

# The Russell–Copleston Debate

Apr. 25, 2014

# Overview I

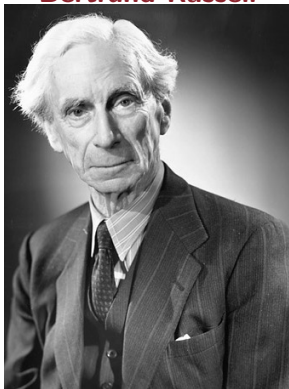
Preliminaries

The debate

Part 1

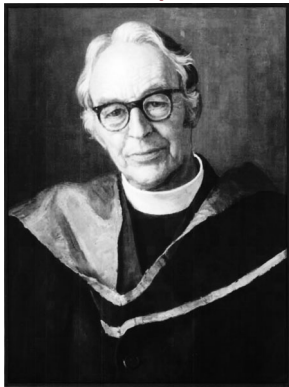
Part 2

## Bertrand Russell



- 1872–1970, Oxford
- Philosophy of language, epistemology, mathematics, logic, etc.

## Frederick Copleston, SJ



- 1907–1994, England
- History of philosophy, metaphysics, philosophy of religion

# Preliminaries

- The debate took place in 1948 (BBC broadcast)
- It is a philosophical argument; both are trying to win the game by their intellect (almost like a chess-game)
- Copleston's argument: based on Aquinas's Third Way, and Leibniz's argument from the principle of sufficient reason
- Russell's position: agnostic
- Some terminology:
  - necessary, contingent
  - deductive, inductive reasoning
  - *a priori*, *a posteriori*
  - analytic, synthetic propositions
  - tautology

# The Debate – Part I

## Reconstruction: Copleston's Argument from Contingency

- $P_1$  There are some things in the world that do not contain in themselves the reason for their existence.
- $P_2$  The world itself is such a thing.
- $P_3$  Thus, the existence of the world can be only explained by something outside the world, a creator.
- $P_4$  If this creator did not contain in itself the reason for its existence, this would lead to an infinite procession of creators.
- $P_5$  However, such an infinite procession is impossible (it would not provide any explanation).
- $\therefore$  Therefore, there must be something outside the world that created the world, and which contains in itself the reason for its own existence (= it is necessary).

## Reconstruction: Russell's Response

- The term 'necessary' can only be applied to analytic propositions (e.g., 'bachelors are married' is necessary in this sense)
- Thus, the only legitimate way to argue for the existence of a necessary being is to show that its denial is self-contradictory (- ontological argument!)
- But Copleston is not arguing this way, so it seems that his argument is just meaningless (it is like saying that the number 3 is loud).
- The existence of the world is a 'brute fact': there is no cause / sufficient explanation for it: "The universe is just there, and that's all." — Basic disagreement: whether the universe has meaning or not.

# The Debate – Part II