop-

erly understood, then, God's existence is the necessary condition for the existence of anything else.

So it is essential to the concept of God that he be a necessary being, Hick argues; but not a logically necessary being, for Hick accepts the standard contemporary arguments against the notion of logically necessary existence. ". . . the notion of a being whose existence is logically necessary, or of whom it is a logical truth that he exists , is a malformed notion."[7] Rather, to say that God is necessary means that God is ". . . something that simply and unqualifiedly is, without beginning or end and without dependence for its existence or for its characteristics upon anything other than itself."[8] God is thus ". . . a factually or ontologically necessary being.[9] With this notion of divine necessity in mind, Hick undertakes his revised cosmological argument—which, however, he concedes does not constitute a demonstration of God's existence.[10]

Understood in this way the argument hinges upon the claim that the space-time continuum, as a contingent non-self-explanatory phenomenon only becomes intelligible when seen in relation to an eternal self-existent being who has established it. More briefly it is the premise that the existence of God would be self-explanatory, whereas the existence of the physical universe would not.[11]

3. This latter premise, of course, lies at the very hart of the dispute between theists and naturalists. Why, indeed, should one suppose that God is self-explanatory, while nature is not? Hick's reply is charmingly candid. This "cosmological principle" is not capable of demonstrative proof, but, on the other hand ". . . it has a certain inevitability as an expression of the fact that to us as conscious beings the fact of conscious mental existence is not a candidate for explanation as is the fact of the physical universe."[12] Therefore

> This explanatory ultimacy of mind for minds, or inevitable prejudice of mind in its own favor as an intrinsically intelligible kind of entity may be said to place the cosmological principle among the "natural beliefs" to which humanity tends spontaneously to assent. As conscious minds we can accept the existence of purposive intelligence as an ultimate fact, neither requiring nor permitting ex planation in terms of anything more ultimate than itself . . . . and no further question then arises as to why . . . divine Mind should exist.[13]

Hick has thus offered a form of cosmological argument resting, as do most contemporary forms, on the question of the intelligibility of the natural order, although, unlike some others, Hick does not claim his to be logically compelling. As Hick notes, it is therefore necessary to understand the relevant concept of intelligibility.[14] Hick accordingly introduces an appeal to

the Principle of Sufficient Reason, but in a form which differs sharply from the traditional version. For he says,

> This principle cannot be demonstrated; but it is presupposed by so many of the processes of thought which we call rational as itself to count as a fundamental principle of rationality. . . . To operate the principle of sufficient reason, then, is to look for explanations; and we must now notice how this process of explaining proceeds. To explain a puzzling phenomenon is to set it in a wider context, or in connection with some further circumstance in relation to which it is no longer puzzling.

But one may of course then be puzzled by this explanation-providing situation, and consider how it in turn is explained. However, in such a process something must in the end be left unexplained, namely that ultimate state of affairs which is not related to anything yet more ultimate, by which it might itself be rendered intelligible. If there is some thing . . . so comprehensive that it can have no wider context, or something . . . of such a nature that there is nothing that could stand in an explanatory relation to it, then this thing will de facto terminate the explanatory process.[15]

Hick agrees with such critics of the cosmological argument as Flew that either nature or God would be equally capable of serving as such a de facto terminus of explanation. We are therefore presented with a dilemma: the universe may be ultimate and inexplicable, but

> . . . if the existence of the universe, as an ordered cosmos, is ultimately explicable or intelligible it must be so in virtue of its dependence upon an eter nal self-existent reality which is of the same order as conscious mind.[16]

And in the light of the natural preference Hick has said we have for explanations in terms of consciousness, the latter may reasonably be seen as preferable.

Against this revised cosmological argument I will try to show: first, that it violates the very form of the Principle of Sufficient Reason to which Hick appeals; second, that it entails the impossibility of identifying any entity whatever as God; and third, that Hick's definition of God is such that it is logically impossible to instantiate.

4. As we have seen, Hick offers a methodological interpretation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: to operate it is to search for explanations. Yet his stated goal is to offer an ultimate explanation, that is, a de facto terminus of the explanatory process. Now, there are two issues here: first, whether Hick's model of explanation admits of a terminus at all, other than an adventitious and perhaps temporary one which represents only the limits

of present knowledge; and second, Hick's claim that, for admittedly psychological reasons, an explanation in terms of creative mind is preferable.

Hick's account of the structure of explanation quoted above is fairly standard among contemporary empiricists; to explain an event is to show it as a particular case of a wider law or regularity, which can then serve as the explanadum of a new explanans. But this process could in principle be continued indefinitely; at no point is there any basis for supposing that the series of explanations must be at its end. For it is always possible that no explanation is known for the most recent explanans just because the relevant information has not yet been discovered; this is a familiar enough case in the development of the sciences. To suppose at any stage of discovery that no further explanation is possible because none exists would be both to make an unsupported claim and to block the path of inquiry. What if Newton had remained content with Galileo's formulation of the laws of motion? Hick apparently attempts to avoid this conclusion in the passage already quoted, where he offers the alternative of ". . . something (such as the universe) so comprehensive that it can have no wider context, or something (such as a creator of everything that exists other than himself) of such a nature that there is nothing that could stand in an explanatory relation to it. . ."[17] Either something, Hick suggests, would serve as a de facto terminus of explanation, since either would, ex hypothesis, be the ultimate or most general explanation possible.

But Hick's language obscures the true logical situation. For when Hick says the natural universe might be "so comprehensive that it can have no wider context," the word "universe" could mean either a) by definition everything which exists, or b) everything now known to exist—i.e., the known physical universe and the known natural laws. This ambiguity is crucial to Hick's argument; for if it were possible to know that the natural universe known at the present or any future time was the total universe—that is, that it was "so comprehensive that it can have no wider context"—then it would be perfectly in order to point to it as de facto terminus of explanation. In that case it would be quite correct to say that it is just a brute fact that the universe exists in the form it does, and by the terms of the description it would have no explanation. But it would never be possible to know that this was the case: it must always be possible, in principle, that further facts, now unknown to us, would constitute the "wider context" which Hick's description rules out, and thus constitute an explanation of the facts about the universe which are now known. Thus the condition necessary to attain the de facto terminus of natural explanation to which Hick refers could never be met.

On the other hand, the known natural universe might be an "ultimate state of affairs"[18] in the second sense mentioned above, namely that at the present time we simply lack the information to provide an explanation of

that particular state. But of course we need not, and would not, suppose that this condition is permanent: further discoveries might at any moment provide just the explanation sought. So if Hick's language is interpreted in the former sense above, we cannot know that the description is correct; and if it is interpreted in the latter sense, there is no true terminus of explanation at all, but only the limits of present knowledge, which may (but of course also may not) be superseded.

5. By the same token, Hick's description of the other possible terminus, that in terms of "a creator of everything that exists other than himself"[19] begs the question: for, even of our explanatory progress brought us to the point of discovering, not merely hypothesizing, such a being, we could again have no way of knowing that there was no further explanation of the being himself. That is, it is in principle possible that the natural world as we know it (or may in future discover it to be) may have a conscious creator as its explanation; and yet also that that being may in turn be explainable by some further factor which is of course now unknown. Explanations, whether in terms of natural law or in terms of creating beings, do not come labelled as "ultimate" or "intermediate"—every explanation is ultimate so long as there is no further explanation known; but many explanations have been superseded by more general ones, and every explanation is liable to be. Thus it is clear that talk of explanatory termini cannot legitimately refer to anything more than those explanations which at the present state of knowledge are the most inclusive known. All of this follows directly from the account of explanation to which Hick subscribes.

6. As to the second point, Hick's reason for preferring an explanation in terms of conscious mind, it stands condemned in Hick's own words. It is no more than a "prejudice of mind in its own favor"[20]; and if it is true that ". . . no further question then arises as to why /the/ divine Mind should exist"[21] then that is a fact about human minds, not about the putative divine one. This argument places Hick in the position of Hume's Cleanthes who, having attained the God he craved, refused to inquire further; it is subject to Schopenhauer's gibe that the cosmological argument treats the causal principle like a hired cab — to be dismissed when the desired destination is reached.[22] We have no a priori guarantee that the universe can be accounted for at all—much less in the particular terms which please us best. To insist that only explanations in the form we happen to like are to entertained is philosophical wish fulfillment.

7. The second major criticism of Hick's argument is that it makes it impossible to identify any being as God, even if a creating mind should be established. For, as argued in the last section, explanations do not carry labels indicating their ultimacy; any explanation, including one in terms of a creative intelligence, may possibly be discovered to be subject to explanation in turn: any explanans may become an explanandum. Consequently,

even if we could know that a bodiless rational being existed, on whose will depended the natural world with which we are familiar, we could not know that he himself was not dependent on some further fact. If, as conceded, his existence is not logically necessary, then there are two possibilities: either he is dependent on some further fact, or else is not. But it would of course always be impossible to know that he was not so dependent. And since, by definition, such a being could only qualify as God if he was not dependent on anything else, it would always be impossible to know that any being was God. The issue could only be resolved in the way unfavorable to thiesm, by showing that the being in question was dependent, and hence was not God.

8. Finally, Hick's definition of God as that on which the entire natural order depends entails that this concept cannot be instantiated. For even if there were a bodiless rational agent who created the natural realm we know, there would still be one fact of the natural order which he did not create: the fact that events followed his will.[23] The fact that his will is effective cannot itself be the result of his creative power, for unless events followed his will he could not, by the exercise of that will, bring it about that they did. So even if all the other facts and laws of nature were susceptible of animistic explanation, there must be at least one fact that is not. And the fact that events occurred according to the will of this hypothetical entity would be a natural fact, in that it would not be the result of any conscious agent's decision; it would simply be the way things happen in the universe—in the same sense as what are now taken to be the natural laws of, e.g., physics or chemistry, are simply the way things happen in the universe. The history of science from the sixteenth century to the present reflects the developing recognition that natural laws are descriptions of regular sequences of events, not the volitions of spirits; the supposed law in question would be natural in precisely this sense. Therefore, even the sort of being we are imagining to exist would be natural, not supernatural; for, like us, he would be dependent on natural law.

Of course, this fact about the power of the creating being would have the same status as any other empirical fact which is not now explainable; it may be that it is an ultimate, "brute," fact for which no explanation exists. Or it may be that with enough information it could in turn be accounted for. But neither case would affect the present point, which is that the concept of a supernatural Author of Nature is incoherent: the conditions required for such a being to exist are logically impossible to fulfill, for his very power would constitute a further natural fact not explainable in terms of that power. If this argument is sound, it follows that explanations of the natural order in animistic terms are not only unnecessary—they are impossible. So Hick's "original sin" of naturalism can be avoided only by a confusion.

9 I have spoken in the preceding paragraphs as though we had good reason to accept the existence of a conscious mind as the creator of most of nature, in order to analyze the logical situation we would face in that event. But I cannot see that there is any good reason to accept this proposition; on the contrary, the main intellectual force behind the hypothesis of a creating conscious being is the conviction, made quite explicit by Hick, that it would allow an explanation of a different sort from those which science can provide: that is, an explanation of nature as a whole in terms of mind. But the present argument entails that no such explanation is possible; so the justification for introducing the hypothesis of such a being is removed. Thus even Hick's chastened version of the cosmological argument fails: when we ask for the most general explanation possible it cannot be in terms of a conscious creator. It is, of course, logically possible that much or all of the universe we know through experience was created by some conscious being—or, far less implausibly, race of beings—at whose existence we can only guess. But such beings, even if they do exist, must be natural, not supernatural.

I can do no better, then, than to close by quoting Hick's own words concerning another of his theses, that of a "resurrection world," in which the appearance of replicas of human beings after their deaths allows the verification of Christian eschatological claims.

> Faced with this hypothesis one could, not unreasonably, decline to take any interest in it, on the ground that there are no reasons for believing it to be true and that in the absence of any such reasons it is too farfetched to be taken seriously.[24,25,26]

NOTES

1. John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York: Seabury Press, 1971), pp. 46-52.
2. J.N. Findlay, "Can God's Existence Be Disproved?" *Mind*, 1948; repr. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair Dkwestern, (New York: Macmillan, 1955, pp. 47-56).
3. *ibid.*, p. 53; emphasis original.
4. *ibid.*, p. 55.
5. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, (London : Macmillan, 1966, pp. 316 ff.).
6. *ibid.*, p. 320.
7. Hick, *Arguments*, p.85.
8. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 86.
9. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 86.
10. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 52.
11. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 46.
12. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 47.
13. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 50; emphasis added.

14. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 47.
15. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 48.
16. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 50; emphasis original.
17. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 48.
18. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 48.
19. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 48.
20. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 50.
21. Hick, *Arguments*, p. 50.
22. Arthur Schopenhauer, On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (London: Bohn, 1888, para. 20; quoted in Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), p. 96.
23. I have discussed this argument previously: Gilbert Fulmer, "The Concept of the Supernatural," Analysis 37 (April, 1977); and "Animistic and Naturalistic World Views, " *Religious Humanism* 11 (Winter, 1977).
24. John Hick, "Resurrection World and Bodies," *Mind* 82, p. 410.
25. Some of the material contained in this paper was presented at a Philosophy Department colloquy at Texas A & M University on February 24. 1977.
26. I am indebted to my colleague Peter Hutcheson for useful comments and suggestions.