Phil Religion: Van Inwagen on the Cosmological Argument

Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). If P, then there is some explanation for why P.

The Cosmological Argument from Contingency

1. There are contingent beings.
2. If there are any contingent beings, then there is an explanation for why there are any contingent beings. (PSR)
3. Any explanation for why there are any contingent beings involves something other than contingent beings.
4. So there is something other than contingent beings: that is, there is a necessary being.

Van Inwagen’s Argument Against the PSR

1. There are contingent facts.
2. If there are contingent facts, then it is a contingent fact that W is the actual world.
3. If S is not true at W, then S doesn’t explain why W is the actual world.
4. If S is true at some world other than W, then S doesn’t explain why W is the actual world.
5. If S is true at W but not at any world other than W (and it’s contingent whether W is the actual world), then S doesn’t explain why W is the actual world.
6. So no matter what S is, S doesn’t explain why W is the actual world. That is, there is no explanation for why W is the actual world.
7. So the PSR is false.

A Reply?

In fact, I think that it can be plausibly argued that the cause of the universe must be a personal Creator. For how else could a temporal effect arise from an eternal cause? If the cause were simply a mechanically operating set of necessary and sufficient conditions existing from eternity, then why would not the effect also exist from eternity? For example, if the cause of water’s being frozen is the temperature’s being below zero degrees, then if the temperature were below zero degrees from eternity, then any water present would be frozen from eternity. The only way to have an eternal cause but a temporal effect would seem to be if the cause is a personal agent who freely chooses to create an effect in time. For example, a man sitting from eternity may will to stand up; hence, a temporal effect may arise from an eternally existing agent. Indeed, the agent may will from eternity to create a temporal effect, so that no change in the agent need be conceived. Thus, we are brought not merely to the first cause of the universe, but to its personal Creator. (Craig 1991, p. 95)