

CHAPTER I

Introduction

“People have at all times been talking of an *absolutely necessary* Being.”

–Immanuel Kant¹

1. The Question of Necessary Existence

Virtually everything we encounter in ordinary experience can, apparently, fail to exist. Cars, iPads, telephone poles, towers, flowers, mittens, kittens, bricks, sticks, planets, stars, dust: none of these things *have to* exist, it seems. We can easily imagine a universe without such things; and there was a time before anything of these sorts existed. It seems the things we are familiar with are *contingent*—i.e., possibly absent.²

Is everything contingent? Or, might there also be one or more things that exist *of necessity*? A necessary thing, as we are thinking of it, would be something that exists no matter what possible situation obtains. Its non-existence at any time would be impossible in the strongest sense. So, for example, a necessary thing cannot be assembled or disassembled. It cannot snap into being or snap out of being. It cannot *not* exist—no matter what. Is there anything like that?

¹Kant and Müller 1907.

²There is Williamson’s proposal (Williamson 2001) that *everything* exists of necessity. But even Williamson allows for contingency in the world. He says it is contingent, for instance, whether a given physical thing is physical (pp. 12–13). And in general, where one might ordinarily say that objects pass in and out of existence, Williamson will say they pass in and out of a certain basic category of being (a category he calls “concrete,” which is to be distinguished from the category of causally-capable things, which *we* call “concrete”). Someone in Williamson’s shoes could wonder, therefore, whether anything is necessarily on the side of this basic category which they are currently on.

In this book, we are primarily interested in the prospect of a necessary *concrete* thing, which we take to be anything capable of causation. We intend to use the term “cause” in a minimal sense to designate anything that acts as an antecedent condition (or entity) that is at least partially responsible for some event. Causes need not be sufficient for their effects: for instance, we could say that *Adam’s smoking* caused *Adam’s lung cancer*, even though his smoking didn’t *have to* cause lung cancer. Also, we allow substances to be causes, even if “substance causation” is to be analyzed in terms of “event causation”.³ In general, we take no sides on what sort of things can be causes; we leave it open, for instance, whether numbers, properties, propositions, sets and other so-called “abstract” entities may have causal powers and so count as “concrete” in our stipulated sense. Our question, then, is this: is there anything that (i) possibly causes something (is *concrete* in our sense) and (ii) exists no matter what? In keeping with tradition, we will call anything that satisfies both (i) and (ii) a “necessary being.” We inquire: are there any necessary beings?

We will set out a case for an affirmative answer. We will lay the groundwork in Chapter II, where we motivate a standard logic of the *necessary* and the *possible*. Then, over the course of six chapters, we will present six arguments for the existence of a necessary being. The first argument is an up-to-date defense of a traditional explanation-based argument from contingency. The next five arguments are new possibility-based arguments that make use of twentieth-century advances in the logic of necessity. We aim to present the arguments as possible pathways to an intriguing and far-reaching conclusion. In the final chapter, we will address what we take to be the most challenging objections to the existence of necessary beings. Finally, in an appendix, we will offer a number of additional valid arguments for a necessary being, without detailed discussion, in the hope of inspiring further inquiry.

³So, for example, one might analyze “John caused the fight” as “John’s rude comments caused the fight.”

2. Why Necessary Existence Matters

The question of necessary existence is relevant to several fields of inquiry, including cosmology, ontology, and theology. Start with cosmology. Many physicists and cosmologists are extremely interested in questions about ultimate explanations. Stephen Hawking states that his goal as a physicist is “a complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is and why it exists at all” (Boslough 1989, p. 77). Echoing a similar sentiment, cosmologist Sean Carroll writes, “We are looking for a complete, coherent, and simple understanding of reality” (Carroll 2005, p. 634). Brian Greene, a theoretical physicist, asserts that an ultimate explanation of the universe “would provide the firmest foundation on which to build our understanding of the world” (Greene 2003). The search for an ultimate explanation invites a question: what kind of an explanation can be ultimate? Can contingent reality alone constitute an ultimate explanation?

Physicist and cosmologist Laurence Krauss proposes that the ultimate foundation of contingent reality is, in a certain sense, *nothing* (Krauss 2012). His proposal is provocative. And it inspires curiosity: his state of nothing includes laws and conditions, and one may like to know what could explain their existence. Might other laws and conditions have obtained instead? If so, then what accounts for the existence of these particular starting conditions? Why did *they* obtain? One might say there is no answer—no deeper explanation. But consider the alternative: a *necessary* concrete reality lies at the ultimate explanatory foundation. That’s an importantly different kind of answer relevant to cosmogony.

Suppose, for a moment, that there actually are one or more necessary beings. Call it, or them, ‘*N*’.⁴ Now *N* is either describable in the language of physics, or it is not. Suppose, first, that *N* has a physical description. Then the most complete cosmogonic theory will make reference to *N*. In other words, our most accurate scientific theory of the world will

⁴To handle plurality, we may either: (i) suppose ‘*N*’ refers to a mereological sum of all necessary beings, (ii) suppose ‘*N*’ refers to the totality of necessary reality in the way we might speak of “heaps” or “holes” without prejudging the question of whether our ontology should include these, or (iii) treat ‘*N*’ as a plural referring device.

make reference to one or more necessary beings. That would be interesting to know, if it is true. Alternatively, suppose N cannot be described in the language of physics. In that case, even the most *complete* physical theory would fail to describe all the basic components of reality. In other words, there would be more to concrete reality than science would be capable of telling us about—even in principle. That, too, would be interesting to know, if it is true. So, if there is a necessary being, then either cosmology is incapable of revealing an ultimate explanation of reality, or cosmological theories that make no reference to a necessary being are incomplete. Either result would be of great interest.

But now suppose instead that there is no necessary being. Then perhaps Krauss' theory is right: everything came from nothing (in some sense). In this case, reality has no necessary foundation: reality is contingent all the way down. Krauss' theory may be true, but *only if* things don't bottom out in necessary beings. For if necessary beings lie at the explanatory foundation of our cosmos, then contingent reality does not—and cannot—come from *nothing* (unless a necessary being could count as “nothing”). The question of necessary existence is relevant, then, to discerning which cosmogonic theories are metaphysically possible.

Necessary existence also matters for ontology. The ontologist courageously endeavors to identify the most fundamental categories of reality. She asks, “What basic kinds of things are there?” One's answer to this question provides a framework for dealing with a wide range of philosophical questions. The traditional view is that we may rightly divide reality into *concrete* things (such as substances and events) and *abstract* things (such as numbers, properties, relations and sets). Furthermore, some philosophers think that the divide between concrete and abstract things coincides with the divide between *contingent* and *necessary* things. We may wonder, however, whether the category of concrete things could overlap the category of necessary things. Is concreteness compatible with necessary existence? The answer to that question depends upon the answer to the question of this book: are there any necessary concrete things?

The question of necessary existence is also directly relevant to the current debate over *metaphysical nihilism*—the thesis that it is metaphysically possible for there to not have been anything at all. If there is a necessary being, then metaphysical nihilism is false: an empty world is impossible.⁵ But if there isn't a necessary being, then subtraction arguments for metaphysical nihilism gain plausibility.

Why care about metaphysical nihilism? One reason is that it bears on one of the deepest and longest standing questions: why is there anything at all? Metaphysical nihilism, if true, precludes what may be the simplest and most straightforward answer: there is something because the alternative is impossible (see, e.g., Rundle 2004). Metaphysical nihilism rules out this answer because it implies that there actually *could* have been nothing. On the other hand, if metaphysical nihilism is false, then the simplest ultimate explanation of existence is metaphysically possible. We consider this possibility to be enormously interesting and worth investigating.

Let us consider finally the relevance of necessary existence to theology. Many people are quick to associate the term “necessary being” with God. There is an obvious historical reason for this: arguments for a necessary being have for centuries been a backbone of natural theology. Of course, arguments for a necessary being aren't by themselves arguments for theism. The usual theistic arguments are multi-stage arguments, where an argument for a necessary being is just an initial stage. Non-theists may resist the subsequent stages; and so they may conceive of necessary concreta in naturalistic-friendly terms. Even so, arguments for a necessary being are a venerable and foundational part of natural theology, since God has classically been conceived as a supreme and unique necessary being. So the question of necessary existence is relevant to the question of God's existence.

⁵See, for example, Baldwin 1996, Lowe 2002, Paseau 2002, Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002, Cameron 2007, Efrid 2009, and Hoffmann 2011. Note that some subtraction arguments have the more modest conclusion that there could be no spatial things.

To be clear, "necessary being" is by no means synonymous with "supreme being". Richard Swinburne, for instance, thinks God is a contingent being. And, as we have already suggested, one might conceive of a necessary being in naturalist terms. Smith (2001), for example, has proposed that the necessary being is a timeless *point* that acts as a causal condition for our cosmos. We should distinguish, therefore, between a necessary being and a supreme being. Arguments for or against the one are not automatically arguments for or against the other.

Nevertheless, sound arguments for or against a necessary being would significantly impact theology. Suppose Swinburne, for example, were persuaded that there is a necessary being. Would he continue to think God is contingent? Probably not. After all, God is supposed to be the ultimate source of all other concrete entities in every world where God exists. So, if God exists and there is a necessary being, then in every world where God exists, either God is identical with that necessary being or God is that necessary being's cause. But if God is identical with that necessary being, then God is a necessary being, after all. And surely if God is the *cause* of a necessary being, then God is also a necessary being. It seems, then, that a sound argument for a necessary being would provide a reason to think that *if* there is a supreme being, it is a necessary being. Moreover, a sound argument *against* the existence of a necessary being would provide a reason to think that the necessarily existent God of classical theism doesn't exist. These are significant theological results.

3. The "Necessary Being" Survey Results

Can arguments for a necessary being actually persuade people? It is commonly thought that philosophical arguments, especially those concerning *ultimate* causes, do little more than reinforce the beliefs of those who already have convictions on the matter. But could there be arguments for a necessary being whose premises are plausible to those who don't *already* think there is a necessary being? If not, what value is there in this inquiry? Is it possible to make genuine progress on a topic like this?