

Thursday, 19 December 2013

How do we stop the infinite regress? The uncaused cause: one or many? Monism or pluralism?

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As I have said before, I am by nature a pluralist - which is why I have gravitated to Mormon theology (my take on Mormon theology is that it is Christian pluralism).

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One way of thinking about this is the infinite regress problem, which children often discover for themselves.

What causes *this*? Answer given: *this* is caused by *that*. Yes but what causes *that*, and then what causes *that*... and so on, and on... forever?

An infinite regress?

Well then no, not forever.

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The only thing that can stop the regress is an *uncaused cause* - something which makes other things happen but not in response to other things happening.

Something which is an origin of action.

(This is also something with free will. Free will is an uncaused cause.)

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So... everything that happens can be traced back to an uncaused cause.

But how many uncaused causes? - One, or more than one; one or many? Monism or pluralism?

To answer the question one uncaused cause, *versus* many uncaused causes, is apparently a matter of intuition, a metaphysical assumption; undecidable on the basis of evidence.

And undecidable on the basis of Christian revelation.

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Most Christians are monists and trace all causes back to one God.

This leads to a problem when considering Jesus and the Holy Trinity in general. Is Jesus an uncaused cause, or not? If so, then God is two; if not then Jesus is just an aspect of God: inessential. This problem has not been solved by monism (only obscured by sleight of language).

Monism also leads to the problem that humans have no free will, since all causes are traced back to God. Insofar that Jesus is essential to our salvation, and insofar as free will is essential to Christianity, then monism is deficient.

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Pluralists like me believe there are more-than-one/ many uncaused causes; so Jesus and the Trinity is not a problem - Father, sona and Holy ghost are all uncaused causes; and free will is not a problem (since each humans is an uncaused cause).

But it is messy! To a monist it is unacceptably messy - it just can't be true!

But a pluralist feels this is intuitively right; that reality is many not one, that there are *many uncaused causes interacting, will be forever, and always have been...*

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Posted by [Bruce Charlton](#) at [Thursday, December 19, 2013](#)



21 comments:

Luqman said...

I have to admit, it is a lot of fun gently ribbing Christians about this. I suppose it would not work on a Christian pluralist. Maybe I could work a polytheist angle into it, but that usually ends up hitting the Mystery of the Trinity wall. Oh well, the struggle continues!

[19 December 2013 at 08:42](#)

Bruce Charlton said...

@Luq - Of course the proper answer is to believe revelation - and let the philosophy go hang!

But many Christians let themselves be trapped by philosophy - they put the philosophy first, and cram Christianity into its meshes. Then they are

vulnerable.

Anybody can criticize the philosophy of somebody else as incoherent, because any philosophy is always incomplete, distorted and its relation to reality unknown - the critic will always themselves also hold an incoherent philosophy.

With philosophy, it is just a choice of incoherences, and how far back you need to push before you reach them...

On the other hand there are benefits from superficial coherence - that seems to be what human need.

Deep coherence however... well, that seems to be beyond us, and we cannot allow ourselves to be dismayed by its lack.

19 December 2013 at 09:20

Bruce Charlton said...

(Continued...) In fact one of the worst philosophical errors is to accept superficial, obvious, in-your-face incoherence - in order to obtain a deeper coherence.

And that is a crime of which I accuse many monists!

19 December 2013 at 09:22

Christian in Hollyweird said...

If God is an uncaused cause, and God is infinite, perhaps there is an infinite chain of uncaused causes?

Or perhaps I'm too short for this ride

19 December 2013 at 11:11

Pontios said...

Nice intuitions, but what is Truth?

19 December 2013 at 12:38

Bruce Charlton said...

@CiH - Well yes. The traditional understanding of an infinite chain of caused causes would mean that nothing can happen at all.

I don't know what you mean by an infinite chain of un-caused causes...

Surely if a cause had been caused by the previous link in the chain - then it isn't an *un*-caused cause... So there could not be a 'chain' of them.

19 December 2013 at 13:38

Kevin Nowell said...

There is another source of knowledge other than Scriptures and philosophy. That is Tradition. And it is the continuous Christian tradition that God is the uncaused cause and that he created our souls. It is also the Jewish tradition from which the Christian tradition sprung.

It was not other Christians in the early Church that denied the creation of human souls by God; but, by Platonic philosophers. So it is the orthodox, traditional belief which you mislabel monism that is based on Christian revelation and your belief which is based on overenthusiasm for a particular brand of philosophy.

It is surely decideable on Scripture as well.

"Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust on the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being."

It is only by mis-translating this passage that Joseph Smith was ever able to justify his belief in the pre-existence of souls.

19 December 2013 at 15:20

Bruce Charlton said...

@KN - I don't think you have answered the question. Of course it does not have to be answered! But the ancient Jews certainly don't sound like monists, if the Old Testament is any guide.

One of the interesting twists of history is that plain commonsense

understanding of Christianity is so often regarded by Christian intellectuals as heresy, on the basis that it leads to philosophical problems further down the line.

Yet at the same time the upfront incoherence of sophisticated philosophy is brushed aside as of little to no significance.

I know that once somebody has monist spectacles firmly in place, then nothing can be done to shift them - and everything must be interpreted in that frame; but I have seen no compelling argument against pluralism and since it makes such plain and easy sense of Christianity, especially its hardest questions - pluralism is my preferred understanding.

In the end it is probably a question of imagination, what can be pictured. I find it quite natural to picture a pluralistic universe - and while I can (and have) picture/d a monist universe as well, it seemed much more forced, less stable a picture, less convincing, more remote, more abstract, less engaging; and without any real or necessary place for love.

I know that pluralism has other problems - such as lack of necessity - but these trouble me far less than monist problems such as why mortal incarnate life, where is free will, where is love, why such extremes of pain, why evil, why is there change, why was Jesus necessary...

The monist problems are much more fundamental problems for Christianity than the pluralist problems!

19 December 2013 at 15:56

George Goerlich said...

@Bruce - This is probably above my pay grade, but many uncaused causes doesn't make sense to me. Or I don't get how it's a potential logical conclusion. Even science seems to seek one initial cause (i.e. Big Bang) - which is perhaps where my bias comes from. It seems necessary for there to be something before there was nothing, because isn't it impossible for nothing to produce somethings? So there must have always and eternally been God as the source?

I am probably misunderstanding, but if there were always and eternally multiple Gods it sort of undermines much of the impetus behind Christianity - (e.g. are you just choosing to worship the Jewish God over some Thor/Zeus/etc.? versus the One and Only God).

I think I don't get the idea of uncaused caused unless we assume the universe is God and He simply *IS* - the center / origination / eternal everything - all other causes branching out from Him. In such a conception it would be impossible for there to ever exist other uncaused causes before Him.

(I think most of this "alternative" conceptualizing on your part originates from trying to deal with the problem of suffering? - which I still have a great deal of trouble with as well)

19 December 2013 at 16:06

Bruce Charlton said...

@GG - As I keep saying, there are problems with all rival metaphysical/philosophical views!

"many uncaused causes doesn't make sense to me" - but why not, If one, why not more than one?

In particular, why not at least two? - God the Father AND Jesus Christ - or are they really just one (It's a trick question - don't answer it!).

"Even science seems to seek one initial cause (i.e. Big Bang)" - Yes that is the currently dominant hypotheses - but maybe it was wrong, and several genius physicists (e.g. Hoyle, Gold) were happy enough with the Steady State theory?

"f there were always and eternally multiple Gods it sort of undermines much of the impetus behind Christianity - (e.g. are you just choosing to worship the Jewish God over some Thor/Zeus/etc.? versus the One and Only God). "

Be careful with this. The Bible mentions multiple gods as well as the 'One' God - clearly 'god' has various meanings, disputed.

The way I look at it is God is as He is described in the Bible plus other trusted sources of revelation - I don't see any philosophical stuff, I see the description of a kind of person who does several things a person does and looks like a person, yet also with unimaginably great powers - far far (far) greater than any other powers - but that does not imply that He is the ONLY power in the whole of reality.

I find it no harder to imagine someone who looks like a man doing everything, than some kind of unimaginable abstraction doing everything -

and the fact is that revelation does describe Him as a person - so that has to be the first choice.

19 December 2013 at 17:22

Sylvie D. Rousseau said...

"I am by nature a pluralist."

This is illogical. Pluralism is not transcendental, it is not even axiomatic; nothing can *be plural by nature*. For example, we are not plural because we have a body and a soul, as Descartes thought, we are a composite; this is a very different thing. Conversely, angels are each of a different nature: there are as many different angelic natures as there are angels. They are in fact the separate "forms" of which Plato was speaking. This doctrine of separate forms was demonstrated by St. Thomas to be entirely true when applied to the angelic world.

A philosophical position is not something we hold by nature, either. There exist a natural philosophy and a natural religion, both of which regard unity as being prior to plurality, and the unique uncaused Cause, that is, the One God, as the condition for the existence of other beings, which are, exist, by participation, thus are included in the transcendental Being. Philosophers misapplied the notion of pluralism to being by participation, called in theology omnipresence. Others transferred pantheism on the philosophical plane by calling it monism.

19 December 2013 at 18:40

Nicholas Fulford said...

The only way that pluralism makes any sense is if each universe expresses a unique set of conditions that become the basis of an instantiated and unique universe.

If one postulates a multiverse of either a finite or infinite number of possible variations, then one could conceivably consider each universe as an expression of a distinct set of properties, (or God if you wish.) Only in such a scenario would a pluralist interpretation fit, because the properties of each universe reflects an instantiated set of properties at $t=0$. Our universe has a consistency in terms of its constants. Were it the expression of a set of uncaused causes, one would expect to see those properties changing unless the balance of action resulting from a set of uncaused causes was kept in continuous and unwavering check. If that were so, what is it that is causing

the unfolding action of uncaused causes to remain in check but some power or principle that transcends them. This power or principle would then of necessity be the One God, and the others an abstract extension, (or aspects.)

A famous talmudic story tells of four rabbis, Azzai, Ben Zoma, Elisha ben Abuyah, and Akiva who would meet together and engage in mystical studies. Azzai, the Talmud records, "looked and went mad [and] Ben Zoma died." Elisha ben Abuyah became a heretic and left Judaism. Rabbi Akiva alone "entered in peace and left in peace."

One may see plurality in unity as one sees many varieties of related expression in the unfolding Mandelbrot fractal. It is still but one equation that expresses that universe, not many.

[20 December 2013 at 02:06](#)

Thordaddy said...

I propose the First Law of Perfection... Nonduplication.

[20 December 2013 at 03:16](#)

Anonymous said...

If you are correct, then Nietzsche is right: the great tragedy of the post modern age has been reducing our gods to only one. Whereas, in the olympiad, for example, there were 12, so the death of one wouldn't necessarily be catastrophic, as the Death of God was. However, as Nietzsche focused his attention on why the Greeks themselves reduced their Gods to Apollo and Dionysus, perhaps the problem goes deeper...is it consciousness itself?

[20 December 2013 at 03:22](#)

Luqman said...

I think there is one way someone can be plural by nature; by being someone intuitively attracted to fundamental pluralism. Ya know?

beep boop the above is illogical

[20 December 2013 at 06:15](#)

Bruce Charlton said...

It is a peculiarity of some intellectuals to suppose/ assume that nothing makes sense except monism, yet to fail to recognize that monism is an assumption - instead to assume that monism is a necessary attribute of reality.

But this is just a psychological condition known as metaphysics-blindness!

20 December 2013 at 06:17

Bruce Charlton said...

Another thing about pluralism is that we were all pluralists when we were kids (and all hunter gatherers are, seemingly, pluralists)

- so, Pluralism is Natural and Spontaneous to Man.

This means that monism seems to be, and really is - in a sense, more adult, difficult and sophisticated than pluralism.

But that don't make it right!

20 December 2013 at 06:31

Sylvie D. Rousseau said...

I agree entirely that monism is an intellectual assumption going back only to Spinoza and Leibniz, in reaction to Descartes' pluralism. Philosophical and theological errors always come by opposite pairs, on either side of the truth.

“All hunter gatherers are, seemingly, pluralists”

I suppose this will be news to you but there was a fairly large group of hunter gatherers who were not monists but rather natural monotheists: the American Indians, to which I am related by blood. Their Great Spirit was obviously the One God, acting through the forces of nature.

20 December 2013 at 12:23

Bruce Charlton said...

@SDR - The Amerindian Great Spirit is the supreme God - who *I* would indeed regard as being God the Father - however he is not an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God who created everything ex nihilo and contains everything in Himself.

[20 December 2013 at 14:14](#)

Sylvie D. Rousseau said...

Thanks for your answer.

I was speaking about "natural" -- though Amerindian religious outlook is generally not that anymore. I was not alluding to reasoned, theological monotheism based on Trinitarian Revelation and deemed by Christian classical philosophers and theologians as not being a monism/pluralism dichotomy.

[20 December 2013 at 14:42](#)

Bruce Charlton said...

@SDR - I would also regard it as very probable that religious Amerindians who had never encountered Christianity would mostly have chosen to accept Christ's salvation after their death. As I imagine it, they would have been told of Christ's salvation and I suppose almost everyone (who was not deeply corrupted) would have accepted it immediately and gratefully. I would be less worried about this than about a typical modern man - who would I fear actively reject Christ's offer.

My understanding is that explicit knowledge of Christian revelation is not so much about salvation as theosis - it enables us to go further on the path and aim at a higher place.

[20 December 2013 at 16:10](#)

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