The Copleston Russell debate took place in 1948 on BBC Radio. It can be split into five distinct sections. The nature of the argument is discourse and so both parties should be explained in each area. We begin with Copleston’s main argument from contingency.

Copleston’s argument is based on Aquinas’ third way from possibility and necessity and Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason. He asks us to view the world as objects which do not contain within themselves the answer for their own existence. He uses the example of depending on his own parents and now food and air etc. He states the universe is the real or imagined totality or aggregate of individual objects, none of which are capable of explaining themselves. The world isn’t distinct from its objects any more than the human race is distinct from its members. Since no object contains the reason for its own existence there must be an external reason beyond the universe and this reason must be an existent being. This being is either the answer for its own existence or it is not. But the chain of dependency cannot go on ad infinitum or else this would be absurd as we would have no explanation for the universe at all. So in order to explain existence we must come to a being whose existence is contained within it which is to say a being which cannot not exist. This is the essence of Copleston’s argument from contingency.

Russell raises a number of issues with this. The argument continues down a discussion of the term necessity and the difference between a priori and a posteriori. Russell suggests that the term ‘necessary being’ has no meaning outside analytic propositions. In fact he argues that analytic propositions are somewhat logically late in the build up of propositions. He states that he could only accept the term ‘necessary being’ if it could be demonstrated that this being was one whose existence it would be self-contradictory to deny. Russell believes that the term ‘necessary’ cannot be applied to things a posteriori as well as the term ‘contingent’. Copleston states that Russell is being over dogmatic on his insistence of adhering to what he terms ‘modern logic’ (Western analytic philosophy). He suggests that once you know that a contingent being exists it follows of necessity that there is a necessary being. Russell insists that he isn’t being dogmatic, just that certain things are meaningless outside of a priori analytic discussions, stating that this is essentially an ontological argument. Copleston asks whether the question “Does the cause of the world exist?” have any meaning, to which Russell replies, if you state that “God exists” this can never be analytic as the term can only have meaning a priori.

The conversation shifts to the principle of sufficient reason. Copleston suggests that if anyone saw God, he would see that God must exist. God’s essence and existence must be identical or we would need sufficient reason beyond God. However he states that this would only be known a posteriori and not a priori. Russell questions whether Copleston has explained the principle of sufficient reason, asking whether lighting a match by striking it against a box is a sufficient reason. Copleston suggests that it is only a partial explanation and a sufficient reason must be a total explanation to which nothing further can be added. Russell claims that he is looking for something he cannot get and shouldn’t expect to get. Copleston argues that to look and find nothing is one thing, but to say you shouldn’t look is dogmatic. Russell insists that these ideas are effectively beyond our epistemological limits.

The debate continues into the meaning of the term ‘universe’ and the fallacy of composition. Russell believes the term
‘universe’ has no meaning. Copleston wants to know if he thinks the universe is unintelligible, he suggests that the universe is without explanation while Copleston states the universe is intrinsically unintelligible without God. After all an infinite number of chocolates are still not a sheep. Contingent objects cannot explain themselves without a necessary being. Copleston questions whether the world is gratuitous as Sartre suggests, to which Russell replies that “the universe is just there and that’s all” indicating his belief that the universe is a brute fact. Copleston states that you cannot rule out the legitimacy of the questions of where the universe came from, to which Russell gives the fallacy of composition: just because every man has a mother it doesn’t follow that the whole human race has a mother as that’s a different logical sphere. Copleston disagrees as he states that this may be the case if looking for phenomenal cause but he is looking for a transcendent one.

Finally the two move onto quantum physics and a discussion of whether things need to have a cause at all. Copleston suggests that scientists pre-suppose a cause as do metaphysicians. Russell states that it doesn’t mean there are causes everywhere, using the example of a man looking for gold. He suggests ultimately that looking for an explanation for the world is a mistake. Copleston argues that scientists assume the universe is not discontinuous but ordered and intelligible. However Russell states that they don’t assume that they will always find a cause, just that it may be likely. Copleston says that they don’t hope for more than probability but assume that the question of explanation has meaning. He asks whether it is an illegitimate question to ask the cause of the world and Russell states that this is his position. The discussion then moves on to a debate on religious experience as they agree to disagree.