

Ultimate Explanation

There is a well known argument that goes roughly like this : natural science can explain most natural things by subsuming them under natural laws. However, there is a limit to this. What natural science cannot explain is why the natural laws we have exist at all.

Sometimes, it can explain one natural law by subsuming it under or relating it to a more general natural law. But it cannot explain why we have the most general natural laws that we have. An explanation in natural science has to make use of a natural law, so it is actually impossible for natural science to explain why we have the most general natural laws we have.

Two questions arise here. The first is whether this argument is valid. The second is what, if it is valid, follows from it.

Is the argument valid? It is clear that at any single moment there is a limit to what natural science can explain. Scientists will be the first to admit this. However, they will continue to work, forever. They will explain an increasing amount, but there will always be something that they can't explain. But is there anything that they can't explain *in principle*? It is presumably possible that natural science could discover a law that could not be explained further, in fact. That is, nothing was discovered or needed to be known that required further explanation of this law. Such a state of affairs could go on for a long time. Suppose it goes on for a thousand years. It clearly can't be assumed that this law might need further explanation because something happens that requires it. Scientists might justifiably think – as physicists did wrongly at the end of the 19th century – that they had finally solved a problem.

But what if they are asked *why that law*? Why is the world such that this law works? Can they explain that, in principle? The suggestion is they cannot, for they can only explain by reference to law, and then we can always ask, 'Why that law?'. Perhaps all that can be said is

that is how the universe works. But it might then be asked why it works that way. Can science answer *that* question? Well, it can only do so by looking for a more general law. And then the problem arises again. So, in some sense, the argument is valid. But what follows from it?

Two things are normally thought to follow from it. One is that there is a limit to what we can know, and of what lies beyond that limit we can only say that we are ignorant. We don't know. We may not know because there is something that we need to learn before we can go further. This may be some new evidence, or some new conceptual turn that we have not yet made. When we learn this, we can perhaps go further. Or it may be that we do not know because we *cannot* know. Perhaps the conceptual turn required is too tight, and our brains cannot make it. Perhaps, as someone once said, the universe is too complex to be understood by the human brain. Already, there are things in advanced physics that defy our comprehension in certain ways. Perhaps we are close to the point where we can go no further.

What also might follow is that we should look for a different *kind* of explanation. This would be one that doesn't involve subsuming what we wish to explain under a natural law. It would be what Richard Swinburne has called a *personal* explanation, one in terms of the actions of an intentional agent. Swinburne's view is that if we cannot provide a scientific explanation of something in the world then we *must* provide a personal explanation of it, otherwise we have no *ultimate* explanation of it. However, it is not clear why this follows, rather than the conclusion that we are simply ignorant, or that we have reached the end of what we can explain.

Swinburne thinks that for everything there must be some kind of ultimate explanation. And if there cannot be a scientific one, there must be a personal one. But suppose we accept there is a personal explanation for everything, a God say. Surely we will only then want

to explain that God. Why *that* God and not a different one? Why a God at all, as opposed to no explanation at all? The reply must be that if there is a God then he (it?) answers all our need for explanation. But it is not clear that this is true. It is not clear that *anything* can do this. If an 'ultimate' explanation is one that prevents us then saying, 'Why that?', then can there be an ultimate explanation? Surely we can always keep asking, 'Why that?'. That we can do this seems to be a consequence of the nature of our minds, particularly the way we think about causation. We conceive of things as being caused by other things. If at the apparent end of the causal chain there is a God, this is just another thing, about which we can ask, 'What caused that?'.

We are often told that God is a necessary being, as if this would prevent the question in relation to God, 'What caused that?'. The difficulty is that we cannot make any sense of a necessary being because of the compulsion we have to ask, 'What caused that?' of anything. A necessary being is one that we cannot conceive asking 'What caused that?' of. And it is not clear that we can make sense of such a being. Arguments for necessary beings are usually based on the claim that if we reject them we are left with an infinite causal regress, and then *nothing* is explained. But if this is so, we seem to be in what might be called a Kantian position, where we have to accept two contradictory propositions:

- i. There must exist a necessary being.
- ii. There cannot exist a necessary being.

What we seem to have reached now is the tight conceptual turn we talked of earlier, as a possible end to the search for scientific explanation. But now we have reached it doing philosophy. Whichever we reach it, we have to stop, at least for the time being.