Theological Misinterpretations of Current Physical Cosmology

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In earlier writings, I argued that neither of the two major physical cosmologies of the 20th century support divine creation, so that atheism has nothing to fear from the explanations required by these cosmologies. Yet theists ranging from Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, and Leibniz to Richard Swinburne and Philip Quinn have maintained that, at every instant anew, the existence of the world requires divine creation ex nihilo as its cause. Indeed, according to some such theists, for any given moment t, God’s volition that the-world-should-exist-at-t supposedly brings about its actual existence at t. In an effort to reestablish the current viability of this doctrine of perpetual divine conservation, Philip Quinn argued (1993) that it is entirely compatible with physical energy conservation in the Big Bang cosmology, as well as with the physics of the steady-state theories. But I now contend that instead, there is a logical incompatibility on both counts. Besides, the stated tenet of divine conservation has an additional defect: It speciously purchases plausibility by trading on the multiply disanalogous volitional explanations of human actions.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been claimed that the Big Bang Cosmogony—and also the now largely unpopular steady-state cosmology—pose a scientifically insoluble

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1 An earlier version of this paper entitled “Origin versus Creation in Physical Cosmology” appeared in Lorenz Krüger and Brigitte Falkenburg (eds.), Physik, Philosophie und die Einheit der Wissenschaften, a Festschrift for Erhard Scheibe, Spektrum Akademischer Verlag, Heidelberg, 1995, pp. 221–254. The present version appears here by permission of the publisher and the coeditor Brigitte Falkenburg. This paper was delivered as an invited address at the international congress on Philosophy and Physical Cosmology, held in September 1995 at the International University Menéndez y Pelayo in Santander, Spain.

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problem of matter-energy creation and fail to explain why the world does not lapse into nonbeing at any given moment. We are told that this alleged conundrum is solved by postulating divine intervention as an external cause. If there is a first moment at which the universe begins to exist, we learn, then this creative supernatural intervention occurs at that moment and ever after. In any case, divine creative intervention is allegedly required throughout all existing time, no matter whether the universe has a temporal beginning or not. Yet some creationists assert only initial divine creation.

In the case of the Big Bang theory, the champions of divine creation have ranged from Pope Pius XII in 1951, as he told the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, to the British astronomer Bernard Lovell, the American astronomer Robert Jastrow, and to the theistic philosophers Richard Swinburne at Oxford and Philip Quinn at Notre Dame University in the USA. Lovell had made the same claim à propos of the steady-state cosmology.

In my earlier papers of 1989 through 1991, I disputed this theological twist. And I maintained more generally that atheism has nothing to fear at all from these two major twentieth century physical cosmologies, because neither of them support the idea of God-the-creator. But, I shall now argue further that, conversely, perpetual divine creationism actually has a great deal to fear from both of these cosmologies.

The familiar meaning of the word “creation” lends itself to the insinuation of a creative role of a supernatural agency without argument. As Webster’s Dictionary tells us, in its primary use, the term “creation” means: “Act of causing to exist, or fact of being brought into existence by divine power or its equivalent; especially the act of bringing the universe or this world into existence out of nothing.” Evidently, the transitive verb “to create” calls for a subject as well as an object. And in a cosmological context, the verb is laden with the notion of a divine agency or cause external to the entire world.

In a 1989 paper, which was reprinted in John Leslie’s 1990 volume Physical Cosmology and Philosophy (Grübaum Ref. 1; Grübaum Ref. 2), I argued that the question of whether the universe had a temporal origin had been fallaciously transmuted into the pseudo-problem of the creation of the world with its matter-energy by a cause external to the universe.

In a 1991 paper in Erkenntnis (Grübaum Ref. 4), I extended my arguments so as to include a critique of the thesis of the English physicist C. J. Isham. According to Isham, the Hartle and Hawking version of quantum cosmology lends itself to supporting Augustinian creation ex nihilo. Writing in a 1988 Vatican Observatory volume, Isham61 (p. 387) extolled as “profound” Augustine’s doctrine that God created both time itself and matter. Yet, as I shall explain at the end of Sec. 5, I contend that Augustine’s view is fundamentally unsound.