




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Can pantheism explain the existence of the universe?

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(Received 12 July 2024; revised 24 September 2024; accepted 25 September 2024)

Abstract

Many traditional theists maintain that God is the ultimate explanation of the universe, for why anything exists at all. For the traditional theist, only a being who is fundamental and transcendent can provide an ultimate ground and explanation of the universe. This requirement that God transcend the universe in order to ultimately explain it poses a challenge for pantheism, the view that God is numerically identical with the universe. If God is identical with the universe, and God is supposed to be the ultimate explanation of the universe, the result is an instance of circular explanation. And circular explanations are allegedly illegitimate. In this article, I develop two explanatory models in an attempt to show that pantheism is consistent with non-circular explanations of the universe. All else being equal, I argue that pantheism is not explanatorily deficient in comparison to traditional theism.

Keywords: pantheism; traditional theism; grounding; metaphysical infinitism; metaphysical coherentism

Introduction

Traditional theists engaged in philosophical and natural theology have long argued that God is the ultimate explanation of the existence of the universe, for why anything exists at all.¹ For the traditional theist, only a being who is fundamental and transcendent can provide an ultimate ground and explanation of the universe. This requirement that God transcend the universe in order to ultimately explain it poses a challenge for pantheism, the view that God is numerically identical with the universe. If God is identical with the universe, and God is supposed to be the ultimate explanation of the universe, the result for pantheism is an instance of circular explanation. And circular explanations are allegedly illegitimate. Pantheism, therefore, is allegedly explanatorily deficient in comparison to traditional theism.

I respond to this challenge by developing two non-circular explanatory models of the universe that are consistent with pantheism, both of which are framed in terms of metaphysical explanation or grounding. These two models correspond to two versions of pantheism: distributive and collective. On distributive pantheism, each part of the cosmos is divine. On my first distributive model, I assume metaphysical infinitism, the view that every fact is grounded in some further facts ad infinitum. I argue that the universe itself has an explanation just in case each of its ‘parts’ does. On collective pantheism, the cosmos

as a whole, but no individual part, is divine. On my second collectivist model, I assume metaphysical coherentism, the view that grounding relationships are interconnected. I appeal to Ross Cameron's (2022) version of coherentism (what he calls 'holism') and argue that the universe has a holistic explanation of its existence. Both models make controversial assumptions. While I consider these assumptions plausible, I don't defend them here. Rather, my primary goal is to articulate these assumptions to show how pantheism can be consistent with non-circular explanations of the universe.

In the next section, I define traditional theism and pantheism, and clarify the kind of explanation my models target. I then develop my two explanatory models and argue they are consistent with pantheism. I conclude by responding to objections.

Divinity and ultimate explanation

While traditional theism is multi-faceted, a key characterising feature of this tradition is God's transcendence. While the God of traditional theism is immanent in creation vis-à-vis God's omnipresence, God is nonetheless wholly or ontologically 'other' and set apart from his creation. A typical way to cash out God's transcendence is in terms of God's aseity or ontological independence. *Aseity* derives from the Latin *a se*, meaning *of* or *from itself*. The doctrine of divine aseity says that God does not have his existence in virtue of anything else, and thus is ontologically independent (Gould 2014, 2). For the traditional theist, while God is the source of everything that exists, God himself does not depend upon anything else for his existence.

Pantheism is the diametrically opposed position to traditional theism. The term *pantheism* is derived from the Greek *pan*, meaning *all* or *every*, and *theos*, meaning *God*. Roughly, pantheism is the view that God is identical with the universe or that the universe is divine. Unlike the traditional theist, the pantheist collapses the distinction between God and the universe entirely. Pantheism should also be delineated from panentheism, which constitutes a kind of middle position between pantheism and traditional theism. Roughly, panentheists believe the universe in some sense is a part of God. So, on this view, God is neither *a se* nor identical with the universe.

Pantheism has a long historical pedigree in both Western and non-Western philosophical and theological traditions. There have been recent defences of pantheism as well.² However, my concern in this article is not any particular historical or contemporary figure's views regarding pantheism. Rather, my concern is how pantheism as an alternative model of divinity works as an explanatory hypothesis.

To that end, we first need a plausible working definition of pantheism. A plausible working definition needs to delineate pantheism from both traditional theism and other alternatives to traditional theism, like panentheism. I think Andrei Buckareff's definition fits the bill (2022, 8).

Pantheism =_{df} God is identical with the totality of existents constitutive of the universe.

The traditional theist will reject this definition since it identifies God with the universe and so fails to respect God's aseity or ontological independence. And the panentheist will reject this definition because the 'is' of identity is too strong a notion for expressing the relationship between the universe and the divine.³

Now, a central characteristic of philosophical and natural theology in traditional theism is the explanatory role that God plays vis-à-vis various natural phenomena and the universe itself. As Edward Feser argues, traditional theism is 'the thesis that God is to be conceived of *first and foremost* as the ultimate reality in the order of being, and the ultimate explanation of things in the order of discovery' (2023, 10).⁴ God is first in the order of being insofar as he

occupies the pinnacle of the hierarchy of existence. God is the greatest conceivable being, the underived source of all being and existence. And God is first in the order of discovery insofar as he is the ultimate explanation of everything. This approach is apparent in first-cause theology like that of Thomas Aquinas', where God is the first uncaused cause of all of creation, and so serves as the ultimate explanation of everything else.

Pantheism faces an explanatory challenge on this front. If God is the ultimate explanation of the universe, and God just is identical with the universe, then it follows that God (the universe) is the ultimate explanation of itself. Thus, we have a reflexive instance of explanation of the form 'A because A'. And reflexive explanations, or circular explanations more generally, are allegedly illegitimate.⁵ The traditional theist, by contrast, faces no such problem since God is numerically distinct from the universe. So, all else being equal, pantheism allegedly scores lower than traditional theism as an explanatory hypothesis about the existence of the universe since it violates basic formal principles regarding the logic of explanation.⁶

Before I respond to this challenge, I want to clarify two issues regarding the nature of ultimate explanation. First, what is *explanation* in the present context? Discussions of God's aseity and God's explanatory role vis-à-vis the universe within traditional theism tend to focus on causal forms of explanation. Instead, I frame this issue within the context of metaphysical explanation or grounding. Metaphysical explanations pertain to what makes something's being the case in a non-causal sense and concern the constitutive generation of a dependent outcome (Schaffer 2017, 305). For example, to causally explain the occurrence of a football match, we will describe the events preceding the match that led to its occurrence. To metaphysically explain it, we will describe the underlying 'goings-on' that make it the case that a match is occurring. We might say the occurrence of a football match is metaphysically explained by, and dependent upon, the various actions of its participants.⁷ I restrict my focus here to a conception of metaphysical explanation understood in terms of the notion of grounding.⁸ On this approach, we can say the fact that a football match is occurring is grounded in, or obtains in virtue of, facts about the actions of its participants. Unless otherwise noted, I use 'explanation' and 'ground' interchangeably throughout this article. I assume that grounding is a relation, the relata of which are facts. I'll say more about this in the next section.

Why frame this issue in terms of metaphysical explanation? There is a growing recognition that traditional theism, and theistic models of reality more generally, are amenable to being formulated in terms of grounding.⁹ One main reason for this is that grounding involves a kind of constitutive metaphysical dependence that is arguably required for notions like divine aseity. While a key component of traditional theism is undoubtedly God's being the first uncaused cause of the universe, notions like God's aseity invoke relations of ontological dependence, which are non-causal forms of metaphysical dependence. It is my working assumption that theistic models are naturally formulated in terms of grounding since grounding can adequately capture the relevant kind of dependence claims theists typically make. Nonetheless, since my focus here is on metaphysical explanation, I'm willing to concede that pantheism may be explanatorily deficient in comparison to traditional theism when it comes to causal explanation.¹⁰

Last, what is an *ultimate* explanation? There is a general consensus that an ultimate explanation is a kind of natural stopping point to a series of explanations of a given phenomenon.¹¹ This is no less true for the traditional theist. For example, Timothy O'Connor thinks of an ultimate explanation as 'a natural or nonarbitrary stopping point (even if only a schematic one) to the nested series of available plausible explanations for increasingly general aspects of the world' (2008, 65). So, we have roughly two conditions on ultimacy. First, an ultimate explanation is a stopping-point in so far as it is unexplained itself.

In the context of metaphysical explanation, this is equivalent to a notion of fundamentality. For some phenomenon x to be fundamental is for x to be ungrounded or ontologically independent (Schaffer 2009, 373).

The second condition on ultimacy says a stopping point must be a *natural* or *non-arbitrary* one. Bliss understands this condition in the following way. She says, ‘some *explanandum* is natural or non-arbitrary insofar as we are *not compelled to go beyond it – it does not stand in need of explanation*’ (Bliss 2024, 26). This seems right to me. If the ultimate explanation, E , of some phenomenon, P , stands in need of an explanation in the very same respect that P does, then E is arbitrary in some sense, and so ill-suited to serve as the ultimate explanation of P . So, E must not exhibit the very feature it is meant to be an ultimate explanation of. For example, some traditional theists will argue that the universe exhibits a certain degree of unity or a kind of contingency that requires explanation. To properly explain it, God cannot thereby exhibit the same degree of unity or be contingent in the same way. Otherwise, God’s existence/nature would call out for an explanation as well, and we’d be no better off having posited God’s existence.

We’ll see that my explanatory models for pantheism don’t conform to the traditional theist’s conception of ultimate explanation. But I’ll argue this is no strike against pantheism. Given pantheism’s radically different conception of the divine and its relationship with the world, we shouldn’t be surprised that the pantheist appeals to different conceptions of explanation. Nor should we feel entitled to impose a conception of ultimate explanation upon the pantheist that is endorsed by the traditional theist without independent reasons for doing so. I’ll revisit this issue below when I respond to objections. With these preliminary issues clarified, let’s move on to my first explanatory model.

Distributive pantheism

Buckareff’s definition of pantheism above is ambiguous between a distributive and collective interpretation (Oppy 1997). On distributive pantheism, each thing constitutive of God is divine. Karl Pfeifer seems to suggest this sort of view when he says, ‘everything (the whole) is [God] and [God] somehow exists in everything (each of the parts)’ (2016, 43). By contrast, collective pantheism says the totality of things constitutive of God is divine while none of the individual parts is divine. In this section, I offer a model for how distributive pantheism can be consistent with a non-circular explanation of the existence of the universe. I’ll begin by laying out my initial assumptions.

First, we need to specify our explanatory target. Since our target notion of explanation is grounding, I assume that the relata of the grounding relation are states of reality. These are akin to D.M. Armstrong’s states of affairs, but I’ll refer to them as facts. For both explanatory models in this article, I assume the Wittgensteinian view that the universe is just the totality of facts. I don’t see anything untoward regarding this assumption. One could just as easily talk about the universe as the totality or sum of its parts or aspects, or whatever. Since my focus here is on grounding, and I assume the relata of the grounding relation are facts, it is natural to construe the universe as the totality of facts.

More specifically, I’ll construe our explanatory target as a *plurality* of all obtaining facts.¹² Construing our explanatory target as a plurality also shouldn’t be controversial since it is in line with how some traditional theists construe the explanatory target of certain versions of the cosmological argument.¹³ Framing the explanatory target in this manner has the advantage of allowing us to speak of all facts without presupposing that they form a distinct entity in and of itself, like a set, since a plurality is nothing over and above its members.¹⁴ So, on my approach, we construe our explanatory target – the universe – as the existence of all facts as a plurality.

Second, my distributive model assumes that ground fails to be well-founded. Scott Dixon (2016, 446) defines well-foundedness as follows.

FS Every non-fundamental fact x is fully grounded by some fundamental facts Γ .

Well-foundedness is endorsed by the metaphysical foundationalist who believes there must be a foundation to reality. By contrast, the metaphysical infinitist denies that ground must be well-founded. The infinitist thinks that ground is a strict partial order but simply maintains there is nothing problematic with indefinitely descending chains of ground, i.e., chains that are not ultimately grounded in some fundamental facts. On this view, every fact is grounded in some further facts ad infinitum. No fact is fundamental. I assume infinitism in what follows.¹⁵

Third, my distributive model appeals to Kit Fine's notion of distributive plural ground. Pluralists conceive of ground as a many-many relation.¹⁶ On this view, we have a plurality of facts on the left-hand side ground a plurality of facts on the right-hand side. Grounding claims then take the following logical form:

The Y s are grounded in the X s

where both 'the Y s' and the 'the X s' are plural variables ranging over facts. Plural ground is distributive in the following sense. Take two pluralities of facts, Δ and Γ . Let's stipulate that Δ grounds Γ . On a distributive reading, each plurality decomposes into members such that individual members of one plurality ground individual members of the other. Fine gives the following definition, where ' $<$ ' denotes strict full ground. If Δ distributively grounds Γ , then 'there is a decomposition of Δ into subsets $\Delta_1, \Delta_2, \dots$ (with $\Delta = \Delta_1 \cup \Delta_2 \cup \dots$) and a corresponding decomposition of Γ into members C_1, C_2, \dots (with $\Gamma = \{C_1, C_2, \dots\}$) such that $\Delta_1 < C_1, \Delta_2 < C_2, \dots$ ' (Fine 2012, 54).

The idea is that for any plurality of facts, f_1, f_2, f_3, \dots , that distributively ground another plurality, g_1, g_2, g_3, \dots , it is individual members of the first plurality that ground individual members of the second plurality, such that f_1 grounds g_1 , f_2 grounds g_2 , f_3 grounds g_3 , ... and so on. So, distributivity entails that individual members of each plurality are grounded in individual members of the other (Oberle 2024, 1422).

Given these assumptions, how might distributive pantheism be consistent with a non-circular explanation of the universe? My proposed model is infinitist. So, consider an infinite series of facts, f_1, f_2, \dots such that f_n is explained by f_{n+1} . While each fact has an explanation, the traditional theist argues that the whole in some sense fails to receive an explanation. In lieu of some facts external to the collection, infinite regresses of the sort under consideration allegedly exhibit a kind of explanatory failure. David Hume and Paul Edwards famously denied this claim.¹⁷ Since each fact in the infinite series is explained by its antecedents, Hume and Edwards say they are all thereby explained. No appeal to an external explanation is required. This has come to be called the Hume-Edwards Principle (HEP).

Given a distributive conception of ground, we can then formulate the following ground-theoretic version of the Hume-Edwards Principle.¹⁸

G-HEP The plurality of all facts (i.e., the universe), ff , are fully grounded iff, for each fact x among ff , there are Γ such that Γ fully grounds x

Given infinitism, we have an infinite series of facts such that each fact is grounded in some further facts ad infinitum. According to G-HEP, the plurality of all facts (i.e., the universe)

has a ground, and so is metaphysically explained, just in case each fact that is a member of that plurality is grounded, as is the case on infinitism. On this model, the universe itself is explanatorily complete and so receives a kind of internal explanation. Since G-HEP is consistent with pantheism, it provides one way for the universe to have an explanation that is non-circular that does not appeal to a transcendent God.

There has been considerable debate regarding proposals like G-HEP. I've dealt with many of the surrounding issues elsewhere (Oberle 2023, 2024). Rather than rehash these debates here, I'll briefly address the common objection that G-HEP is circular.¹⁹ As I've argued elsewhere, there is nothing circular about G-HEP. Given an infinite regress of facts, G-HEP tells us that since each fact is grounded, they all are. Given that the series is infinite, it's not as though the infinitist thinks we have a series of facts that repeats, such that f_1 explains f_2 , f_2 explains f_3 , f_3 explains f_4 , ... f_n explains f_1 . Rather, at each 'level' of explanation, we have distinct facts from the ones that came before. So, there's no obvious threat of circularity in that regard (Oberle 2024, 1422). To get a circular instance of grounding out of G-HEP, we need to make controversial assumptions regarding the nature of plural ground that I think aren't motivated. I'll refer readers to my other work (Oberle 2023, 2024) for a more in-depth discussion.

Collective pantheism

On collective pantheism, the plurality of facts that constitutes the universe is divine taken as a collective, while no individual fact is divine. In the distributive model I outlined above, the explanation I offered was a linear one. Each fact is explained in terms of some further facts ad infinitum, and ground forms a strict partial order; it is asymmetric and transitive. So, there are no circles of ground. By contrast, collective pantheism arguably favours a non-linear model of explanation. In this section, I develop a holistic explanatory model of the universe that is consistent with pantheism. To get started, I'll first layout my initial assumptions.

Pantheists often stress the phenomenon of unity. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre says, 'Pantheism essentially involves two assertions: that everything that exists constitutes a unity and that this all-inclusive unity is divine' (1967, 98). And Anantanand Rambachan notes that the theology of the *Bhagavad Gītā* 'commends the knowledge that enables us to see "one imperishable Being in all beings, undivided in separate things." A false and inferior way of seeing is to regard things as isolated, separate, and independent of each other' (2023, 267).²⁰ This emphasis on unity often stems from the idea that the universe, as divine, constitutes some kind of mind. And minds are presumably highly unified entities. Consider Buckareff (2022, 14):

What is it about that with which God is identical that renders it suitable to describe it as a mind, and a *divine* mind, at that? That people simply have reverential attitudes and experience awe in the face of the vastness of the universe is not a very philosophically satisfying answer to this question. I suggest that at least one desideratum that must be satisfied is that there must be something about the universe as a totality that makes it a fit candidate to describe using theological language. I take it that to satisfy the desideratum in question, the universe must exhibit a certain type of unity we can ascribe to the whole.

It is not my concern here to discuss various kinds and degrees of unity that the universe would have to exhibit in order to count as divine. Instead, note that Buckareff ascribes unity to the universe as a whole but not necessarily the parts. This fits nicely with a collective interpretation of pantheism.

A highly unified conception of the cosmos naturally lends itself to, though perhaps does not entail, a coherentist metaphysic. Metaphysical coherentism is characterised by interdependence. Rather than view reality as hierarchically structured, the metaphysical coherentist countenances circles of ground. Circles or loops of ground may be achieved in several ways. One way is by symmetric instances of ground such that x grounds y , y grounds x , and $x \neq y$. Another is by reflexive instances, such that for some facts x and y , x grounds y and $x = y$. Consider the following examples.

Many North American Indigenous traditions that endorse a pantheistic conception of reality also emphasise the interrelatedness or interdependence of all things. V.F. Cordova writes,

In a Native American worldview there is no divinity that exists outside the universe—primarily, because there is no ‘outside’. Whatever *is*, is an indivisible, infinite, and divine *something*. All things are perceived as either *participating* in this one thing or being *manifestations* of the one thing (2007, 145–146).

She stresses the interdependence of everything as a result, writing, ‘The Native Americans take some general commonality for granted – we are, after all, all manifestations of the ONE thing’ (Cordova 2007, p. 106). And elsewhere, she writes,

The worldview that the child is being taught is that which places him in a world that he is ‘*a part of*’ rather than ‘*apart from*’. There is...an ‘enlarged sense of self’ that is being granted the child in this view of what it is to be human. There is, here, a sense of oneself as involved in an *interrelationship* rather than a mere *relationship* with the ‘other’ (Cordova 2007, 149).

Interdependence is a strong theme among many Indigenous traditions, expressed with the Cree word *Wāhkôhtôwin* in particular, which denotes the interconnected nature of relationships, communities, and natural systems. In part, it reflects the belief that everything in the universe is interrelated.

While this idea doesn’t necessitate a robust metaphysical view like coherentism, it is arguably a natural interpretation. For example, Joel Álvarez argues that many Native American traditions have a pantheistic conception of the divine that embrace a coherentist metaphysical picture of reality. For example, in Native American thought, the Great Spirit or divine is sometimes conceptualised as a Great Circle or Hoop that has within it smaller circles representing the created order. Álvarez writes,

... the smaller circles are the earth, the sun, stars, galaxies, trees, eggs, and humans. This entails that everything inside the Great Spirit is a circle. The whole world, the cosmos, and the universe are circles. But these things are not the only circles; the Great Spirit is also a circle. *Essentially, the circle is in everything and in each of us, and all these circles are within the Great Spirit* (Álvarez 2023, 165, my italics).

Álvarez’s characterisation of the relationship between the Great Spirit or the divine and everything else is symmetric. The Great Spirit, represented as a circle, is in everything and everything else – represented by smaller concentric circles – is within the Great Spirit. While the relationship here seems to be a mereological one, one could also read this as a claim of metaphysical dependence or grounding. Among various Indigenous

traditions, then, there is a natural tendency to associate pantheism with an interdependent or coherentist metaphysical framework. Collective pantheism, therefore, is naturally conceptualised within a framework of metaphysical coherentism.

However, ‘coherentism’ is a broad label that incorporates a dizzying number of varieties, all with varying degrees of strength. The common core is coherence, namely, a rejection of foundationalism and infinitism. Swiderski captures this with the following two commitments, which he calls the ‘Coherentist Canon’ (2024, 1864).

The Coherentist Canon (i) For any x , there is some y such that y grounds x , and (ii) there is some z and some w such that z (perhaps indirectly) grounds w and *vice versa*.

The first clause denies that there are any ungrounded or fundamental facts, and so functions as a rejection of foundationalism. The second clause is a denial of ground as a strict partial order. So, Swiderski’s characterisation of coherentism involves (1) non-well-foundedness and (2) mutual (i.e., symmetric) grounding. It may also be natural for the coherentist to deny irreflexivity as well.

There doesn’t appear to be any standard form of coherentism in the literature. And what gets called ‘coherentism’ varies considerably. For my purposes here, I assume the following strong version of coherentism, what Swiderski calls ‘Holism’ (2024, 1865).

Strong Coherentism For any facts x and y , x (partially) grounds y and y (partially) grounds x .

In a world where Strong Coherentism obtains, every fact is partially grounded in every other fact. Such a world exhibits the maximal degree of coherence or interdependence, and for that reason is likely the most implausible. For instance, it would entail that the fact that I am 5’10” is partially grounded by the fact that Edmonton is located in Alberta, Canada. And it seems incredible that the location of Edmonton should stand in any sort of explanatory relationship with my height. Though perhaps not a decisive objection, Strong Coherentism seems to violate our intuitive judgments about what grounds what.

Why adopt Strong Coherentism, then? Since coherentism itself comprises a broad range of views, it isn’t clear to me how the pantheist will want to understand their commitment to interdependence. Adopting Strong Coherentism is one way of doing so and gives us a kind of simplified toy model to show how explanation can work on a coherentist metaphysic, which is my primary goal here. I’ll leave it to the pantheist to sort out the finer details.

However, there is an obvious problem of circularity here. Since metaphysical coherentism countenances circular instances of ground, it therefore countenances circular instances of metaphysical explanation. Suppose that A grounds B , B grounds C , and C grounds A . We thereby have a circle of explanation. And this is problematic because it seems that all along the explanatory loop, we’re simply presupposing what it is that needs to be explained in the first place. Yet, since many metaphysical coherentists accept that explanation transfers along lines of ground, they endorse the possibility of circles of explanation (cf Barnes 2018).

A plausible strategy for avoiding this difficulty is for the pantheist to adopt an alternative account of metaphysical explanation that simply divorces metaphysical explanation from determination relations like grounding altogether. For example, Ross Cameron (2022) thinks coherentism is problematic insofar as metaphysical explanation can literally be transferred along lines of grounding in a circle. Instead, Cameron endorses a holistic form of explanation modelled on an analogous position called ‘epistemic holism’. Analogous to metaphysical foundationalism, epistemic foundationalism holds, roughly, that there are

some beliefs that are not justified by any further beliefs, which provide justification for all of our other beliefs.²¹ Analogous to metaphysical infinitism, epistemic infinitism holds that each belief is justified in virtue of some further beliefs ad infinitum, with no foundation of unjustified beliefs. In contrast to both views, epistemic coherentism holds that justification for a class of beliefs is holistic. For example, we can have a system of beliefs whereby B1 is justified by B2, B2 is justified by B3, and B3 is justified by B1. As Cameron notes, this sort of view can seem like magical thinking. If justification goes round in a circle, then where does the justification come from in the first place?

Rather than thinking of justification as literally transferred around in a circle, sophisticated epistemic coherentists think of justification as a holistic affair.²² The idea here is that we reinterpret models of justification as models of epistemic support. So, instead we say that B1 is epistemically supported by B2, B2 is epistemically supported by B3, and so on. But we deny that justification works in the same way. As Berker argues, ‘According to holistic coherentists, a belief is never justified *in virtue of* standing in a relation of support with another belief that is justified: justification does not *transfer* or *transmit* from one belief to another via inferential relations’ (2015, 332). Rather, as Cameron says, ‘the system of beliefs is collectively justified in virtue of the structural features of the system: in virtue of the pattern of relations of epistemic support that hold between the beliefs that form the nodes of the system’ (2022, 163).

Cameron models his version of metaphysical holism along similar lines, with metaphysical determination (i.e. grounding) in place of epistemic support and metaphysical explanation in place of justification. So, even if there are circles of grounding, there are no circles of explanation because explanation is not transferred along lines of metaphysical determination. Cameron writes,

We get an explanation for the nature of the system of entities as a whole, as a result of the pattern of [metaphysical determination] that holds among them, just as the holistic coherentist says that our system of beliefs as a whole is justified as a result of the pattern of epistemic support that holds among them (2022, 163).

Cameron cites gender and sexuality as one example. On his view, the nature of gender involves sexualised subordination, and the nature of sexuality involves gendered subordination. However, we do not thereby explain the nature of gender in terms of sexuality and vice versa. Rather, by this mutual relationship of dependence, we explain something about the nature of gender and sexuality *collectively*, namely, that nothing would be gender or sexuality, unless it related to the other in certain ways. Instead of taking ‘A exists’ or ‘A has such-and-such a nature’ to be the primary target of explanation, and then go on to explain it in terms of B and vice versa, the holist’s explanatory target should be claims like ‘the xs have so-and-so nature’. It is the nature or existence of the system of entities itself, collectively speaking, that is explained.

On my proposal, the universe is interdependent, and so exhibits a high degree of unity. But it is not the case that we have circles of explanation whereby the universe explains itself since we would be taking for granted what we are attempting to explain. Metaphysical explanation does not transfer along lines of ground. Instead, we explain holistically the collective nature/existence of the universe, which obtains in virtue of the structural features of the system as a whole. In other words, the holist will argue that we can understand in a holistic fashion why the universe exists and has the nature that it does, that is to say, why it is unified in the way that it is, why it has the parts that it has, and so on. On this model, explanation concerns ‘the structure as a whole – the *system* of entities, and what *they* are like collectively’ (Cameron 2022, 164).

It may seem there is something initially dissatisfactory about this holistic form of explanation. After all, on holism, what is the answer to the question of ‘What explains the existence of the universe?’ Admittedly, I’m not entirely sure what the content of this answer will be. But I refrain from offering a specific answer here because I suspect this will be a matter of some dispute among pantheists. But providing a specific answer to this question isn’t my goal anyway. What matters for my purpose is that holistic forms of explanation are legitimate contenders for how explanation can function within a coherentist system in various subfields of philosophy, including metaphysics and epistemology. And all I’m attempting to show here is that this is a plausible explanatory model that is consistent with pantheism.

However, even if explanation on my holistic model isn’t circular, we still have circular instances of grounding or metaphysical determination. And one might object that self-grounding or mutual grounding is problematic. We can refer to this objection as the ‘boot-strapping’ objection. For example, if ground is reflexive such that some fact x grounds itself, it seems that x ‘bootstraps’ itself into existence. A common worry is that this sort of bootstrapping is somehow contradictory. Speaking of ground as a determination relation, Paul Audi says, ‘Metaphysically speaking, there is nothing properly called self-determination. Putative cases involve determination between different facts, events, parts, or temporal stages of or about a single particular. I move myself, to be sure, but only by events in one part of me causing events in another’ (2012, 691–692).

Even though Audi’s remark is about the *metaphysics* of self-determination, his concern is really about the principle of non-contradiction. If we suggest that something moves itself at the same time and in the very same respect, a worry of contradiction arises.

In response, it’s unclear to me exactly how a formal contradiction arises from an instance of reflexive grounding. One concern is that for something to metaphysically determine itself, it must precede itself in time, which is impossible. But many understand grounding to be a synchronic notion rather than a process that unfolds over time. Thus, there’s no obvious problem with self-grounding in the sense that some fact must first exist in order to then make itself exist (Bliss 2018, 81).

One can look to the history of philosophy to further motivate the boot-strapping objection. Self-production more generally (or self-causation) was widely rejected as impossible by many historical thinkers (Lee 2006, 91). This is especially true for Scholastic thinkers like Aquinas. For Aquinas, the idea of something causing itself to exist such that it is both cause and effect simultaneously, was logically contradictory because of his Aristotelian analysis of causation (or motion more generally) as a reduction of potency to actuality. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (I, 13) Aquinas argues (Aquinas 1924, 25–26),

Nothing is at the same time in act and in potentiality in respect of the same thing. Now whatever is in motion, as such, is in potentiality, because motion is *the act of that which is in potentiality, as such*. Whereas whatever moves, as such, is in act, for nothing acts except in so far as it is in act. Therefore, nothing is both mover and moved in respect of the same movement. Hence, nothing moves itself.

Given this conception of causation, the idea of self-causation clearly violates the principle of non-contradiction. But it is only because self-causation would involve something being both A (potential) and not-A (actual) at the same time and in the same way that leads to a formal contradiction (Lee 2006, 97). Grounding is not analysed in the Aristotelian terms of act and potency. Rather, most understand grounding to be a primitive notion. Thus, there is no clear path to generating a formal contradiction from instances of self-grounding. And

any analysis of grounding that can generate such a formal contradiction will likely be controversial. So long as grounding is a primitive notion, self-grounding presents no immediate or obvious threat of formal contradiction.

Objections

In this final section, I'll respond to three objections. First, Cohoe (2020) argues there are two constraints for some entity serving as an ultimate being: aseity and unity. First, the ultimate being must be *a se*, that is, it cannot be ontologically dependent upon, or grounded in, anything else. This follows from our very definition of what it means for some being to be ultimate. Cohoe argues, 'If supposed ultimate being *A* were ontologically dependent on *B*, *A* would not, after all, be the ground of being, since *B* is grounding its existence. *B* would be more ultimate than *A*, precisely insofar as it grounds *A*' (2020, 204). Second, for some entity to be an ultimate being, it must have a sufficient degree of unity. Weakly unified collections of things do not qualify for being ultimate since they need some further explanation for why they have the constituents they have. As Cohoe says, 'the ultimate being can neither be a mere collection of things nor any sort of unified whole that depends on something external for its unity' (2020, 204). Cohoe argues this second constraint entails divine simplicity, the view that God is ontologically simple.

Cohoe then argues that pantheism cannot meet these two constraints. With regards to the first constraint – aseity – the universe certainly seems to be ontologically dependent in various ways. For example, given that the universe is complex, it seems the identity of the universe depends upon the identity of its parts. Similarly, Cohoe maintains that the universe exhibits a low degree of unity, which entails that it is ontologically dependent upon something else for the unity it does exhibit. Pantheism, therefore, fails to meet the requirements for offering an ultimate explanation of the universe.

Cohoe's two constraints on ultimacy are, I think, really just one and the same. The main point is that a being that is ontologically dependent (whether it is dependent upon something else for its existence, unity, identity, or whatever) cannot be ultimate. It must be ontologically independent or fundamental in every respect (Cohoe 2020, 208). This constraint on ultimacy reflects the conception of ultimate explanation standardly endorsed by the traditional theist, which I discussed earlier. Recall on that model, God is an ultimate explanation by virtue of being a natural or non-arbitrary stopping-point to a series of explanations.

I'm in agreement with Cohoe that pantheism cannot meet this constraint. But I don't think the pantheist must be committed to this constraint in the first place. So, I think it's question-begging for Cohoe to understand pantheists as being 'committed to thinking that the universe forms an ordered whole which counts as an ultimate being and satisfies aseity and unity' (2020, 205). When explaining the universe, the form that our explanation takes – that is, whether it conforms to a conception of ultimate explanation that is already amenable to traditional theism – doesn't matter all that much. Instead, what matters is whether the explanatory target under consideration can be met. The pantheist argues that the explanatory target – the existence of the universe – is met without appealing to an ultimate being that conforms to Cohoe's aseity constraint.

For example, consider first my distributive model of explanation. This model fails to adhere to both conditions of the traditional theist's conception of ultimate explanation. It is infinitist. So, there's no stopping-point. And with each level of explanation, we don't appeal to anything transcendent of, or distinct from, the universe. So, there's no *natural* or *non-arbitrary* stopping-point either. But for the pantheist, what is relevant is that the distributive model can meet the explanatory target in question, not whether it conforms to a particular conception of ultimate explanation. Recall that I construed our explanatory target – the

universe – as the plurality of all facts. And given a distributive form of ground, the plurality is grounded just in case each member of the plurality has a ground. So, the distributive model arguably meets the explanatory target without invoking anything fundamental or ontologically independent.

As such, insofar as God's ontological independence or aseity is equivalent to God's transcendence, Cohoe's constraint on ultimacy arguably begs the question in favour of traditional theism. The constraint simply rules pantheism out by fiat. So, we need independent reason to first think that only a being that satisfies an aseity constraint can meet the explanatory target in question. And it's important to note that Cohoe's argument is a conditional one. He doesn't argue in favour of the requirement he imposes on ultimacy, namely aseity. He only shows that if we accept it, then pantheism is explanatorily deficient with respect to traditional theism. In this case, his *modus ponens* is my *modus tollens*.

Second, with regards to my holistic model, I argued that we do get an explanation for the existence of the universe, just not one understood in terms of a linear form of explanation. As per Cameron's approach, we get a holistic explanation of certain facts about the system in terms of the structure of the grounding relationship that obtain within that system. I mentioned above that this form of explanation might seem inherently implausible. As such, my opponent is likely to object that a holistic model of explanation doesn't offer any explanation of the existence of the universe at all. However, if my opponent implicitly has a linear conception of explanation in mind here, then she's presupposing that the answer to the question, 'What explains the universe?' must conform to a linear or non-holistic form of explanation. But the holist simply rejects this form of explanation, and so will deny that an answer to the question must conform to the constraints of a linear kind of explanation. The holist's model does offer a kind of explanation of the existence of the universe, just not a conventional one.

Third, one may object that the notion of God or the divine plays no unique explanatory role in the two models I've sketched above since both models are consistent with atheism. I think this is right. So, in one sense I think Schopenhauer is right when he accuses 'pantheism' of being a euphemism for 'atheism'. In a well-known passage, he writes (1974, 114),

Pantheism is a concept that invalidates itself, since the concept of God presupposes as its essential correlative a world different from him. If, on the other hand, the world itself is to take over his role, there remains simply an absolute world without God, and so pantheism is only a euphemism for atheism.

Schopenhauer is correct here only in that both pantheism and atheism understand the universe to be absolute or explanatorily complete in its own right. Nonetheless, this objection would only affect my argument in this article if I were trying to offer a cosmological-style argument in favour of pantheism. That has not been my goal. All I've tried to show is that pantheism is consistent with non-circular explanations of the existence of the universe. To that end, it's irrelevant whether the explanatory models I've offered carve out a unique explanatory role for a pantheistic conception of the divine.

Conclusion

I've developed two explanatory models in this article to show that pantheism can be consistent with non-circular explanations of the universe. To reiterate, I have not offered an explanatory or cosmological-style argument in favour of pantheism. These models are intended only to diffuse the objection from the traditional theist that pantheism, at best,

can only offer us a circular explanation of the existence of the universe. Admittedly, my explanatory models look very different from the traditional theist's conception of ultimate explanation. But a key takeaway from my discussion is that pantheism isn't beholden to a particular conception of explanation that favours, or is otherwise amenable to, traditional theism. The pantheist doesn't subscribe to a traditional conception of God. So, why should the pantheist subscribe to the traditional theist's conception of ultimate explanation?

Competing interests. None.

Notes

1. I use the term 'traditional theism' rather than 'classical theism' because 'classical theism' sometimes narrowly denotes a metaphysic of the divine defended by Thomists and their followers as opposed to the more general 'omni-God' metaphysic of the divine. I take my arguments in this article to apply more broadly.
2. See Levine (1994) and Byerly (2019).
3. I don't endorse Buckareff's definition as *the* definitive and final definition of pantheism. Nor do I endorse his definition as a normative one. I simply adopt it as a plausible working definition.
4. To be clear, Feser is articulating *classical* theism. But I take his characterisation to apply to what I call *traditional* theism as well.
5. Since I am working within a framework of grounding, it's important to note that there is disagreement regarding whether circular instances of grounding are illegitimate. I assume that it is for the purpose of defending pantheism against this challenge.
6. I think the pantheist can avoid this challenge by simply rejecting the traditional theist's explanatory project. As far as I can tell, pantheists endorse their view of the divine on the basis of experience rather than on the basis of cosmological-style arguments. Nonetheless, I think it is worthwhile to show that pantheism can adequately respond to this challenge even if we accept the traditional theist's explanatory approach.
7. Some also delineate causal from non-causal or metaphysical explanations using the synchronic/diachronic distinction. Causal explanations occur diachronically or through time whereas metaphysical explanations obtain synchronically or 'through levels'.
8. For prominent discussions of grounding, see Schaffer (2009), Fine (2012), and Audi (2012).
9. See Oberle (2022, 2024), Pearce (2017), and Cohoe (2013, 2020).
10. See (Levine 1994), chapter 4 for a discussion of how the pantheist treats the issue of the creation of the universe in opposition to the traditional theist.
11. For example, Bliss (2024) endorses this conception even though she is not formulating her views within the context of traditional theism.
12. I'll remain neutral on whether this involves natural facts or not and whether this involves only actual facts as opposed to possible facts as well.
13. For example, see Pruss and Rasmussen (2018, 34–35).
14. See Boolos (1984) and (1985).
15. Metaphysical infinitism is a matter of controversy. For defences, see (Oberle 2022; 2023; Cameron 2022). For defences of foundationalism, see (Schaffer 2010) and (Cameron 2022).
16. See Litland (2016) and Dasgupta (2014) for accounts of plural ground.
17. Edwards says, 'If we have explained the individual members there is nothing additional left to be explained' (2000, 207). See also Hume (1980, Part 9, 56).
18. I've adapted this from Oberle (2023, 2024).
19. For claims that G-HEP, or something similar, is circular within the context of cosmological arguments, see Rowe (1997, 197), Van Inwagen (2024, 159), and Rasmussen and Leon (2019, 18).
20. I should note that it is controversial whether the theology of the Gītā expresses a pantheistic model of the divine's relationship with the universe.
21. See Hasan and Fumerton (2018).
22. See BonJour (1985). See Berker (2015) for a recent discussion.

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Cite this article: Oberle T (2024) Can pantheism explain the existence of the universe?. *Religious Studies*, 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000623>