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## From a Necessary Being to a Perfect Being

T. Ryan Byerly

Cosmological arguments for the existence of God typically proceed by defending an intermediate conclusion — that there is a first cause, or necessary being, for example — and then arguing that the being referred to in this intermediate conclusion is God. Most of the historical and contemporary discussion of these arguments has focused on their first stage — the stage of the arguments intended to support their intermediate conclusions. But an important objection to these arguments is that they face a ‘gap problem’: a problem of convincingly arguing that their intermediate conclusion provides evidence for their main conclusion, that God exists. In this paper, I develop a simple proposal for how to bridge this gap. The proposal is applicable to cosmological arguments such as Leibnizian cosmological arguments where the intermediate conclusion is that there is a necessary being, and this necessary being provides the explanation for a wide range of contingent truths. The proposal developed here stands out as distinct from other contemporary attempts to solve the gap problem in its simplicity, in its being abductive rather than deductive, and in its borrowing salient ideas from ontological arguments, albeit without inheriting all of the difficulties associated with those arguments.

For illustrative purposes, consider the following first-stage Leibnizian cosmological argument:

- (1) Every contingent existential fact has an explanation.
- (2) The conjunction of all contingent existential facts is itself a contingent existential fact.
- (3) The conjunction of all contingent existential facts can only be explained by the activity of a necessary being.
- (4) So, there is a necessary being whose activity explains the conjunction of all contingent existential facts.

Arguments not unlike this one have been defended by both historical and contemporary thinkers as part of their case for the existence of God (see, e.g., Pruss 2009). Certainly there are important objections to the reasoning of (1)-(4) itself. Discussion of these objections, as suggested above, tends to be the focus of attention in evaluating Leibnizian arguments of this kind. However, a separate objection to these arguments, where they are taken to be parts of arguments for the existence of God, focuses on the fact that (4) does not yet make a claim about God. Why should we think that the existence of a necessary being of the sort identified in (4) provides reason to think God exists? Why should we think this being is God? This is the gap problem as applied to such arguments.

The importance of this gap problem has recently been brought to the fore in the work of Graham Oppy (2014). Oppy proposes to identify a damning objection against all cosmological arguments, including Leibnizian ones of the sort just identified. His objection is that it is more reasonable to think that the necessary being identified in these arguments is a natural being than a supernatural being, on grounds of theoretical simplicity. Since God is a supernatural being, these arguments do not provide reason for believing in God. Instead, they provide reason for believing in a naturalistic necessary being. And, indeed, this is precisely the view Oppy himself finds most attractive. On what he calls his favoured theory of modality, ‘possible worlds all “share” an initial history with the actual world and “branch” from the actual world only as a result of the outworkings of objective chance (47).’ The shared initial history (perhaps together with the laws, which Oppy also thinks are shared across worlds) is a necessary being — one that exists in all possible worlds — that explains a wide range of contingent facts, potentially as wide as those referred to in Leibnizian cosmological arguments.

With this important challenge concerning theoretical economy noted, how might the theist attempt to bridge the gap, arguing that there is indeed reason to think that the necessary,

explanatory being of the first-stage of Leibnizian cosmological arguments is God? Existing attempts to bridge the gap are couched in deductive terms, and often get quite complex quickly (see, e.g. Gellman 2000, Pruss 2009, and Rasmussen 2009). In this paper, I develop a simple, abductive alternative. I do so by borrowing some key ideas from ontological arguments.

The origin of my proposal lies in a question we might sensibly ask once we've reached the conclusion that there is a necessary, explanatory being of the sort identified in (4). Namely: why does this being exist necessarily? Or, more perspicuously, why do we find that this being has necessary existence? In asking the question, I don't mean to presuppose that there must be a good answer to it available. Rather, I simply raise the question in the hopes that perhaps there is a good answer to it available, and with the presumption that if there is a sufficiently good answer to it that is better than its rivals, this would provide abductive confirmation of this answer.

So, why do we find that this being has necessary existence? Here's one answer: we find this because it is a perfect being — a being possessing all perfections — and necessary existence is a perfection. The idea behind this answer is that the fact that the being possesses all perfections would explain why it is that all of the perfections we've investigated have applied to it. All of the sample perfections we've investigated — namely, necessary existence<sup>1</sup> — apply to this being because the being possesses all perfections. In supposing that in cases like this universal generalizations would explain observations of their instances, this proposal is endorsing an idea commonly affirmed by others (see e.g., White 2005). Compare, for example, the felicitous explanation that some particular raven is found to be black because all ravens are black.

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<sup>1</sup> The sample of investigated and possessed perfections might be larger given Oppy's particular views of modality. For, on Oppy's views, whatever could be is to be explained by this necessary being as well, suggesting that it is perfect in power. There is nothing that could come about that this being would not account for.

This proposed answer to our question borrows certain salient ideas from definitional ontological arguments. In particular, if it is to be used to defend the conclusion that God exists, then it will borrow commitments to (i) the idea that God is by definition a perfect being (or at least that a perfect being would be God) and (ii) the claim that necessary existence is a perfection. In a positive vein, this borrowing shows that the ideas that motivate the proposed answer are deeply entrenched. They have a history of endorsement. Of course, on the other hand, the history of discussion of definitional ontological arguments has not always been flattering toward these arguments. So, we might ask whether the kinds of objections that are most forceful against these arguments will not also be forceful against the proposed answer to our question about why the necessary being's existence is necessary.

Here it is worth noting that the ideas the present answer is borrowing from these arguments are among the commitments of ontological arguments that are challenged with least confidence by their opponents (Kant notwithstanding). Oppy (1995, 2016), for example, who is himself one of the leading contributors to contemporary discussions of ontological arguments, doesn't dispute either of these commitments, but instead disputes other features of these arguments. Indeed, he is quite critical of the Kantian objections that would falsify (ii). Of course, not everyone will follow Oppy in dismissing the Kantian objection. So, it is worth noting that the dialectical force of the present argument is limited to those who are not convinced by this Kantian line. Setting the Kantian objection aside, there is reason to think that if it were true that the necessary being in view in (4) were a perfect being, this would explain why we find that it has necessary existence, and it would imply that this being is God.

Yet, we don't quite yet have our gap-closing abductive argument complete. For, to generate this argument, we need it to be the case not only that this proposed explanation has explanatory power over the phenomenon in question — namely, that the being referred to in

(4) has necessary existence — but we need it to be the case that this proposed explanation is a sufficiently good explanation of this datum that is better than rival explanations.

Is there reason to think that the proposed explanation, despite its explanatory power, is not a good explanation? Such reason would need to derive from worries that the proposed explanation is incoherent, or that it conflicts with our background knowledge.<sup>2</sup> One might argue, for example, that the existence of a perfect being is impossible, or that its existence would conflict with facts about evil. Yet, these kinds of objections, to the extent they threaten the present argument, equally threaten any theistic argument. We shouldn't demand that the present argument be able to do something — i.e., overcome such objections — that no theistic argument can do. Indeed, responding to atheistic arguments is one thing and providing theistic arguments another.

So we are left with the question of whether there are rival explanations of why the necessary being has necessary existence that are just as good as the proposed explanation. The relevant rivals will need to be naturalistic explanations, or at least non-theistic explanations. So, the question is, is there some non-theistic explanation for why the being referred to in (4) has necessary existence that is just as good as the proposed explanation? I suggest that there is not.

What we should expect from such an explanation is that it would highlight some internal features of the being in question that would explain why we find that it has necessary existence. It would not do, for instance, to be told that the being has the perfection we've investigated — necessary existence — because it was identified as the being playing the appropriate role specified by the conclusion of a cosmological argument. What we are wanting to know is precisely why this being plays this role, and in particular why it is a

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<sup>2</sup> I am supposing, for simplicity's sake, that the criteria of explanatory goodness are simplicity, conservatism, and explanatory power. Cf. (Poston 2014).

necessary being. We are wanting to know what there is about this being itself, if anything, that accounts for why we have found via this argument that it exists necessarily.

It may be instructive here to compare a case where you are given an argument for the existence of a black raven, and then wonder why that raven is black. It would not do to be told that it is black because it was identified as the raven in view in the conclusion of an argument for the existence of a black raven. Rather, the sort of explanation you are after might instead say that it is black because all ravens are black (presumably because of something about the internal nature all ravens share in common), or because of some internal features of this particular raven that account for its blackness. The explanation you are after, and appropriately so even if none such proves available, is an explanation in terms of features internal to the object in question.

The problem, however, is that in our case we have so little idea what a non-theistic, explanatory necessary being would be like that we are really in the dark here. None of the naturalistic beings which populate our everyday experience are such that there is something about their internal nature that explains why they would be necessary. And the same point holds when we turn our attention to what are likely the best candidates for the necessary naturalistic being, such as early temporal segments of the universe as characterized by leading scientific models of cosmology.<sup>3</sup> For example, one attractive candidate here would be the inflationary segment of the very early universe posited by the so-called Standard Model.<sup>4</sup> This is an attractive candidate not only because of the epistemic standing of the Standard Model itself, but because inflation has been posited as a mechanism that could introduce contingency<sup>5</sup> — an important function the necessary being must serve. What is relevant for

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<sup>3</sup> The reader may be interested to know that Oppy (2014) himself doesn't supply further details about what the naturalistic necessary being is—his characterisations are at a very abstract level (as above: an “initial history” of the universe), because nothing further is needed for stating his argument. I am here attempting to offer some charitable, more detailed suggestions.

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to the Standard Model written for philosophers, see (Smeenk and Ellis 2017, Sect. 1).

<sup>5</sup> For an accessible explanation of why inflation might serve this function, see (Lewis and Barnes 2016: 297ff).

our purposes is that there is nothing about the internal nature of this initial inflationary segment that would explain why it is necessary if it is. We know various things about the segment (and don't know others, it should be added). We know it was extremely hot, dense, and subject to very rapid expansion. But there is no explanatory relation connecting these or any other known features of this initial segment to the feature of necessary existence. If the segment is necessary, the explanation (if there is one) for why it is necessary is opaque to us. Similar points will apply to the initial segments (whether finite or infinite) of more speculative scientific cosmologies, though in many of these cases we are even more in the dark about what these segments are like than we are on the Standard Model.

We might instead turn our attention to more exotic naturalistic beings, searching here for a being whose internal nature can explain why we find it to have necessary existence. Yet it is important to keep in mind that the beings in view must not only possess necessary existence, but must serve the explanatory function demanded by cosmological arguments. Certain exotic beings that are not-so-bad candidates for naturalistic beings that have necessary existence are not-so-good candidates for serving this latter function. This is true, for example, of existence itself and of abstracta. These beings (supposing they are beings) may be necessary, and perhaps there is even something about their internal nature that explains why they are necessary — e.g., in the case of abstracta, they are causally inaccessible. Yet, they are not good candidates for explaining all contingent existential facts.

Nor are we helped if we turn to supernatural beings, searching here for a non-theistic being whose internal nature will explain why it is necessary. For one thing, if we propose (departing from Oppy) that the being in question is a supernatural being that provides the explanation for the wide range of facts cited in the cosmological argument, then the so-called 'gap' is no longer very wide. Moreover, it remains unclear what else can be said about the being that would explain why we find that it has the perfection we've investigated that would



explain this just as well as the proposal that it has all perfections. For example, the proposal that it has necessary existence because it has many but not all perfections is no more attractive than the proposal that all of a sample of ravens are black because many but not all ravens are black.

The search for a naturalistic (or at least non-theistic) being whose internal nature explains why it is necessary, and which can serve as the explanation for the wide range of facts in view in cosmological arguments, is one that may appear hopeless before it even gets up and running. By contrast, the idea that the necessary being that explains the facts referred to in these arguments has necessary existence because it is perfect is well-worn. At present, then, it appears we may reason abductively as follows:

- (5) The best available sufficiently good explanation for why the being in (4) has the perfection we've investigated — necessary existence — is that this being is a perfect being.
- (6) So, there is a perfect being.
- (7) If there is a perfect being, there is a God.
- (8) So, there is a God.

This reasoning enables us to bridge the gap faced by many cosmological arguments, enabling these to overcome an important objection that threatens all cosmological arguments. It isn't the only way to bridge this gap, but it is a simple and innovative way with some historical purchase. It is a way that puts pressure on the atheist to either defend an alternative objection to the relevant cosmological arguments, or else to identify an alternative, non-theistic explanation for why the necessary being is necessary that is just as good as the explanation available to the theist.

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