O'Connor's Cosmological Argument

In Chapter Three of his recent book *Theism and Ultimate Explanation*, Tim O'Connor discusses what he calls 'the existence stage' of his cosmological argument. According to the dust-jacket notes of the book, 'O'Connor defends a novel version of the Leibnizian cosmological argument from contingency for the existence of a transcendent necessary being as the source and basis of the ultimate explanation of contingent beings and their interconnected histories'. Taking the dust-jacket notes at face value, then, we can reasonably infer that Chapter Three—which is entitled 'Ultimate Explanation and Necessary Being: The Existence Stage of the Cosmological Argument'—is where we find the heavy lifting in O'Connor's cosmological argument: this is where we are provided with his argument for the *existence* of 'a transcendent necessary being as the source and basis of the ultimate explanation of contingent beings and their interconnected histories'. In this paper, I aim to provide a critical assessment of the material that O'Connor presents in this key third chapter.

1. O'Connor's Project

O'Connor has rather different sounding things to say about what he aims to do, and what he succeeds in doing, in the chapter under examination. On the one hand, in the *Preface*, he repeats the claim that is made on the dust-jacket of the book (though perhaps the direction of causation is the other way around!): 'I defend a version of the 'Leibnizian' cosmological argument from contingency for the existence of transcendent necessary being as the source and basis for ultimate explanation, of contingent beings and their interconnected histories' (ix). Moreover, O'Connor goes on to outline the direction of argumentation in Chapter Three in the following terms:

> The stage is thus set for a consideration of that most fundamental metaphysical question, or set of questions, concerning existence itself. The best form of the question—one that presumes the least—is this: are there contingently existing objects, and if there are, why do those particular contingently existing objects exist and undergo the events they do? I consider a variety of options for providing an outline of an answer to this question. I argue that *the only one that is not beset by fundamental problems* is one that accepts the existence of contingent beings and maintains that they are the causal product of a purposive, transcendent necessary being, one for whom existence and essence are inseparable, one that must simply be. (xii, my italics)

On this account, it seems that O'Connor must suppose that the achievement of Chapter Three is very considerable indeed: what Chapter Three shows is that *there is only one* 'outline of an answer' to 'the best form of the most fundamental metaphysical question concerning existence' that is 'not beset by fundamental problems'—namely, the 'outline of an answer' provided by one kind of traditional theism.

On the other hand, at the end of Chapter Four—at the conclusion of 'the identification stage' of his cosmological argument—O'Connor writes:

> I conclude that the reflections of the past two chapters provide a significant reason to believe that contingent being has its explanatory ground in necessary being ... Philosophical arguments on fundamental metaphysical theses rarely if ever settle the matter, and the present line of argument is no exception. I do contend, however, that the considerations adduced are weighty enough to warrant some serious conceptual development by the philosopher inclined towards a rival metaphysical vision. (110)

And, in the coda to the book, O'Connor says:

> It has been a long and at times wild ride. Though I promised at the outset not to arbitrarily dismiss our cab when it arrived at an agreeable location, no doubt even the most patient of my readers will agree that it is best to put it into park for a while. I have argued that the Existence Question can sensibly be posed, and if it is, we will see reason to posit necessary being at the heart of our metaphysics … But unlike both John Duns Scotus and Samuel Clarke, the two most direct influences on the present line of argument, I would take pains once again to deflate the quasi-mathematical rhetoric of 'demonstration'. It is, I believe, a plausible line of thought that adds to the attractiveness of traditional theistic metaphysics. As such, it merits careful response by those contemporary philosophers (who name is legion) who take themselves to have seen through its illusory promise—a much more careful response, alas, than is fashionable in these days of breezily dogmatic adherence to philosophical naturalism. (143)

On this alternative account, it seems that O'Connor steps back from the bold claim that his argument shows that, e.g., naturalistic responses to 'the best form of the most fundamental metaphysical question concerning existence' are 'beset by fundamental problems'. Rather, his more modest claim is that he has adumbrated 'a plausible line of thought' which 'merits a careful response' from those who are not disposed to accept the claims of 'traditional theistic metaphysics'.

I propose to take O'Connor at his later word. I'm happy to pay careful attention to his 'plausible line of thought'. However, I think that, when we do pay careful attention to his 'plausible line of thought', we see that we don't need to add anything 'weighty' to extant dissenting treatments of this topic. Far from calling for 'serious conceptual development', O'Connor's discussion merely calls for attention to refinements of points that have already been made—again and again—by, for example, naturalistically inclined philosophers.

2. Existence Questions

O'Connor begins his discussion by offering a characterisation of the central aim of metaphysics, namely: 'to articulate a theoretical framework that makes possible *ultimate* explanation of reality—that is, a natural or non-arbitrary stopping point … to the nested series of available plausible explanations for increasingly general aspects of the world'. Moreover, O'Connor goes on to observe that 'the realisation of this aim has been thought to require an answer to the most basic of metaphysical questions: *Why is there anything contingent at all?*' Finally, O'Connor settles on a refined version of this question that he takes to be, in some sense, 'best': *Are there*

contingently existing objects, and if there are, why do those particular contingently existing objects exist and undergo the events they do? (xii, 65)

I think that O'Connor's characterisation of the central aim of metaphysics is not well-suited to the investigation that he proposes. I take it that the central aim of metaphysics is to provide the most general theory of what there is and what it is like. Furthermore, I take it that when we assess the merits of rival metaphysical theories, we consider the usual range of theoretical desiderata: simplicity, scope, fit with empirical data, explanatory power, fit with well-established scientific theories, and so forth. It may be that, when we consider metaphysical theories, we think that one *prima facie* desirable feature of such theories is that they should provide 'ultimate explanations of reality'—but we should also recognise that it may be that, in the best metaphysical theories, failure to provide 'ultimate explanations of reality' is outweighed by performance on other theoretical desiderata. To insist that the central aim of metaphysics is to construct theories that provide 'ultimate explanations of reality' is to make a question-begging assumption about the characteristics of best metaphysical theories (perhaps as a result of giving unwarranted primacy to the 'explanatory completeness' of metaphysical theories).

It is worth noting that, in framing the discussion in the previous paragraph, I followed O'Connor in supposing that, if a theory says that the existence of the universe is a brute, unexplainable fact, then that theory provides no answer to the existence question. (66, 69) One might well think, to the contrary, that if a theory says that the existence of the universe is a 'brute, unexplainable fact', then that theory provides one kind of answer to the existence question—and, moreover, if one followed out this line of thought, one would naturally suppose that no suitably developed metaphysical theory *could* fail to provide an answer to O'Connor's most basic of metaphysical questions. However, if we were to think about the matter in this way, then we would be required to reformulate O'Connor's understanding of the central aim of metaphysics: for, on his view, the central aim of metaphysics is to arrive at a metaphysical view on which there are no 'brute, unexplainable contingencies'. No matter how much higher theories might score on grounds of simplicity, scope, fit with empirical data, fit with well-established scientific theory, and so forth, O'Connor will not allow them entry to the metaphysical contest if the involve 'brute, unexplainable contingencies'.

Suppose that we do accept that metaphysical theorising should be oriented primarily by a fundamental question about existence. We are still left with the question about how exactly to formulate this question. O'Connor himself notes that 'the question admits distinct formulations of greater precision': *Why is there anything (contingent) at all? What explains the fact that there are contingent things? What explains the fact that these contingent things exist? What explains the fact that these contingent things exist rather than those others that were possible?* (65) Moreover, given his claim that 'the best form of the question—one that presumes the least—is this: are there contingently existing objects, and if there are, why do those particular contingent objects exist and undergo the events they do?' (xii), it is clear that O'Connor would grant that each of the formulations in the preceding list also admits of a 'better' variant in which it is not assumed in the question that there are contingently existing objects. But, how, exactly, do we get to the conclusion that the best form of the question is the one that O'Connor identifies? While there is a point at which

O'Connor says that he "will in due course consider the relevance and appropriateness of certain of these formulations' (65), I do not think that O'Connor provides an explicit answer to this question.

I take it that, in fact, what O'Connor does is to endorse the most explicit form of the question that he takes it to be possible to answer. While one might think that one ought to endorse the contrastive question—*What explains the fact that these contingent things exist rather than those others that were possible?*—O'Connor is persuaded that *that* question does not admit of an answer: it cannot be that there are explanations for all contrastive facts. By contrast, O'Connor holds that it is possible to answer the correspondingly detailed non-contrastive question—*What explains the fact that these contingent things exist? Why do those particular contingently existing objects exist and undergo the events they do?*—and that is why he claims that this is the best version of the existence question.

It is, I think, worth noting that, because O'Connor justifies the formulation of his existence question in this way, he may not be entitled to ask the following rhetorical question: 'Given that our natural, intuitive assent is towards our world's being ultimately intelligible (as the pervasive tendency to raise the Existence Question reveals), why should we retreat when we see where it leads us? (72/3). For, if the pervasive tendency is to follow Jonathan Edwards in asking the contrastive question, then the recognition that *that* question does not admit of an answer surely does give us *some* reason to rethink any intuitive enthusiasm that we might have for the idea that the world is 'ultimately intelligible'.

3. The Range of Options

If we were to list 'schematic' metaphysical frameworks, we would have to include at least the following. (In the specification of these frameworks, I use the word 'the universe' to refer to the entirety of physical reality, or, at any rate, to the largest part of physical reality that includes the earth, and that is in no way externally related—causally, spatially, temporally, spatiotemporally, etc.—to any other part of physical reality. This usage takes no stance on the question whether physical reality is exhausted by what cosmologists typically refer to as 'our universe'.)

1. The universe is all that exists, the universe has an initial state, and the existence and nature of the initial state of the universe is metaphysically necessary.

2. The universe is all that exists, but the universe has no initial state, and the 'history' of the universe does not have a finite measure. Moreover, each state of the universe can be explained in terms of earlier states of the universe.

3. The universe is all that exists, the universe has an initial state, and the existence and nature of the initial state of the universe has no explanation.

4. There is a necessarily existent agent who intentionally brings about the existence of the universe.

5. The universe exists because a particular kind of non-agential principle obtains (e.g., as John Leslie has it, the universe exists because it should exist).

At least *inter alia*, O'Connor discusses all five of these 'schematic' metaphysical frameworks; and, of course, he argues that the fourth should be preferred to the others. Since I'm not particularly interested in considering the relative merits of the fourth and fifth 'schemes', I shall simply ignore the criticisms that O'Connor makes of the invocation of non-agential principles in explanations of the existence of the physical universe. What I shall focus on is the case that O'Connor makes on behalf of the claim that the fourth 'scheme' should be preferred to each of the first three 'schemes'. In particular, I'm interested in the reasons that O'Connor gives for being dissatisfied with the first three 'schemes', and the reasons that O'Connor gives for thinking that the fourth 'scheme' might be developed into a satisfying metaphysics.

Before we turn to our examination of these 'schemes', it is worth noting that each of the first three 'schemes' plausibly scores rather better than the fourth 'scheme' on grounds of simplicity (ontological economy). For, not only does the fourth 'scheme' involve an additional kind of entity, it also involves the instantiation of entirely new kinds of properties. If the fourth 'scheme' is to be preferred to any of the first three on explanatory grounds, then it will not be merely because it provides explanation where the other 'schemes' fail to do so; rather, it will be because it is worth paying the price of the extra ontology and ideology in order to purchase the explanations in question.

4. **The Initial State of the Universe as Necessary Existent**

The first comprehensive 'scheme' that we consider supposes that the universe has an initial state whose existence and features are necessary—in the same sense in which O'Connor supposes that his intentional creator is necessary, a sense that may well be 'opaque to our cognitive capacities' (67), so that we need not suppose that we understand how it can be that the existence and features of an entity are necessary in this sense.

O'Connor does not really discuss this proposal. What he does, instead, is to criticise the suggestion that the universe is, itself, a necessary existent. Against this suggestion, O'Connor objects that nothing with mereological complexity and diversity can be necessarily existent in the sense at issue: nothing composed of elementary particles and fields could be necessarily existent 'of itself'. (87-92) While O'Connor, himself, admits that his discussion is 'a rather hard-scrabble excursion' (xii), I don't propose to discuss it in any detail; for the purposes of the present section, I can happily concede that O'Connor may be right to hold that nothing that is composed of elementary particles and fields can be necessarily existent in the relevant sense.

Clearly, then, the proposal *here* under consideration is that the universe has an initial state that has no mereological complexity or diversity: it is not composed of elementary particles and fields, and it has no topological parts. Subsequent states of the universe evolve from this initial state, under the twin influences of law and chance. Moreover, subsequent states of the universe do have mereological complexity and diversity; and at least some subsequent parts of the universe are composed of elementary particles and fields.

Further details of this account depend upon how extensive the universe turns out to be. If the initial state of the universe is something like 'the initial state of the Big Bang',

then the account requires that our Big Bang emerged from an initial state that had no mereological complexity or diversity, and that was not composed of elementary fields. (Of course, on standard accounts of the Big Bang, particles don't emerge until much later on.) We needn't suppose that this initial state has to be what we get if we project a standard general relativistic model back to an initial singularity, i.e. that the initial state is identified with a point on the boundary of a standard general relativistic model. Rather, all we need to suppose is that the correct—perhaps quantum-gravitational—model of the universe is equipped with an initial state that lacks mereological complexity and diversity, etc. If, on the other hand, the initial state of the universe is something that precedes 'the initial state of the Big Bang', then we don't yet have any bounds on our conception of what that state might have been like, or on what might lie between it and our Big Bang.

Of course, it is speculative to conjecture that the universe had an initial state that had no mereological complexity or diversity; it could hardly be said that we have compelling reason to believe that this is, in fact, the case. However, the important question here is whether this theory should be preferred to a theory that postulates a necessarily existent agent that brings about the existence of the universe. Both theories are committed to the existence of the universe. One theory proposes that the initial state of the universe is necessarily existent, and hence that the initial state of the universe has no mereological complexity or diversity. The other theory proposes that there is a necessarily existent agent who brings the universe into existence, and, hence, that there is an agent with no mereological complexity or diversity. Since simplicity favours the first hypothesis, and since it seems pretty clear that one *can* reasonably hold that there is nothing that favours the hypothesis that there are agents with no mereological complexity or diversity above the hypothesis that the universe had an initial state that had no mereological complexity or diversity, it seems that the naturalist is on pretty solid ground in thinking that our first 'scheme' should be preferred to the fourth. (Note that I don't say here that one *could not* reasonably hold that the hypothesis, that there are agents with no mereological complexity or diversity, is sufficiently to be preferred to the hypothesis, that the universe had an initial state that had no mereological complexity or diversity, that there remains justification for the postulation of the additional ontology and ideology that the theist requires. However, one would surely need to advert to other considerations, beyond those that are invoked in the context of cosmological arguments.)

5. **A Beginningless Sequence of Causes**

The second comprehensive 'scheme' that we consider supposes that, if the universe is co-operative, then we can have an answer to O'Connor's existence question without postulating *any* new ontology or ideology. According to this scheme, even if the universe is all that exists, provided that the universe has no initial state, and provided that the 'history' of the universe does not have a finite measure, it remains the case that we *can* explain why particular contingently existing objects exist and undergo the events they do, since each state of the universe can be explained in terms of earlier states of the universe.

Against this Humean proposal, O'Connor objects:

The crucial claim here, it seems to me, is that this form of explanation can be *complete*, leaving nothing further to be explained, *even when the explanandum is a single event of short duration*. This claim is simply mistaken. [FN: Thus my response is different from that of Rowe … who allows that contingent events within the universe are fully explainable, in principle, by citing their natural causes, while contending that the universe as a whole may still require additional explanation.] A complete explanation would be *unconditional*—it would not appeal to factors that are themselves left unexplained. This requirement evidently is not met for local, sequential explanations where one event is explained in terms of another which itself is an unexplained given in terms of the explanation at hand. … Explanations cannot be unconditional if the terms are themselves all contingent. (74)

I'm not confident that I can reconstruct the argument that O'Connor has in mind here. What he *seems* to be saying is that the Humean thinks that we can give a complete explanation of an event E1 by invoking another event E2, even though we acknowledge that, for the purposes of the explanation at hand, the event E2 is just an unexplained given. (Why did the first domino fall? Because the second domino fell against the first! Why did the second domino fall against the first? Enough with the questions! I've already fully explained why the first domino fell!)

If this is what O'Connor is saying, then it doesn't square with my understanding of the Humean view. I don't think that the Humean supposes that we can give a *complete* explanation of an event E1 by invoking another event E2, even though we acknowledge that, for the purposes of the explanation at hand, the event E2 is just an unexplained given. Rather, I think that what the Humean holds is that, if we suppose that there is an infinite regress of events in which each is causally dependent on the next, then we are entitled to think that *there is* a complete explanation of why particular contingently existing objects exist and undergo the events they do that adverts only to the elements of the infinite regress of events. Of course, the Humean doesn't suppose that we can *give* the complete explanation—*per impossible*, that would require us to enumerate a beginningless infinite list of premises; rather, the Humean supposes that we can recognise that, were it the case that there is an infinite regress of events in which each is causally dependent on the next, we would have no reason to think that our 'scheme' is explanatorily incomplete.

O'Connor adverts to an example from Pruss (2006:44), which he takes to 'illustrate the essential explanatory incompleteness of simply noting the stepwise dependence within a beginningless sequence of events':

Suppose a cannon is fired at time t_0 and the cannonball lands at t_1. Now consider the infinite sequence of momentary events spanning all times between the two events excluding t_0 and including t_1. There is no first event in this sequence, as there is no first temporal instant after t_0. Thus, though the entire sequence has a finite duration, it still meets Hume's envisaged scenario of a beginningless infinite sequence of events, each causally dependent on events that precede it. Hume should conclude that this series is explanatorily complete, but this is evidently false: the entire sequence of events has a partial explanation in terms of the firing of the cannon at t_0. (75)

I don't believe that this argument establishes the conclusion that O'Connor (following Pruss) takes it to establish. On the one hand, it is clear that Hume himself would have denied that there are infinite sequences of finite duration, since he believed in minimum spatial and temporal intervals. On the other hand, if Hume had not believed in minimum spatial and temporal intervals, then he would have amended his claim: either he would have claimed that it is only beginningless infinite sequences of events where the sequence has infinite temporal measure that give complete explanations, or he would have claimed that it is only beginningless infinite sequences of events for which it is true that there isn't anything that is temporally anterior to all of the members of the sequence that give complete explanations. Moreover, not only would Hume have amended his claim, but he would have offered justification for the amendment. As Pruss's example makes vivid, an infinite sequence of events, in which the sequence of events is of finite duration, can be preceded by other events (and those other events might be invoked to explain the infinite sequence of events). However, it is *impossible* for an infinite sequence of events, in which the sequence of events is of infinite duration, to be preceded by other events; and it is *impossible* for an infinite sequence of events, for which there is nothing that is temporally anterior to all of the members of the sequence, to be preceded by other events.

Suppose that it is the case that there is a beginningless infinite sequence of events, where the sequence of events has infinite temporal measure; i.e. suppose that each state of the universe can be 'conditionally' accounted for in terms of prior states of the universe, and that the universe is infinitely old. Compare two 'schemes', one which says that the universe is all that there is, and the other of which adds a necessarily existent creative agent to the story. As before, the addition of the necessarily existent creative agent clearly has ontological and ideological costs. But what does it buy us? In this case, we have already assumed that *each* state of the universe can be 'conditionally' accounted for in terms of prior states of the universe, and that the universe is infinitely old. So where is the activity of the necessarily existent creative agent supposed to gain purchase? If there were an initial state of the universe, we could understand how there could be a role for a creative agent: the creative agent could make the initial state of the universe (and the laws). But if there is no initial state of the universe (and if the laws have *always* been around), then it seems that there isn't anything for a creative agent to do.

If the line of thought at the end of the previous paragraph is right, then it seems that, in this case, on the assumption that there is a beginningless infinite sequence of events, where the sequence of events has infinite temporal measure, the naturalist is on pretty solid ground in preferring the naturalistic 'scheme' to the theistic 'scheme'. Again, I don't say that one could not hold that, all things considered, the theistic 'scheme' should be preferred to the naturalistic 'scheme'; but, as before, one would surely need to advert to other considerations, beyond those that are invoked in the context of cosmological arguments.

Perhaps it might be thought that the argument that there would be nothing for a creative agent to do went a bit fast. Many theists suppose that God has a further role 'sustaining' the universe in existence, or the like. Maybe, then, what the postulation of a necessarily existent creative agent purchases is an explanation of the continuing existence of the world: it is only against the background of the necessarily existent creative agent's conserving power that an event E1 can cause an event E2.

I see at least the following two difficulties with this proposal. First, it seems that the theistic 'scheme' now compares even less favourably with its naturalistic comparator: in order to get an alleged explanatory advantage, we postulate not only the necessarily existent creative agent, but also the need for this agent to exercise conserving power to preserve the universe in existence. Second, it is hard to see that this theistic 'scheme' affords any advantage when it comes to the explanation of individual events: supposing that a necessarily existent creative agent exercises sustaining power could only 'complete' the explanation of E2 in terms of E1 by making the necessarily existent creative agent causally responsible for E2—a result that most theists will likely find unacceptable, since it leads to problems concerning the libertarian freedom of human agents, and the like. While I agree that the argument that I have sketched is incomplete, it seems plausible to me to think that the provision of further detail would not undermine the conclusion that the naturalist is on pretty solid ground in preferring the naturalistic 'scheme' to the theistic 'scheme', on the assumption that there is a beginningless infinite sequence of events.

6. **Brute Contingency**

The third comprehensive 'scheme' that we consider supposes that the universe is all that exists, that the universe has an initial state, and that the existence and nature of the initial state of the universe has no explanation. As we have already noted, O'Connor is not prepared to admit this 'scheme' to the metaphysical contest: in his view, to say that, ultimately, the particular contingent objects there are exist and undergo the events they do as the result of brute contingency, is simply to fail to answer 'the existence question'. That's not to say that O'Connor offers nothing by way of justification of this stance. For instance, he writes:

> *Prima facie*, it seems unreasonable to say that the question is a perfectly coherent one, and that it correctly presupposes that the universe and everything therein need not have existed—that is to say, its existence is entirely contingent—and nonetheless hold that there is no answer to it: hold that the universe's existence is simply a brute unexplain*able* fact. It seems even more unreasonable, then, to deny that, other things being equal, given two metaphysics such that one of them provides a final, non-arbitrary answer to the existence question and one of which leaves it unanswerable, we should prefer the one that answers it on account of its greater explanatory power. (69/70)

There are at least two obvious points to make here. First, it is clearly true that, *other things being equal*, given two metaphysics such that one of them provides a final, non-arbitrary answer to the existence question and one of which leaves it unanswerable—or even merely unanswered—we should prefer the one that answers the existence question on account of its greater explanatory power. But—as we have already taken pains to note—it is obviously not the case that 'all other things are equal' when we compare the theistic 'scheme' that O'Connor endorses with naturalistic 'schemes' that leave the existence question unanswered or unanswerable. O'Connor's theistic 'scheme' has ontological and ideological investments that are surplus to the commitments of the rival naturalistic 'schemes'. So the question must be addressed whether there is sufficient justification for this additional investment in O'Connor's theistic 'scheme'; and, at the very least, it is not *obvious* that the

investment is justified simply because it purchases an answer to—or, at any rate, the possibility of an answer to—the existence question.

Second, it is quite unclear why O'Connor thinks that it is '*prima facie* unreasonable' to hold that the existence of the universe is contingent, and yet to hold that the existence of the universe is brutely contingent, i.e. not something that admits of further explanation. When we compare this third 'scheme' with O'Connor's theistic 'scheme', it seems to me that there is *prima facie* reason—and not merely *prima facie* reason—to prefer the third 'scheme'. After all, even on O'Connor's own account, the theistic 'scheme' has various problematic ontological and ideological commitments that do not figure in the third 'scheme'; whence, there is surely *prima facie* reason to suppose that friends of the third 'scheme' *can* reasonably hold that the costs of those commitments outweigh the explanatory benefits that the commitments confer.

One point that friends of the third 'scheme' might think to make in the present context is that there is a sense in which brute contingency is unavoidable: it is necessarily that case that, if there is contingency, then there is unexplained contingency. As O'Connor notes (75), if we suppose that, for each truth P, there is an explanation of why P rather than Q, for any possible alternative Q to P, then it follows that there are no contingent truths. Hence, if there are contingent truths, then there is at least one truth P for which there is no explanation of why P rather than Q, for some possible alternative Q to P. So, the friend of the third 'scheme' might be inclined to say, if any 'scheme' that allows for contingency is bound to contain some unexplained contingency, surely there is no serious objection to the third 'scheme' simply on the grounds that it allows that the existence of the universe is an unexplained contingency.

In response to this kind of argument, O'Connor says:

> One could still press the Existence Question in a principled manner by urging that one should seek explanation for every fact other than those for which there is an explanation of why there can be no explanation of those facts. If an event is an outcome of a non-deterministic causal system, there will be no explanation of why it occurred rather than any of the other possible outcomes of the system (at least in many cases). But there is an explanation for why we cannot explain such contrastive facts that involves the character of the system in question. By contrast, the philosopher who maintains that the existence of the universe is a brute, inexplicable fact cannot, by the very nature of his position, explain why such a fact is unexplainable. (Even if the universe has no explanation, it could have had one, as there could have been an equally contingent being that caused it to be.) (84)

Suppose that the existence of the universe has no explanation: it is just a brute contingent fact that the universe exists. Must we suppose that even though the existence of the universe has no explanation, it could have had an explanation? In particular, must we suppose that, even though the existence of the universe has no explanation, there could have been a contingent being that caused the universe to come into existence? I don't think so. Suppose, for example, that we hold a strong version of the thesis that origins are necessary: if something has a certain kind of origin, then it is not possible that that thing should have had a different kind of origin. (See Kripke (1981: 110-14). While these kinds of theses are clearly controversial, it would be a very hard saying to hold that one could not be *reasonable* in adopting

them!) Given this strong thesis of the necessity of origin, if it is true that *our* universe has no explanation for its existence, then it is not possible that *our* universe has an explanation for its existence. So—it seems—the friend of the third 'scheme' can provide an explanation of the inexplicability of the existence of the universe, given only the datum that the existence of the universe has no explanation; at the very least, the friend of the third 'scheme' has a principled reason for denying the claim that there could have been a contingent being that brought the universe into existence, given that there wasn't anything that brought the universe into existence.

Suppose that, the foregoing considerations notwithstanding, we agree that the philosopher who maintains that the existence of the universe is a brute, inexplicable fact cannot, by the very nature of his position, explain why such a fact is unexplainable. Should we suppose that this represents a serious problem for friends of the third 'scheme'? I don't think so. For, despite O'Connor's implicit claim to the contrary, it seems pretty clear that the friends of O'Connor's fourth (theistic) scheme are no better placed to meet the demand that a 'scheme' should provide an explanation for every fact other than those for which there is an explanation of why there can be no explanation of those facts. (We shall fill out this argument at the end of the next section, after we have examined the details of O'Connor's fourth 'scheme'.)

Given the arguments that have been developed in this section, it seems to me to be plausible to conclude that naturalists are on pretty solid ground in concluding that the 'third' scheme should be preferred to the 'fourth' scheme. Once again, I don't say that one could not hold that, all things considered, the fourth (theistic) 'scheme' should be preferred to the third (naturalistic) 'scheme'; but, as before, one would surely need to advert to other considerations, beyond those that are invoked in the context of cosmological arguments.

One final observation. It is an interesting feature of O'Connor's position that he defends commitment to what one might call 'brute necessities': i.e., commitment to internal and external relations of necessity that are opaque to our cognitive capacities. In the foregoing discussion, I have simply followed O'Connor's lead in allowing that a commitment of this kind can be reasonable. However, it might occur to some friends of the third 'scheme' to claim that, at the very least, there needs to be some accounting of the relative costs of commitments to 'brute necessities' and 'brute contingencies'. Even if we are prepared to accept that causation involves a kind of necessity that is not fully intelligible to us, we might reasonably baulk at the idea that it is better to postulate the necessary existence of a being whose necessary existence is not fully intelligible to us than it is to suppose that there is no explanation for the existence of the universe. Or, at least, so friends of the third 'scheme' might be tempted to suppose.

7. **A Necessarily Existing Agent**

The fourth 'scheme'—the 'scheme' of which O'Connor does say that it is 'the only one that is not beset by fundamental problems'—holds that the universe is the intentional contingent creation of a necessarily existing agent. On O'Connor's own account, his treatment is 'sketchy', owing to the presence of 'complicating issues' (82); indeed, O'Connor says of the underlying theory of intentional agency that he

claims 'only to show that there appears to be a way in which this might go, the details of which must be developed elsewhere' (80). Here is the core of his account of 'the agency of a transcendent necessary being':

> A personal necessary being's activity in generating a contingent order is to be thought of, in the first instance, as the direct causing of an internal state of intention that a particular determinate state of affairs obtain. This is not, importantly, to be treated as an elliptical expression for there being some prior state of the agent that brings about, in mechanistic fashion, the agent's coming to have the intention. Rather, the intention is irreducibly a product of the agent qua agent. … When we apply this generic picture to the creative activity of a transcendent necessary being, the explanatory framework it will engender is roughly this: Let it be supposed that our necessary being has some purpose whose content is P and recognises that creating contingent order C would satisfy P. Suppose further that he generates an intention whose content is *that C obtain* in order to attain P, and that C's obtaining is itself an immediate product of that intention. In such a circumstance … the core activity and its product are perfectly well explained by reference to the agent's purpose and his belief that C would satisfy it. (82/3)

On O'Connor's account, then, we are to suppose that we have a *complete* explanation of the existence of the universe if we can advert to the necessary existence of an agent who has some purpose, who recognises that creating the universe would satisfy that purpose, and who generates an intention whose content is *that the universe exist* in order to attain that purpose.

If the agent were only to possess the purpose contingently, then it seems that we would not have a complete explanation of the existence of the universe; similarly, if the agent were only to contingently recognise that creating the universe would satisfy the purpose, then we would not have a complete explanation of the existence of the universe. Hence, it seems that we must be supposing that the agent has the purpose of necessity, and that it recognises that creating the universe would satisfy the purpose of necessity. However, in order to make room for contingency, it seems clear that we are then to suppose that the agent also has other purposes of necessity, and that it recognises a variety of ways of satisfying each of these purposes of necessity. (Something like the former assumption is needed if we are to suppose that the agent might not have chosen to create anything; and something like the latter assumption is needed if we are to suppose that the agent might have chosen to make something other than our universe.) But, if that's right, then the picture that O'Connor is recommending is one on which there is brute contingency in the generation of the intention whose content is *that the universe obtain* in order to satisfy a held purpose: the agent has the same purposes and the same beliefs about how it could realise those purposes in all possible worlds, and yet it forms different intentions for realising purposes in different possible worlds, even though there is *nothing else* that varies across those possible worlds that bears on the formation of those intentions.

Should we be happy with the claim that there can be brute contingency in a complete explanation? That surely depends upon exactly how we are to understand the expression 'complete explanation'. O'Connor does not give an explicit account of 'complete explanation'. However, there are places where he makes use of the

expression: for example, he tells us that 'a complete explanation would be unconditional—it would not appeal to factors that are themselves left unexplained' (74). While it is tempting to read this as endorsement of the claim that there cannot be brute contingency in complete explanation, I think that it is better read as endorsement of the claim that there are cases in which we can properly think that brute contingencies are not unexplained.

Consider what O'Connor has to say about 'indeterministic mechanistic causal processes in the natural world':

> Tertiary syphilis, when untreated by penicillin, leads to paresis, a form of motor paralysis, about 28% of the time. Furthermore, paresis only arises in syphilitics. Assuming for the sake of example that this statistical fact is a result of a fundamentally 'chancy', indeterministic process, we can explain a given occurrence of paresis, nonetheless, by pointing to the presence of the untreated syphilis. (And this despite the fact that the explanandum was not even made likely by the explaining factor cited.) For the latter, *ex hypothesi*, caused the former in an indeterministic fashion. It may well be that in such a case we cannot explain why the paresis occurred rather than not, given that it was causally possible (and indeed likely) that it not occur under just those circumstances. But why is it not enough for a non-contrastive explanation of what actually occurred that we point to the causal mechanism (however chancy) that produced it? (85)

While I agree with O'Connor that there is something right in the idea that we could explain occurrences of paresis by pointing to the causal mechanism that produced it, it seems to me that it would be very odd to say that we can give a *complete* explanation in this way. What we would more naturally say is that a complete explanation has to advert both to the causal mechanism that produced the paresis, and to the fact that that causal mechanism is chancy. Why did Fred get paresis? Well, there's a 28% chance that tertiary syphilis will lead to paresis, and Fred happens to be a tertiary syphilitic who lucked out. End of story. But if you tell me only that Fred has tertiary syphilis, then you plainly haven't given a complete explanation of his paresis.

I think that there is a pattern here that is repeated wherever we think that there is objective chance. In one sense, we think that objectively chancy events lack complete explanations, because those events are partly the products of objective chance. ('There's no explanation of why that particular radioactive atom decayed exactly when it did.') In another sense, we think that objectively chancy events can be given complete explanations, but then we insist that such explanations have to make explicit mention of the fact that there is objective chance involved. ('That particular radioactive atom decayed when it did because radioactive decay is an objectively chancy process, and that radioactive atom decayed when it did simply as a matter of objective chance.') So long as we are clear about the sense in which we are using the expression 'complete explanation', no confusion results.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, we can see that O'Connor's favoured account of intentional action gives the generation of intentions metaphysical standing rather similar to the metaphysical standing of radioactive decay. Moreover, I think, the fact that we cannot make any more precise claim than that O'Connor's favoured account of intentional action gives the generation of intentions metaphysical standing *rather*

similar to the metaphysical standing of radioactive decay points to a difficulty in O'Connor's overall position. The reason why we cannot make a more precise claim about the comparison between the metaphysical standing of the generation of intentions and the metaphysical standing of radioactive decay is that it is not clear whether, on O'Connor's favoured account, it would be appropriate to say that the generation of intentions is 'objectively chancy'. In particular, the most detailed statement that O'Conner makes—'we suppose that a necessary being might have sustained any of a very wide range of possible orders answering to competing motivations, none of which came decisively weighted' (83)—is silent on the question whether we should suppose that there is a probability distribution over the intentions that it is possible for the postulated necessarily existent agent to form.

If there is a probability distribution over the intentions that it is possible for the postulated necessarily existent agent to form, then it is clear that O'Connor is wrong to claim that a complete explanation of the action of the agent need only advert to the generation of the intention that was actually formed: in the only sense of 'complete explanation' that could properly apply in this case, the explanation would be 'complete' only if it also adverted to the existence of the probability distribution. Moreover, when we compare the fourth 'scheme' thus understood with, say, the third 'scheme', we have to decide whether the cost of postulation of a necessarily existent agent whose intentions are formed as a matter of objective chance is worth the alleged improvement obtained in the answer to the question *Why do those particular contingently existing objects exist and undergo the events they do?* Friends of the third scheme might well reasonably ask: why is it better to postulate objectively chancy intentions in a necessarily existent agent than it is to postulate that the existence of the universe is brutely contingent? At the very least, it is far from obvious that this is the best way of trading off the virtues of theories in the case of the existence of the universe.

On the other hand, if there is no objective probability distribution over the intentions that it is possible for the postulated necessarily existent agent to form, then it seems to me that we lose any justification for the claim that these intentions are the *products* of the agent. If A is produced by B, or if A is under the control of B, then either there is some kind of counterfactual dependence of A on B, or else there is some kind of objective probability distribution that links the production of A to B. In particular then, there is no such thing as 'the irreducible production of an intention by an agent *qua* agent' in circumstances in which there is neither counterfactual dependence nor objective probability distribution to tie the production of the intention to the agent. If *that* is what is meant to be invoked in O'Connor's fourth 'scheme', then friends of the third 'scheme' can rest easy: whatever problems may be involved in supposing that the existence of the universe is brutely contingent pale into insignificance in comparison with the problems that arise on the supposition that there is 'irreducible production of an intention by an agent *qua* agent' in circumstances in which there is neither counterfactual dependence nor objective probability distribution to tie the production of the intention to the agent.

Before I turn to examination of some loose ends, it is probably appropriate for me to summarise the argument of this section. I have claimed that O'Connor's fourth 'scheme' is crucially underspecified: it fails to tell us whether it is to be supposed that there is an objective probability distribution over the intentions that it is possible for

the postulated necessarily existent agent to form. If it is not to be supposed that there is an objective probability distribution over the intentions that it is possible for the postulated necessarily existent agent to form, then it seems clear that naturalists can quite reasonably suppose that the fourth 'scheme' is, on these grounds alone, inferior to each of the first three 'schemes'. On the other hand, if it is to be supposed that there is an objective probability distribution over the intentions that it is possible for the postulated necessarily existent agent to form, then it seems to me that it is no less clear that naturalists can quite reasonably suppose that the fourth 'scheme' does worse on point of satisfying the combined desiderata for theory choice than does any of the first three 'schemes'. Of course, in this second case, I don't say that one could not reasonably prefer the fourth 'scheme' to each of the first three 'schemes', all things considered; but I do think that one would surely need to appeal to other considerations, beyond those that are invoked in the context of cosmological arguments.

First loose end. O'Connor makes much of the point that his opponents will likely focus on explanations of contrastive facts, i.e., explanations of facts of the form 'C rather than C*', where C* is a possible but rejected alternative to C. For example, he writes as follows:

> Let us suppose that there is no explanation for many contrastive truths. That is, there is an explanation for why C obtained, a reason that ultimately involves the necessary being's causal activity as guided by particular reasons, but there is no explanation for why C obtained rather than C*, a possible state of affairs for which there are also motivating considerations. On a natural reading of the question 'Why did C obtain rather than C*?' what is being asked for is a factor that 'tipped the scales' in favour of C, a factor the obtaining of which ruled out the occurrence of C. But once we analyse the question in this way, we see that it amounts to little more than a demand for an account that renders the actual state of affairs inevitable. But that there is no such account to be given, owing to its contingent origins, does not entail that explanation is absent for what has actually obtained: the concrete reality of persisting particulars interacting and undergoing change through time. (84)

But, if what I have said is right, then there is clearly a sense in which it is quite appropriate to focus on explanations of contrastive facts: for, while there is a sense in which one can give a 'complete' explanation of contrastive facts by way of appeals to objective probability distributions, there is no sense in which one can give a 'complete' explanation of contrastive facts that appeals neither to counterfactual dependence nor to objective probability distributions. What is at issue is not an improper demand for 'accounts that render the actual state of affairs inevitable; rather, it is a perfectly respectable demand that we be told exactly how counterfactual dependence and objective probability distribution combine to account for the actual state of affairs.

Second loose end. As we noted in the previous section, O'Connor claims that the fourth 'scheme', unlike the third, is able to satisfy the desideratum that a 'scheme' should provide an explanation for every fact other than those for which there is an explanation of why there can be no explanation of those facts. The problem that he finds for the third 'scheme' is that, even if the universe has no explanation, it could have had one, as there could have been an equally contingent being that caused it to

be. But, equally, even if there is no explanation of the intentions that are generated by the necessarily existing agent, because there is no objective probability distribution over those intentions, it seems that there could have been such a distribution. If that's right, then what I take to be O'Connor's preferred interpretation of his fourth 'scheme' does not score better on the desideratum at issue.

Third loose end. I take it that O'Connor's account of agency is just plain false if applied to human agents. The intentions that we generate do depend upon our prior states; what O'Connor calls the 'mechanistic' model of agency is, indeed, correct. Of course, O'Connor disagrees: he thinks that the 'mechanistic' model of agency is 'a mistake' (80). But neither O'Connor nor I make arguments that directly depend upon the presupposed truth or falsity of the 'mechanistic' model of agency as it applies to human agents. It would take us very far afield to try to pursue this matter further.

8. Concluding Remarks

In my discussion of the existence stage of O'Connor's cosmological argument, I have neither examined nor challenged the views that O'Connor defends in the first part of his book ('The Explanatory Role of Necessity'). While other naturalists might well wish to challenge some of the controversial theses that O'Connor defends in that first part of his book, I have been happy to let all of these theses stand, at least for the sake of argument. My project here has been to explore how O'Connor's cosmological argument fares if we grant him as much as we can of his underlying metaphysical assumptions. My conclusion is that, even given this concessive approach, the argument does not fare particularly well.

Roughly speaking, there are three clear naturalist alternatives to O'Connor's theistic 'scheme': infinite regress, brute fact and naturalistic necessary origin. Naturalists have good reason to think that, if there is infinite regress, then naturalism is preferable to theism. Moreover, naturalists have good reason to think that either brute fact or naturalistic necessary origin is preferable to theism. Consequently, naturalists have good reason to reject theism—here understood to mean 'a theistic explanation of the origins of the universe'—on the grounds that, no matter which naturalistic alternative is correct, it trumps the theistic explanation. Naturalists may well think—as I do—that there are no particularly good grounds for choosing between the three naturalistic alternatives: there is nothing that speaks strongly for or against any of these 'schemes'. However, so long as each of the undefeated naturalist schemes trumps theism, naturalists can be justified in their naturalism without making a choice.

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