

The Argument from Contingency

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1. The Question of Existence

Why does *anything* exist? There are atoms. There are planets. There is you. Why are there any of these things? Why not instead just nothing at all? The purpose of this chapter is to help you investigate a possible answer.¹

Given the topic of this book, you might expect me to argue that *God* is the answer—i.e., God explains why anything exists. However, this answer has a puzzling consequence. God cannot explain existence unless God already ... *exists*. This explanation appears circular.

If we want to know why something exists, curiosity typically draws our attention to a broader context. For example, if we wish to understand why a particular fire exists, we might search for a cause of the fire. The cause of the fire is not the fire itself; the cause is something *else*, like a match or lightning strike. In the absence of a broader context that could help us see why something exists, the original mystery seems to remain.

I will seek to shed light on the mystery of existence in two stages. In the first stage, I will show how certain principles of explanation suggest that there is a *foundational* layer of reality, which exists without any outside explanation. In the second stage, I will investigate the nature of this foundation; in particular, I will consider how a foundation could be *relevantly different* from everything else that has an outside explanation, and how we may thereby avoid the problem of circularity. In the end, we will arrive at what may be the most ultimate explanation conceivable.

¹ There are different ways to interpret the question (Brenner 2016). See *The Puzzle of Existence* (2013) for a survey of contemporary articulations and analyses. Cf. my review in Rasmussen 2017.

2. Why Ask Why?

Asking *why* is one of the most powerful tools for investigating any topic. I will show how we can use the question—*why?*—to investigate an explanation of everything.

I begin with a simple “why” principle: *explain as much as you can*. This principle will guide our entire inquiry.

Let us unpack the “why” principle. I offer what I call ‘the Principle of Explanation’ (PE), which is one modest translation of the “why” principle:

PE: For any fact *F*, if an explanation of *F* is possible, then an explanation of *F* is expectable, other things being equal.

This principle is relatively modest as far as principles of explanation go. PE is more modest than the classic Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). PSR says that everything whatsoever has a sufficient reason (explanation or cause).² By contrast, PE doesn’t require that much. Instead, PE expresses a *presumption* to expect an explanation; in other words, explain as much as you can.

Five clarifications are in order. First, when I say some explanation is expectable, I don’t mean that someone probably *knows* the explanation. Some explanations may be entirely unknown. For example, it could be that there is ash on the ground because there was a fire, even while no one knows that there was a fire. So I’m thinking of explanations as part of the world—perhaps awaiting discovery.

Second clarification: I am thinking of explanations as expressible in terms of *propositions*. So, for example, the proposition *that there was a fire* may explain the fact (true proposition) *that*

² Pruss (2006) defends a version of this stronger principle.

there is ash on the ground. If we say the fire itself explains the ash, I understand this talk to be shorthand. I'll say an explanation is *real* (actually obtains) if the proposition that expresses it is true.³

Third, an explanation, as I am thinking of it, provides *some* illumination of why or how something is the case without circularity. When I say the explanation is not circular, I mean that at least part of the explanation is *external* to (not wholly included in) the fact to be explained. (I leave to the side the prospect of other notions of “explanation” that allow for circularity.) Example: a theory of common ancestry helps illuminate—and so explains (to some extent)—why genetic similarities exist.¹

For our purposes, we may say that where F is a fact of the form *the xs exist*, an external explanation of F is in terms of at least one thing that is not among those same *xs*. For example, an external explanation of the fact that the turtles exist is not entirely in terms of those same turtles.

Fourth, by “expectable,” I mean a positive *degree of expectation* (what philosophers sometimes call “epistemic” probability). For example, if someone tosses a six-sided die, and if all sides look equal in size, then you can expect a 1/6 probability (expectation) that the dice lands on a given side. In the same way, the expectation in PE is an expectation of a further explanation in light of the record of actual explanations one knows about.

Fifth and finally, the principle allows for exceptions. It says that an explanation is expectable *other things being equal*. In this way, PE can expose a *reason* in support of some explanation, while leaving open whether one may have counterbalancing reasons. The discovery of reasons to think something is true is itself an important part of the discovery of truth.

³ For more on the relationship between true propositions, facts, and the word, see McGrath and Frank 2018.

Now that we have some preliminaries out of the way, I will share a few reasons I think PE can help us extend sight. First, PE successfully predicts many observations. In this respect, PE is like the law of gravity. The law of gravity successfully predicts the many cases of gravitational attraction. Similarly, PE successfully predicts the many cases of explanation. Successful prediction provides evidential support for the theory.

Note that evidential support is *open to defeat*. For example, suppose we found a special massive object that defies gravity. Then we may have reason to restrict the law of gravity. Similarly, if one has reason to think that PE fails to apply to a particular item, then that reason may motivate an exception. Still, even if we found some weird object, that wouldn't undermine the presumptive application to most other objects.

Consider, moreover, that science succeeds by seeking deeper explanations of observations. Without something like PE, it is unclear how scientific practice could have a solid footing, for scientific investigation relies on at least the presumption that there is a further, outside explanation for a given phenomenon (while we might not yet know what it is). Suppose, instead, there is no presumption of any explanation. Then for any given observations, there is no presumption of an explanation of those observations. In that case, every scientific explanation would be suspect.

The ramifications go beyond science. Without PE, it's not even clear how you could infer that anything exists outside your head. For suppose there is no presumption to expect an explanation. Then why expect any external explanation of your existence or inner experiences? You might just as likely be randomly hallucinating.

Now to be clear, I am not suggesting that you must first *explicitly* believe PE to believe that particular things have an explanation. Rather, I think you can begin by directly witnessing clear cases of explanations, such as that your current thoughts have an explanation in terms of

previous thoughts. These clear cases then provide a basis for inferring a more general principle, which is implicit in ordinary and scientific reasoning.

Here is a final, reason-based consideration that may also support PE. One may have a direct, intuitive sense that truths, in general, have an explanation. To trigger that sense, take any arbitrary proposition *P* out of a hat. Suppose *P* is *true*. We can wonder: why is *P* true? Why not false? One's very curiosity reflects the sense that there is likely *some* explanation, whatever it might be.

At this point, it may help to sketch the sorts of explanations that might be available in general. So take any true proposition *P*. Proposition *P* is either *contingent* (i.e., not necessarily true or necessarily false) or *necessary*. Suppose, first, *P* is contingent. Then an explanation of *P* could be in terms of prior causes or tendencies. For example, the fact that there are sheep is explicable in terms of a causal history leading to the first sheep. Next, suppose *P* is necessary (not contingent). In that case, here are three options: (i) the fact that *P* is necessary is a reason to think *P* cannot have an explanation; (ii) *P* has an explanation in terms of more fundamental necessary truths; or (iii) *P* is self-explanatory (if we put aside the *external* explanation requirement).

In light of these options, one could theoretically hold that *every* fact has some explanation, either in terms of prior causes or conditions (if it is contingent) or in terms of itself (if it is necessary).⁴ For our purposes, we may leave these (and other⁵) options open.

To review, PE invites us to explain things as far as we can. *Why?* To illuminate our world. The twin lights of reason and experience testify to the illuminating power of explanations.

⁴ For a defense of the general principle that every (contingent) fact has an explanation, see Pruss (2006) or Della Rocca (2010).

⁵ Joe Schmidt suggested to me the possibility that certain necessary truth may be explicable in terms of a necessary truth *in combination with contingent truths*.

Explanations empower scientific inquiry. Explanations help you see that there is an external world. And, as we will consider next, explanations may help us uncover the nature of ultimate reality.

3. The Foundation Theory

The next step is to use the “why” tool to investigate reality as a whole. Suppose we call reality as a whole (all things included), ‘the blob of everything’. The blob of everything is strange in a way, for nothing beyond the blob explains or causes the blob (since there is nothing beyond the blob). But how can any blob—of any size or shape—exist without any outside cause or outside explanation?

I offer for your consideration the beginning of an answer. I propose that a blob can exist without any outside cause or explanation if that blob includes some *foundational* (non-dependent) layer. This foundation is the bedrock layer of existence. Nothing causes the foundation to exist. The foundation exists on its own—independently of any outside cause or outside explanation. I call the theory that the blob of everything includes a foundation, ‘The Foundation Theory’.

I will motivate this proposal by offering two related reasons to think that there is a basic, necessary portion of reality capable of being a foundation for *contingent* (i.e., non-necessary) things. The first reason uses the Principle of Explanation (PE) in support of the first stage of a classic *Argument from Contingency*. The second reason is a contemporary argument from possible explanations.

Start with the Argument from Contingency (stage 1):

1. Something exists.
2. If everything is contingent, then there is no external explanation of the contingent things (of why there are the contingent things *there are*).

3. There is an external explanation of the contingent things.
4. Therefore, not everything is contingent. (from 2 and 3)
5. Therefore, something is non-contingent. (from 1 and 4)
6. Therefore, something has necessary existence.

Let us examine each premise. Start with (1): something exists. By “exists,” I do not mean anything fancy. I mean that *there are things*, whatever they might be. Even if everything is an illusion, then illusions *exist*.

Why believe anything exists? Here’s why: you can see that something exists via your direct awareness of existing things. For example, you are aware of your thoughts. Your awareness of your thoughts is your clearest way of knowing that your thoughts exist. (I do not assume anything about the *nature* of the things that exist. If everything is an illusion, then at least the illusions exist.)

If we suppose instead that nothing exists, then *no one* exists. If no one exists, then there is no one for me to convince. There are no words here. There are no thoughts. There is no you. But there are words, there are thoughts, and there is you. Therefore, something exists.

Next, consider premise (2): if everything has contingent existence, then there is no external explanation of the contingent things. A contingent thing is something that doesn’t have necessary existence. So the premise says that if nothing has necessary existence, then there is no external explanation of the fact that there are the contingent (*non-necessary*) things that there are.

Principle (2) follows from the intended meaning of ‘explanation’, which goes beyond what is to be explained. In this case, what is to be explained is the fact *that there are the contingent things that there are*. If we want to know why there are *these* contingent things, an external explanation will not be entirely in terms of those very same things. Any explanation in terms of contingent things presupposes the very thing we are trying to explain: these very contingent things.

Therefore, an external explanation of the contingent things (of the fact that they all exist) will ultimately be in terms of something that is *not* contingent. (This inference doesn't depend upon the *length* of the chain of contingent things; I'll say more about the prospect of an infinite chain in section 5.⁶)

Note the term 'the contingent things' refers to all the contingent things using plural reference.⁷ That is to say, the term 'the contingent things' refers to the plural of *all* contingent things (at all times and all places).⁸ In referring to the contingent things, I do not assume that they compose a single Big Contingent Thing, over and above the individuals. In the same way, by referring to 10 children, I'm not saying those 10 children compose a big child.

Turn to premise (3): there is an external explanation of the contingent things. Our explanation-seeking tool (PE) exposes a reason in support of (3). According to PE, for any given fact *F*, if an explanation of *F* is possible, some explanation is expectable (other things being equal), where the notion of "explanation" in view is external. In this case, *F* = the fact that there are the contingent things that there are. According to PE, then, we can expect an external explanation of this fact. (I am assuming it is a fact that there are contingent things. If instead there are *no* contingent things, then everything is a necessary thing. In that case, the *conclusion* of the first stage of the Argument from Contingency is true, and we may then skip ahead to section 6.)

Before moving on, I want to emphasize again that PE is quite modest. The principle merely invites us to seek an explanation as far as we can. If there is an exception (a fact with no external

⁶ We may set aside van Inwagen's proposal (1996) that things exist because an empty world is improbable, for probability doesn't externally explain *the* actual contingent things there are. Cf. Maitzen 2013.

⁷ For a discussion of the motivation for plural reference, see Boolos 1984.

⁸ Those who think past times do not exist (e.g., *presentists*) may translate what I say in terms of truths about what *did* exist. Compare: an external explanation of all humans, including the humans that *did* exist, is not entirely in terms of humans.

explanation), then perhaps that fact is special. We can identify special exceptions if we have sufficient reason. In any case, PE is at least a *reason* in support of (3), which one may weigh in the balance.

Moreover, in the absence of a counterbalancing reason to think that a given fact admits of no further explanation, one has no reason to treat the given fact as different from every other fact that has a further explanation. In other words, you may explain facts as far as you can.

Let us recap the argument. The key idea is that contingent things have some explanation. To avoid circularity, an explanation of all the contingent things will not be solely in terms of contingent things (on the relevant notion of “explanation”). If that is right, then some non-contingent thing is part of the total explanation of contingent things. Since a non-contingent thing is (by definition) a necessary thing, it follows that there is a necessary thing; maybe there are many necessary things, but there is at least one.

This result has far-reaching ramifications, as we shall see in section 6. It will be useful, therefore, to reexamine our steps before we continue. In the next section, I will offer another argument for the same result. Then, in section 5, we will examine some objections.

4. An Argument from Possible Explanations

A more recent type of argument from contingency seeks to display a link between *possible* causes (or possible explanations) and a necessary thing capable of causing or grounding contingent things. Here is one such argument, what I will call ‘The Argument from Possible Explanations’ (APE):⁹

⁹ For other examples of arguments from possibility, see Rasmussen (2010, 2011), Pruss and Rasmussen (2018), and Rasmussen and Weaver (2019).

1. Every contingent state could *possibly* have some (external) explanation.¹⁰
2. If no necessary thing is possible, then some contingent state couldn't possibly have an (external) explanation.
3. Therefore, some necessary thing is possible.
4. A necessary thing is either impossible or necessary.
5. Therefore, some necessary thing is necessary.
6. Therefore, there is a necessary thing (at least one).¹¹

I will suggest a potential justification for each premise. First a clarification: I use the term 'could possibly' to convey *consistent with* the truths of reason—i.e., the truths one can see to be true via rational reflection (*a priori*). Truths of reason include, for example, truths of mathematics and logic, like that $1 + 1 = 2$.

Next, when I say a proposition is *consistent* with reason, I mean the proposition doesn't *contradict* any truth of reason.

This notion of 'possibility' is very broad. It is broader than *physical* possibility—i.e., consistency with what physical things actually exist. There might be physically impossible things that are still logically possible; e.g., it may be *physically* impossible for you to travel faster than

¹⁰ We could try running a related argument using the premise that *possibly* (1) is true. Such an argument would show that in any possible world, there is a contingent state that is only explicable in terms of a necessary thing (its activity or inactivity)—and so (3) is true. The remainder of the argument would be the same. I leave it as an exercise for readers to see how such an argument might work.

¹¹ This argument may remind you of the *ontological* argument, which attempts to deduce the existence of a maximally great being from the premise that such a being is at least possible. However, my argument is importantly different. In particular, I do not assume that the conclusion is even possible. Rather, I *argue* for the possibility of a necessary thing based on an independently supported principle of explanation. Note also that my argument leaves open the reverse possibility that the contingent things have no explanation; the result so far is just that there is a necessary thing that *could* cause contingent things. We will see what more we might say about a necessary foundation in section 6.

the speed of light, but there's nothing *logically* impossible about that. (A priori possibility may also be broader than what is called "*metaphysical* possibility"—i.e., consistency with whatever is ontologically necessary.¹²)

The broadness of the notion I have in mind contributes to the modesty of (1). This premise says merely that no principle of reason *rules out* a scenario in which every contingent state could—consistent with reason—have an external explanation. In view of the modesty of (1), I suspect you might find (1) quite plausible in its own right—perhaps self-evident.

In any case, one might also motivate principle (1) via examples. Principle (1) successfully predicts many cases of possible explanations (without appealing to anything ad-hoc or weird). In particular, (1) predicts that it is possible for there to be an explanation of your current thoughts. An explanation of your thoughts is surely possible. Therefore, (1)'s prediction here is successful. As far as I am aware, there are no counterexamples to (1) and no simpler, competing principle with as much predictive success. I leave it to the reader to consider possible exceptions.

As with any principle, (1) is open to defeat, at least in principle. Thus, for example, if you have some reason to think that some contingent state *couldn't* have any explanation, then that reason may defeat (1), at least with respect to that case. In the interest of modesty, we may treat (1) as a rule of thumb (at least): so for any given contingent state, one may expect that state to at least possibly have an external explanation, absent a sufficient reason to think otherwise.

Next, consider premise (2): there is some contingent state that couldn't possibly have an (external) explanation unless some necessary thing is possible. Here's a reason for (2). Let C = the *state of there being the contingent things there are and no others*. C is contingent (since C would

¹² In Rasmussen 2019, I argue that truths of reason are an essential part of the foundation of existence, and that therefore, this foundation spans both metaphysical possibilities and logical possibilities.

fail to obtain if any contingent cause failed to exist). So suppose C could possibly have an explanation. To avoid circularity, the explanation will not be solely in terms of those same contingent things; instead, the explanation will be in terms of something *non-contingent* that could produce or cause contingent things. In other words, if C could possibly have an (external) explanation, then there could possibly be a necessary thing capable of producing or causing contingent things.

If that much is correct, we may then complete the argument as follows. A necessary thing is the sort of thing that is either *necessary* or *impossible*—premise (4). A necessary thing is not impossible—given (3). It follows that a necessary thing is necessary, and therefore actual.

Let us look again at premise (4): a necessary thing is either necessary or impossible. This premise is a consequence of a standard logic of possibility. For our purposes, we may treat this logic as orienting us to a relevant *definition* of ‘necessary thing’. I relegate the technical details to a footnote.¹³

We’ve covered a lot of ground. I invite you to review the steps carefully. Test them. See what you can see. (To examine additional pathways to a necessary thing that could be a cause of contingent things, see necessarybeing.com or Pruss and Rasmussen 2018.)

¹³ Define ‘x is necessary’ = ‘x exists no matter what *symmetric* possibility is actual’, where *w* is *symmetric* means that if *w* had been actual, our actual world would still have been possible. We then narrow our scope to symmetric possibilities, with the understanding that a “necessary” thing is something that spans all the symmetric possibilities. Then (4) is true by definition. I give a formal deduction of the actual existence of a necessary thing from its possible existence at joshualrasmussen.com/s5.

5. Objections

I will address six common and instructive objections to the Foundation Theory. This list is only a sample. You may have additional objections. The discussion below is an introduction to some of the wider issues at stake.

Objection 1: infinite regress. Suppose every contingent thing depends on another *contingent* thing in an infinite regress of causes. Then no foundation is required, or even possible. If every contingent thing already has a complete contingent cause, there is no place in the chain of causes for a necessary thing to participate.

Reply. Note first that this objection does not target any premise in either of my two arguments for a necessary foundation. Both arguments leave open the prospect of an infinite chain of causes. No premise says that contingent reality is finite.¹⁴

Second, and more fundamentally, the hypothesis that there is an infinite chain leaves unanswered *why* that chain exists (whether we conceive of the chain as a single thing or as an assemblage of many things). The mere infinity of the chain still leaves something unexplained. To illustrate, suppose you find a hammer in your friend's garage, and you ask, "where did this hammer come from?" Your friend replies, "oh, that hammer has always been there." His answer doesn't really address your question, since the age of the hammer—even if infinite—doesn't by itself ultimately explain the existence of the hammer.¹⁵

Note that even if a chain of causes is *internally* explained (in some sense) by its members, that still doesn't give us an external explanation. PE invites us to look for external explanations as

¹⁴ For arguments that infinite causal chains are metaphysically impossible, see Pruss (2018) and Koons (2014).

¹⁵ Thanks to Paulo Jaurez for suggesting this example to me.

far as we can (to empower science, etc.). We can externally explain a chain of contingent things in terms of a non-contingent foundation (just as we can externally explain any chain of turtles in terms of more fundamental causes), whether or not the chain is infinite.¹⁶ (I say more about external explanations of infinite chains in the next objection.)

Objection 2: the fallacy of composition. It is fallacious to suppose that the totality of contingent things is itself contingent. After all, a totality can have different properties from its parts: for example, the totality of chickens is not a chicken. Similarly, maybe each contingent thing has a cause, while the totality of contingent things is uncaused.

Reply. The version of the Argument from Contingency in this chapter does not depend upon any inference from parts to wholes. In particular, the Principle of explanation (PE) equally applies to totalities (of any size).

To draw out this point, consider the following story. You wake up in an alternative world. In this world, you encounter a forest on a flat planet that extends out infinitely. You then overhear some people talking about the origin of the forest. Their conversation proceeds like so:

Philo: Where did this forest come from?

Nihilo: Don't you know? Every tree in the forest came from another tree. This forest is infinite.

Philo: I've heard that, Nihilo. But I'm still perplexed. Why have any trees ever come from any other trees? Why are there any trees here at all? And why *these* trees?

Nihilo: Explaining each tree suffices to explain all the trees. What is there left to explain?

¹⁶ If someone thinks an infinite chain of contingent causes *precludes* an explanation of contingent reality, then PE gives them a reason to think the chain is finite. But see Pearce 2017 for an account of how an infinite chain of contingent causes could be explained in terms of a more fundamental, necessary ground.

Philo: There's *something* left unexplained. I see this giant forest. It's huge and impressive. But why is it here? Why not instead an infinite series of *vines*, or *turtles*, or just *nothing at all*? If you explain a bunch of things by citing the activities of those *same* things, then the explanation is circular. A circular explanation is as good as no explanation.

Nihilo: Well, the reason no vines are here is that these trees here take up too much space.¹⁷ Suddenly, out of nowhere, a new *infinite* forest appears in the sky.¹⁸ Philo and Nihilo run and hide. The End.

This story illustrates a difference between explaining *individuals* (e.g., individual trees) and explaining *groups* (the forest). Even if each individual tree is somehow explained in terms of another tree, all these individual explanations leave something unexplained. We can still wonder why there is the infinite forest at all, or why it exists where it does.

PE invites us to search for an explanation that goes beyond the very fact to be explained. So, if there is a forest, PE invites an explanation that goes beyond the elements of that same forest. In general, an external explanation of X (whether one or many) is in terms of something beyond X itself.

Note also that the Argument from Possible Explanations depends merely on the *possibility* of an external explanation. So even if some infinite forest in the sky *could* somehow grow up without any external explanation, it wouldn't thereby follow that contingent things *couldn't* have an external explanation.

¹⁷ I owe this suggested ending to Tyron Goldschmidt.

¹⁸ We could stipulate that each tree in the sky forest springs out of another tree (in supertask speed). Then every tree in the sky has an explanation, even while the total forest emerges from nowhere.

Objection 3: virtual particles. Physicists tell us that “virtual” particles can randomly appear without any explanation. If virtual particles appear uncaused, perhaps the entire cosmos came into existence uncaused, without any explanation.

Reply. The first thing to note is that virtual particles don’t literally come from *nothing*. Virtual particles come from prior states of energy. Next, states of energy can provide a *non-deterministic* (non-necessitating) explanation. For example, if state alpha spontaneously transitions to state beta, and if state alpha had a 15% chance of doing so, then this 15% chance provides some (even if slight) explanation of the transition. For the purposes of our arguments, even a slight explanation counts as *some* explanation. (Note: the explanation need not be contrastive, e.g., an explanation of state alpha *rather than* state beta.)

Objection 4: bootstrapping. How does a necessary thing produce contingent things? It seems the very production of contingent things would itself be contingent (because the effects are contingent) yet uncaused (because it is the first production). If something can be contingent and uncaused, why couldn’t the universe simply be contingent and uncaused?

Reply. This objection helps us separate different versions of the Argument from Contingency. Some versions rely on the stronger principle that whatever is contingent (whether a thing or an act) must have a prior cause. The arguments in this chapter, by contrast, don’t rely on anything that strong. Instead, I say *explain as much as you can*. We can explain carrots and castle, for example, in terms of prior activities; thus, we can expect an explanation of carrots and castles. Same for contingent things: we can explain them in terms of prior activities. Moreover, the activities themselves could also have an explanation in terms of a necessary tendency within the necessary thing to produce something. Here is the main point: if we explain things as far as we

can, that's enough to expose a reason to think contingent things have an explanation in terms of a necessary thing.

Objection 5: the possibility of nothing. The philosopher David Hume (1779, 58-59) observes that any existing thing is *conceivably* non-existent. For example, I can conceive of a world with no chairs, no trees, and no universe. Therefore, each thing has the real possibility of not existing. A necessary foundation, however, is supposed to have *no* possibility of not existing (cf. Swinburne 2012).¹⁹

Reply. Hume's thought does not actually touch our particular arguments. To see why, suppose Hume is right that whatever can be conceived of as existing can be conceived of as not existing. And suppose that a necessary concrete thing *N* can be *conceived of* in the relevant sense. Then either conceivability implies (or gives evidence for) possibility, or it does not. If conceivability does not provide evidence for possibility, then Hume's objection fails at the start: for then we cannot use conceivability to infer that *N*'s non-existence is possible. So, suppose instead that conceivability provides evidence for possibility. Then conceivability provides evidence for *both* the possibility of *N* and the possibility of no *N* (since both are conceivable if either is). Yet, these can't both be possible, for we saw that *N* is either possible or impossible. So, the evidence from conceivability washes out. Either way, then, the objection fails.²⁰

Objection 6: brute fact. Everyone is committed to brute, unexplained facts. Whether you locate bruteness in God or in the universe, *something* must be ultimate. So why couldn't the universe be the brute, ultimate reality?

¹⁹ My discussion of this objection is from Leon and Rasmussen 2019.

²⁰ I address contemporary versions of the conceivability objection in Rasmussen 2016.

Reply. This objection invites us to consider the next stage of the Argument from Contingency. The Argument from Contingency has two stages. We have only seen the first stage, which is an argument for the *existence* of a necessary foundation. The second stage seeks to identify the *nature* of the foundation. We will turn to the second stage next.

6. Can We Say More?

What else might we say about a necessary foundation? I will seek to show that if there is a necessarily existent portion of reality that could be a foundation for contingent things, this necessary portion has the following attributes: (i) independent existence, (ii) eternal existence, (iii) non-limited nature, (iv) unsurpassable power, and (iv) a supreme nature.

To begin, let ‘N’ refer to the totality of whatever exists necessarily (including any mathematical objects and other abstracta, if there are any). I shall now give a series of arguments to shed light on some attributes of N. I will construct all my arguments using conceptual analysis and the Principle of Explanation (PE).

6.1. *Independent existence*

By ‘independent existence’, I mean that N’s existence doesn’t depend on any *prior* reality (whether prior in time or in existence).

Here is an argument for N’s independent existence:

1. N is the totality of whatever is necessary (by definition).
2. No necessary reality is prior to the totality of *all* necessary reality.
3. No contingent reality is prior to the totality of all necessary reality.
4. Everything is either necessary or contingent.

5. Therefore, no reality is prior to N.
6. Therefore, N's existence doesn't depend upon any prior reality.

6.2. *Eternal*

N is eternal in at least this sense: N never comes to exist or ceases to exist. Here is my argument for eternal existence:

1. Whatever comes to exist or ceases to exist can fail to exist.
2. N cannot fail to exist (since N has *necessary existence*).
3. Therefore, N cannot come to exist or cease to exist.
4. Whatever cannot come to exist or cease to exist is eternal.
5. Therefore, N is eternal.

For the sake of neutrality, I leave open the nature of time. N is eternal on any of the major theories of time. Take *eternalism*, which is the position that whatever exists at any time also exists *simpliciter*. If eternalism is true, then N is eternal in at least this sense: there is no time at which N began or ceased to exist *simpliciter*.²¹ Another option is presentism: whatever exists, exists presently. On this option, N necessarily exists at whatever time is present (now), since N necessarily exists. In any case, N cannot come to be or cease to be.

²¹ Technically, on eternalism, everything counts as “eternal” in this minimal sense. I leave it to the reader to consider what more might be said about N's relationship to time. In particular, one could argue that whatever exists only *sometimes* is arbitrarily limited in temporal duration, whereas by the argument in 6.3., N is not arbitrarily limited in any of its basic features.

6.3. *Non-limited*

I begin with a modest proposal: N is not a turtle. Perhaps this much is already too obvious.

However, seeing *why* N is not a turtle will help us see other things about N.

Here is why N is not a turtle:

1. Every turtle is dependent.
2. N is independent.
3. Therefore, N is not a turtle.

Premise (1)—that every turtle is dependent—is justified by a principle of irrelevant differences. The principle is that differences between turtles (size, shape, eating capacity, etc.) are *irrelevant* to account for a difference with respect to being dependent on prior conditions. Therefore, if any turtle depends on a prior condition, every turtle alike is dependent.

Someone might reply that perhaps there is simply no relevant difference between the explained and the unexplained. Perhaps something could be *inexplicably* unexplained.

However, PE is itself a reason to expect an explanation. PE invites us to explain things as far as we can. If we do, then we will explain all turtles, if we can; or we will explain why some turtle is relevantly different from all others.

Next, we have premise (2): N is independent. We already saw justification for (2). To review, the independence of N follows from the meaning of terms. ‘N’ refers to the totality of necessary reality. There is nothing prior to all necessary reality. Therefore, there is nothing prior to N upon which N may depend. In that sense, N is the ultimate anchor for dependent things.

The reasoning above has additional applications. For example, it applies to *cubes*. In the absence of a reason to think there is a special, uncaused, necessary cube, the presumption is to

treat all cubes alike: contingent and dependent. Hence, we have reason to expect that N is not a cube.

In general, for any type T, in the absence of a reason to think there is a special, uncaused, necessary instance of T, the presumption is to treat all instances of T alike: contingent and dependent. PE amplifies this reasoning. By the light of PE, we should explain things as far as we can. So, if we can explain an instance of T, we have good reason to do so.

We can use this general reasoning to form an argument against positing arbitrary *limits*, such as in size, shape, powers, or in any other attribute that comes in various degrees. Let us say a thing is *limited* (to some extent) if it has some basic attribute (i.e., an attribute not grounded in other attributes) to some non-maximal degree, like a flower with a finite size. Then we have the following argument against N being limited in its basic nature:

1. Whatever is limited (like turtles, giraffes, cubes, etc.) can have an external explanation.
2. N cannot have an external explanation.
3. Therefore, N is not limited (in its basic nature).

The most common response to this argument I have received is a question about whether N's basic limits might be *necessary*. The thought here is that if N's limits hold necessarily, then perhaps they couldn't have any further explanation.

This proposal, however, requires motivation. To my mind, positing unexplained limits is like supposing some event is an exception to the natural order (a miracle). Theoretically, one could have some reason to posit such an exception. Still, anyone who lacks such a reason is in position to expect a further explanation.

Recall the "why" principle: explain as much as you can. We can explain limited things. For example, the hypothesis that an unlimited foundation created limited, contingent things would

explain the existence of limited things. I leave it to readers to consider whether there may be sufficient reason to make a special exception in this case. Here, my main point is to draw out the implication of explaining things as far as you can—by the light of PE; if you explain things as far as you can, then you will explain limits as far as you can.

6.4. *Unsurpassable Power*

We may build on the previous results to expose another attribute: N has unsurpassable power, where a *power*, let's say, is a potential to produce an effect. Here's my argument:

1. N has some power (at least to be a possible cause of contingent things).
2. If N's power were surpassable, then N would be limited (e.g., would have a basic limit in power).
3. N is not limited (see 6.3).
4. Therefore, N's power is unsurpassable. (from 2 and 3)

I leave it to the reader to consider the potential implications of unsurpassable power (e.g., whether unsurpassable power would include cognitive powers, powers of moral reflection, etc.).

6.5. *Supreme*

Finally, here is a reason to think N is *supreme*.

1. Whatever is not supreme is limited (in some basic respect).
2. Whatever is limited could conceivably have some external explanation.
3. N cannot conceivably have an external explanation.
4. Therefore, N is supreme.

By ‘supreme’, I mean the quality of being maximal with respect to positive properties. A positive property is a property that contributes to the *intrinsic value* of a thing. Examples of positive properties include *knowledge*, *power*, and *goodness*. A supreme foundation, then, is something that, in total, has no limit with respect to whatever positive properties it has.

There are various questions to consider at this point. Is the concept of ‘positive’ purely subjective, or could there be an objective notion of positive property? Are there counterbalancing reasons to think that the foundation cannot be supreme? What positive properties could the foundation have? I deal with these questions in some detail in Rasmussen 2019.²² Here I set them aside for further inquiry.

Instead, I will close this chapter by showing how the hypothesis that the foundation is supreme enables a maximally *deep* (or complete) explanation of things. The Foundation Theory provides the beginning of an explanation of at least contingent things. We can still wonder about the nature of the foundation. If the foundation has necessary existence, what sort of thing could have necessary existence? Not a turtle. Not a snake. Then *what?* The deepest answer is going to be in terms of something that we can *see* is relevantly different from dependent, contingent things.

So what is relevantly different from dependent, contingent things? The answer, I propose, is something with a (maximally) supreme nature. A supreme nature is relevantly different from every other nature that can conceivably have a further explanation. Every non-supreme, limited thing could conceivably have an external explanation; for example, a turtle could have an explanation in terms of causal activities or essential tendencies of N. Something with a supreme nature, by contrast, *cannot conceivably* have any further explanation. Supremacy itself entails

²² With respect to the last question, I argue that a supreme nature would include the positive properties of knowledge, power, and goodness, since any nature that lacks these properties would include an arbitrary, unexplained *limit* in intrinsic value (2019: 136-151).

ultimacy. In other words, if N is supreme, we can see *why* N must be ultimate, foundational, and independent. We can also see why N would have supremely robust existence (necessary existence).²³

Note that this proposal also gives us a simple, non-arbitrary account of N's basic nature. If the foundation is not supreme, by contrast, then we multiply complexity: a theory of a non-supreme nature will include additional complexity about the details of its particular limits.

I conclude this section with an argument that succinctly summarizes both stages of the argument from contingency:

1. Without a supreme foundation, the chain of explanations stops inexplicably short.
2. The chain of explanations doesn't stop inexplicably short (PE).
3. Therefore, there is a supreme foundation.

7. Results

I note three significant results of our inquiry. First, we saw that reality, in total, has no external explanation (since nothing is outside everything). Second, we saw how a *foundation* of reality (within reality) could provide an ultimate explanation of everything else. Third, we saw how a foundation could provide the *most ultimate* explanation if it has a supreme nature, since anything less than supreme could conceivably have a further explanation.

²³ For more on how N's great nature could explain N's necessary existence, see Byerly 2019.

These results add up to a single, significant result. If you explain things as far as you can, you will arrive at the most supreme explanation possible.²⁴

PROOF

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