Is Everything Contingent?

Abstract

I investigate *contingentism*—the thesis that all causal entities are contingent. I begin by bringing to the table a reason to think that contingentism, but not its negation, results in a certain explanatory gap. Unlike previous arguments against contingentism, the argument I give does not depend upon a general principle of explanation or causation. Instead, I make use of the far more modest principle that theories that avoid explanatory gaps are preferable, other things being equal. I go on to assess candidate counter-costs of the negation of contingentism. By cataloging potential costs on both sides, I hope to advance the debate over *metaphysical nihilism* (the view that there might have been nothing). I also aim to contribute to an ongoing inquiry into the ultimate explanation of existence.

Is Everything Contingent?

1. The Question of Contingentism

Let 'contingentism' name the thesis that all causal entities (whatever can be a cause)—is *contingent*—possibly absent from reality.[1] Is contingentism true? One's answer to this question has far-reaching implications concerning the nature and occupants of the ontological categories. Suppose some causally efficacious things exist of necessity. Then *metaphysical nihilism*—the thesis that there might have been nothing—is false. Moreover, contingentism enables a modally uniform view of causal efficacy: *every* causally efficacious thing that might exist also *might not*.[2] If, on the other hand, all causally efficacious things are contingent, then *causal efficacy* precludes *necessary existence*. And, there is no Anselmian God.[3] Many enduring inquiries turn, then, on the question of contingentism.

There has been a quiet resurgence of discussion over contingentism, as new arguments for and against the view have been developed. New explanation-based arguments against contingentism, for instance, have been inspired by developments in modal logic.[4] And new moves

[1] Williamson (2002) uses 'contingentism' to refer to the thesis that *some* things exist contingently. The target of this paper is the more ambitious thesis that every causally efficacious thing is contingent. We might call this thesis 'radical contingentism' to distinguish it from Williamson's contingentism. I'll stick with the simpler 'contingentism', however, for ease of presentation—and because it isn't that radical.

[2] Big Bang cosmology may support this modal uniformity, insofar as everything that *begins to exist* at the Big Bang is contingent. But see Smith 2001 for an account of a causally efficacious necessary thing that is compatible with Big Bang cosmology.

[3] I should emphasize that *necessitism* (the negation of contingentism) is compatible with naturalism. Although certain anti-naturalist views may *require* necessitism, naturalism allows for both necessitism and contingentism. Cf. Smith 2001.

[4] Recent explanation-based arguments are given or examined by Rowe (1998), Gale & Pruss (1999), Pruss (2004, 2009), Oppy (2009), Rasmussen (2010, 2011), and Turri (2011).

have been proposed in discussions over the so-called 'subtraction argument' for contingentism.[5] These developments bear on remarkably many areas of philosophy, including ontology, modality, mereology, etiology and action theory.[6]

I shall count costs as a way to make progress in the contingentism debate. The literature on contingentism has for the most part been occupied with proposed arguments that establish or disconfirm the view. I'd like to draw attention to a dialectically gentler way toward progress by investigating potential costs of contingentism and its negation.[7] The bulk of my investigation will be devoted to the question of whether contingentism carries an *explanatory* cost. I will then consider some potential counter-costs of the alternative.

2. Explanatory Costs

Suppose we have some data (or fact) D and theories T_1 and T_2. And suppose we learn the following information about the data and the theories:

(1) If T_1 is true, then there is no explanation of D.

(2) If T_2 is true, then there is an explanation of D.

I suggest that the above information reveals a cost of T_1 that T_2 doesn't carry. That is to say, the information is a reason to favor T_2 over T_1—a *pro tanto* reason, we might call it. The suggestion here is that T_1 carries an *explanatory cost*, which is a cost that arises for any theory that implies

[5] See, for example, discussions by Baldwin (1996), Lowe (2002), Paseau (2002), Rodriguez-Pereyra (1997, 2000, 2002), Cameron (2006, 2007), Efird, et al. (2005, 2006, 2009), and Hoffman (2011).

[6] Concerning just one causal-based argument, David Beck (2002: 299) writes, "Working with this argument relates one to virtually every other philosopher because the scope and depth of concepts it involves are so extensive."

[7] Katz, Bernard and Elmar Kremer (1997) take up a similarly modest approach by merely arguing that it is *reasonable* to think there is a causally efficacious necessary thing. Their conclusion is different than mine, since I assess theoretical costs without specifying which, if any, are worth paying. There are also arguments built upon 'defeasible' causal principles (see Koons 1997, 2013), and those arguments are similar in spirit to mine, except they do not take the form of an investigation of costs and counter-costs.

that there is brute, unexplained data that would be explained by an alternative theory. The cost need not be steep; and it could, in principle, be worth paying.

Why think (1) and (2) together result in a cost? Let me get three reasons on the table. First, we intuitively tend to favor theories that enable an explanation of some data over those that do not. Suppose, for example, that a certain scientific theory about volcanoes enables a geophysical explanation of the presence of ash in the sky. The volcano theory would seem to have *something* going for it, especially if there are no other feasible explanations available: the volcano theory certainly has more going for it than the theory that the ash appeared in the sky without any explanation (known or unknown) whatsoever. Or, consider the Platonist who argues that abstract objects help *explain* various facts, such as facts about resemblance, mathematical equations and rules of inference. Nominalists don't normally just shrug their shoulders in response. Instead, they reply by proposing nominalist-friendly explanations or by denying that the alleged facts obtain (*per* fictionalism).[8] Or, they concede that nominalism bears an explanatory cost—but one that is worth paying. In general, we are not sanguine about brute, unexplained facts. We prefer to eliminate them wherever we can. It may seem, then, that a theory resulting in certain unexplained facts is inferior to one that doesn't imply that those facts are brute, other things being equal.

Second, explaining facts is part of ordinary experience and reasoning. Therefore, for any given fact, the prior epistemic probability that *it* has an explanation may be high. In other words, we may treat the general principle of explanation as a good rule of thumb. The rule may seem even more secure when restricted to *contingent* facts, since explanations of contingent facts are part of everyday experience. Moreover, if a fact obtains *but need not have obtained*, then it is natural to wonder *why then* it obtained. The call for an explanation may reveal an *a priori* reason to expect

[8] See, for example, Balaguer 1998.

one. Note that even if there are unexplained facts, it may be reasonable to *begin* with the hypothesis that a given fact has an explanation. If so, then a theory that enables an explanation of a given fact is usually preferable to one that precludes it—other things being equal. There may be exceptions; and in those cases, I take it that one will have a reason to think the exceptional case in question is relevantly different.

Third, the preference for *an* explanation may help justify or underwrite the inference to the *best* explanation. Inference to the best explanation seems to be a reasonable form of inference, and it is commonplace in virtually every area of inquiry. Yet, inference to the best explanation would not seem to be justified if the best explanation were not, in general, more likely than *no* explanation. Take, for instance, facts about genetic similarity. It is reasonable to suppose that some such facts are best explained by a theory of common ancestry. But suppose it is no less likely that such facts simply have *no* explanation whatsoever. In that case, the theory of common ancestry wouldn't be justified because the "no explanation" alternative would be at least as likely to be true. Yet the common ancestry theory is surely more likely than the "no explanation" option. The reasoning here is perfectly general: in general, we tend to prefer the *best* explanation over no explanation, other things being equal. I suggest, therefore, that in general, we have reason to prefer *an* explanation over no explanation, other things being equal.

For these reasons, I suggest that explanatory costs are genuine costs. That isn't to say that a theory that has an explanatory cost cannot be true or reasonable to believe. My suggestion, rather, is just that explanatory costs detract from a theory. So, we should take them into account.

I should emphasize that I have a minimal notion of explanation in mind. An explanation may be a fact, an event or something else that "makes sense" of why or how something (be it a fact, event or something else) obtains. I assume that this minimal notion is one that shows up in

ordinary language and is pre-philosophically graspable. I leave open specific theories and analyses of the nature of explanation. My argument for explanatory costs is compatible with a wide variety of views about the nature of explanation.

3. A Cost of Contingentism

In this section, I will articular a reason to think that contingentism has an explanatory cost. But first, I will say a bit more about just what contingentism is.

Contingentism, recall, is the theory that all causal entities are contingent. For ease of presentation, I will use the term 'concrete' as shorthand for 'causal reality'. More exactly, I'll say that a thing is *concrete* if and only if it possibly causes something to exist or occur. (Equivalently: *x* is concrete *iff* there is a possible world in which *x* is a cause.) This definition is consistent with the traditional understanding of a necessary concrete thing as a first *cause* of all contingent things. (I make no assumption about the sorts of things that can be causes. On my definition, if any of the things that are typically thought of as abstract, such as numbers, Platonic forms, propositions or properties, have causal powers, then they count as 'concrete' for my purposes. Contingentism, then, is the thesis that *whatever* can be a cause is contingent.)

Consider, next, the term 'contingent'. A thing is *contingent*, I'll say, if and only if it doesn't *have to* exist. Put differently, a thing is contingent if and only if its non-existence is metaphysically possible. In possible worlds talk: necessarily, *x* is contingent *iff* there is a possible world *w*, such that were *w* to obtain, there would be no such thing as *x*.[9] Therefore, contingentism says that

[9] I have just defined 'contingent' in terms of 'possible'. I take 'possible' to be a primitive modal term—or else I define 'possible' as 'not necessarily not', where 'necessarily' is primitive. Others are welcome to understand 'possible' (as in 'metaphysically possible') in whatever way makes most sense to them.

There is one definition, however, that I cannot recommend. That definition is this: '*s* is possible' $=_{def}$ 'the proposition that *s* obtains does not entail a contradiction'. I cannot recommend that definition because (among other reasons) I see no way to deduce a contradiction from 'there can obtain true contradictions', and it is manifestly *not* possible that there *can* obtain true contradictions. In any case, I suspect that people actually come to grasp the notion of a possibility *prior to* grasping the notion of contradiction.

whatever possibly causes something possibly does not exist. Equivalently: nothing that can be a cause *must* exist.

I will now give a reason to think that contingentism carries an explanatory cost. The reason is composed of the following two premises:

(1) There is a contingent fact C, such that if contingentism is true, then there is no explanation of C.

(2) There is an alternative to contingentism that explains C.

If these premises are both true, then contingentism carries an explanatory cost (according to the thesis of the previous section).

Consider, first, premise (1): there is a fact that has no explanation if contingentism is true. Why think that? Well, let 'Contingent Reality' name the fact that there are the contingent entities that there are (tenselessly).[10] Now suppose contingentism is true. Then Contingent Reality has no explanation, or else it is ultimately explained by some other contingent facts that themselves have no explanation. The option that Contingent Reality has no explanation falls out of the general principle that no facts about contingent instances of F could explain why *there exist* the things that are those very F things. I will say a bit to motivate this principle and then consider a Humean objection.

Consider, first, that no matter how many Fs there are and no matter how they might be causally connected, we may ask, "Why are there *these* Fs?" The very question reveals puzzlement. We have facts *about* the Fs—about how they are causally connected. But we do not yet know why

[10] In case someone wonders if the contingent things that exist *now* could be explained by contingent things that *did* exist, let me clarify that 'the contingent things' includes any and all contingent things that have *ever existed* (whether temporally or *sans* time). So, we cannot explain the existence of the contingent things merely by citing the activities of *past* contingent things. (I am assuming here that it makes sense to talk about past contingent things. If that assumption is false—perhaps because presentism is true—then *a fortiori* we cannot explain the existence of the contingent things by citing the activities of past contingent things.)

these very Fs exist in the first place. Our curiosity may suggest, then, that no facts about the particular contingent Fs *themselves* adequately explain why there are those very Fs in the first place.[11] Similarly, it may seem that no facts about particular *contingent* things adequately explain why there are those very contingent things in the first place. If there *were* a complete and adequate explanation of the contingent things, then it would seem that this explanation would make reference to one or more non-contingent things. (I am assuming for the sake of argument that there are contingent things. If there are no contingent things, then contingentism is false if *any* causally efficacious thing exists.)

Let us now turn to a famous Humean objection. The objection is based upon the following question: why think that an explanation of a *whole*—such as a whole fact—cannot simply consist of whatever explains each *part*.[12] More to the point, why can't an explanation of the contingent things simply consist of the conjunction of the explanations of *each c*? Paul Edwards (1959) illustrates this sort of question with Eskimos. Suppose there are some Eskimos on the corner of Sixth Avenue and 50th Street. For each Eskimo, there is an explanation as to why that Eskimo is at that corner. And these individual explanations join together to explain why *all* those Eskimos are there. No further explanation is required. Similarly, if the existence of each contingent thing is causally explained by another contingent thing *ad infinitum*, then since the existence of each contingent thing is thereby explained, no *further* explanation of the existence of contingent things is required. Perhaps, then, a complete and adequate explanation of contingent things can be in terms of those very contingent things, after all.

[11] Just to be clear, it is the *existence* of the Fs that remains to be explained, not the fact that the Fs are Fs. For it could be that facts about philosophers, for example, explain why the people who are philosophers are in fact philosophers, even while no facts about philosophers explain why those philosophers all *exist*.

[12] Hume 1959: 58-59.

We should be careful to distinguish between two related objections. One objection is that there is no need for an explanation of a series of things because each member of the series already has an explanation. A related objection is that if each member of a series has an explanation, then the explanations of the members constitute the explanation of the whole. These objections differ. The first says there is *no need* for an explanation of the whole, whereas the second says that an explanation of a whole may be given entirely in terms of explanations of its parts. We are concerned with the second objection. For it, unlike the first, challenges the argument on the table: specifically it targets the premise that if contingentism is true, then there is an *unexplained* contingent fact. The relevant objection, then, is that there can be an explanation of Contingent Reality (the "whole") that is entirely in terms of particular explanations of particular contingent things (the "parts").

Is the objection sound? Can an explanation of the "whole" be solely in terms of explanations of the "parts"? I believe the correct answer is "only sometimes". In the case of the Eskimos, it does indeed seem that an explanation of why each Eskimo is on a certain corner can suffice to explain why they are all there. But consider a different situation. Suppose that the *existence* of each Eskimo is explained solely by the causal activities of another Eskimo. In this case, either the chain of explanations is circular, or it is infinite. Both options result in a wholly "internal" explanation. That is to say, in either case, the fact that *those Eskimos exist* is explained solely by the *activities* of the very Eskimos whose existence is to be explained. In this situation, it seems we can still wonder why there are *those* Eskimos at all. After all, a wholly "internal" explanation would not seem to provide nearly *as satisfying* an explanation as would an explanation that makes reference to at least some things other than Eskimos.

Let us continue to probe the matter by considering another case. This case is about a "causally-connected" worm. Suppose we encounter a worm and learn somehow—don't ask how—that the front half of the worm was caused by an adjacent quarter section of it (perhaps in virtue of certain events involving that section), which in turn was caused by an adjacent eighth section, which in turn was caused by the preceding sixteenth section, and so on, so that each section was produced by an adjacent section half its size. In this case, each part of the worm was caused by another part, *ad infinitum*. I make no assumptions about how long this production has been going on: maybe the worm has been growing from eternity past. Let us put aside for a moment the question of whether or not this situation is genuinely possible. Ask yourself: if this situation *were* to obtain, would the causal connections between the worm's parts constitute an adequate *explanation* of the existence of the worm itself? It may seem not. After all, one may still wonder why the causally-connected worm exists in the first place. Why is there this worm here, rather than a different one or none at all? The fact that the parts of the worm are causally connected doesn't seem to explain why the causally-connected worm exists in the first place.[13]

In the above cases we find that even if each member of some *x*s has a cause, it doesn't automatically follow that we have an explanation of the existence of those *x*s. In the worm example, each worm part has a cause in terms of another worm part. Yet the question remains: why are there these very worm parts at all? The original Eskimo case is different because the causes aren't all themselves members of the very class of effects to be explained. It seems this difference makes a difference. It seems that an adequate explanation of a contingent fact cannot be wholly "internal" to those very facts. Instead, some part of the explanation must be in terms of

[13] Cf. Pruss 1998

things, events, or states that aren't "internal to" the very explanandum itself. Call this response to the Humean objection 'the No Internal Explanation Reply'.

The No Internal Explanation Reply poses a strong challenge to the Humean objection. Here are three further considerations that strengthen the challenge. First, in every case where the *x*s are merely causally connected to each other, it still makes perfectly good sense to ask why there are those causally connected *x*s in the first place. Suppose instead we know that the *x*s were all produced by a factory, say. *Then* it no longer makes sense to wonder why they exist; we already know why. Causally connected things, by contrast, inspire greater curiosity. The fact that we may still wonder why they exist suggests that their mere causal connectedness is insufficient to explain why they exist at all. An external explanation is apt.

Second, a fact about the *existence* of things would seem to be explanatorily prior to any fact about the *activities* of those same things. In a slogan: being is prior to doing. The thought here is that an infinite series of *productions* is, in total, posterior to the infinite series of *producers*. In other words, a complete fact about all the productions is explanatorily posterior to a complete fact about the existence of all the producers themselves. If that is so, then the "production" fact cannot explain the "producers" fact—for otherwise, the "production" fact would be explanatorily prior to itself, which is impossible.

Third, the No Internal Explanation Reply makes good sense of our intuitions about wholly "internal" explanations. Take, for instance, an infinite stack of turtles. Suppose the turtle stack is two feet off the ground—hanging. "Why is *there*?" you wonder. Suppose someone tells you that the stack of turtles is located just where it is for the following reason: each turtle within the stack is hanging desperately onto to the one just above it. Does that answer satisfy your curiosity? I bet not. But why not? The No Internal Explanations Reply provides a straightforward answer: the

explanation of each location of each turtle in the stack is wholly *internal* to the fact that the entire turtle stack is located where it is. The problem with the turtle stack, I suggest, is that there cannot be an explanation of a contingent fact that is wholly "internal" to that very fact. This answer seems to me to be the most plausible account of why the hanging of *each* turtles fails to explain the precise location of the entire stack. By forbidding wholly internal explanations of contingent facts, we neatly rule out certain cases of seemingly absurd explanations.

In light of the above reasons, I suggest that Contingent Reality is not plausibly explained solely in terms of facts about the particular contingent things. Or, more modestly, any explanation of Contingent Reality will itself bottom out in a brute, unexplained contingent fact. For example, if Contingent Reality is explained by a particular contingent law that entails that there be the contingent things that there are, then this contingent law will either have no explanation, or it will ultimately be explained by more basic contingent laws, which terminate the explanatory regress. There does not appear to be a more plausible alternative, if contingentism is true.[14]

Turn, next, to premise (2): there is an alternative to contingentism that explains C. The next task is to show that if contingentism is *not* true, then the contingent facts on the table may be explained given an alternative theory. I propose a theory that consists of the following three theses:

> U1. There is a necessary, concrete (causally-capable) reality N that caused a contingent reality C.
>
> U2. Every contingent fact that is not explained by other contingent facts is non-deterministically explained by necessary facts about N.

[14] In case someone wonders whether Contingent Reality might be explained by a necessary principle, I offer two relevant observations here. First, Contingent Reality is itself contingent, since it is rigidly about each and every actual contingent thing. Second, Contingent Reality is about particular contingent things and so should be distinguished from the more general fact that there are *some* contingent things. These observations forestall the objection that Contingent Reality obtains because it *must* or *likely* obtains. Although it may be necessary or likely that there are some contingent things, it is presumably very unlikely that the particular things comprising our universe exist (assuming they are indeed all *contingent*). So if there is a necessary principle about contingent things that explains Contingent Reality, it is far from clear what that principle could be.

U3. Every necessary fact about N is explained by (at least) the fact that it could not have not obtained.

Call the conjunction of these proposals 'Ultimate Explanation'. This theory, though certainly contentious, has the twin virtues of being logically consistent and compatible with everything we know empirically. Plus, it avoids the explanatory cost of contingentism.

Let us have a closer at each component. Consider, first, U1, which says that there is a necessary, concrete reality that caused a contingent reality. This theory is on the table if contingentism is false. For if contingentism is false, then there is at least one concrete necessary thing. And, if there is at least one concrete necessary thing, then it is possible for a concrete necessary thing to cause something—in particular, something that is not itself metaphysically necessary. I should emphasize that I take no stand on the nature of necessary concreta. You might think they are particles of a very fundamental sort, or you might think necessary concreta would have a more transcendent nature. U1 is compatible with a variety of views.

Next, consider U2: every contingent fact that is not explained by other contingent facts is non-deterministically explained by necessary facts about a necessary concrete reality. This theory is available if a necessary thing could cause something that is not necessary. Suppose, for instance, that a necessary thing causes the first contingent things. Then we may tell the following story:

Prologue: Let *n* be a necessary fact that contains (or entails) every necessary fact.

Chapter 1: **Explaining the Cosmos**. Once upon a time, certain necessarily existent particles indeterministically changed position in accordance with certain necessary probabilistic laws. The particles had enjoyed an original state, such that no other starting state was metaphysically possible. Now the particles essentially have tendencies to change in certain ways in certain positions. And these tendencies provided a non-necessitating explanation of why the particles changed in the ways they did at each position. The

subsequent positions and motions of these particles then gave rise to the contingent structure and evolution of the entire cosmos. As a result, certain necessary facts, which are included in *n*, provide an ultimate explanation of the contingent facts about the cosmos.

Chapter 2: **Explaining the Explanations**. The plot thickens. The contingent explanations given in Chapter 1 are themselves about to be explained. Let p_N be the necessary fact that a certain particle *p* has some tendency to shift to state α at time t_1, given the necessary initial state β at time t_0. And let p_C be the contingent fact that *p* shifts to α at t_1. In keeping with the previous chapter of the story, p_N provides a non-necessitating (and perhaps non-contrastive) explanation of p_C. (Had *p* instead shifted to α_2, say, then that would be because of the necessary fact that *p* has some indeterministic *tendency* to shift to state α_2 at time t_1; *p* may essentially have multiple tendencies simultaneously.) Now for the crucial question: why does p_N explain p_C? Part of the answer is that it is *impossible* for p_N *not* to explain p_C, assuming that p_C obtains: that is, necessarily, p_N explains p_C if p_C obtains. The other part of the explanation is that p_C obtains. This proposal places p_C explanatorily prior to p_N *explains* p_C; and p_N is prior to both. No circularity arises, therefore. These two parts together jointly explain why p_N in fact explains *C*. The two parts are themselves explained by facts included in *n*: part one is explained by a necessary fact about explanation, and part two (that p_C obtains) is explained by p_N. The same sort of explanation arises for every fact of the form $_N$ *explains* $_{C,}$ where $_N$ is necessary and $_C$ is contingent. We thus avoid circularity: necessary facts lay at the foundation of all contingent facts about explanation.

And everyone lived happily ever after.

The End.

Although some philosophers will have reasons to doubt the story (since, for instance, they may have reasons to doubt that there could be a necessary causal reality, or they may doubt that there can be the sort of indeterministic explanations presented), the story addresses certain of the toughest and most important recent objections to the principle that every contingent fact has an explanation.[15] In particular, the story shows one way there could be an ultimate, *indeterministic* explanation of contingent facts in terms of necessary facts.[16] I admit these are deep waters, and someone could resist swimming in them on the basis of other metaphysical commitments. My point here is just that there is an explanatory cost to take into account. I have offered an internally coherent story on which U2 is true, and this story enjoys an explanatory advantage over any theory that implies the falsity of U2. (I will consider potential counter-costs in the next section.)

Consider, finally, U3, which says that every necessary fact about N is explained by (at least) the fact that it could not have not obtained. The basic thought here is that for any necessary fact F, there is a significant sense of 'explanation' on which the fact that F cannot fail to obtain explains F. For example, one might wonder why there is anything at all. One answer that could satisfy us, if only we could believe it, is that there *couldn't* have been merely nothing. Similarly, suppose it is true that N necessarily exists. Then we might explain why N actually exists by citing the fact that N *couldn't* have not existed. And, if it is true that N necessarily has a certain feature

[15] See Ross 1969: 295-304, van Inwagen 1983: 202-4 and Rowe 1998: 103-11 for representative challenges to the thesis that every contingent fact has an explanation.

[16] I do not mean to suggest that no one can raise concerns about non-deterministic explanations. [Removed] expressed to me the worry that if N were to indeterminiscially bring about c, then it seems there would be no explanation of the particular fact that N brings about c, considering that N could have brought about something else instead. But those who allow for indetermnistic explanations have this option: they may suppose that certain necessary facts about N explain why N brings about c, even while other necessary facts about N *would have* explained why N failed to bring about c had N brought about something else instead. In any case, these are deep waters, and there is ample room for debate and disagreement here. Rather than attempt to resolve such a debate, it is significant enough to see that Ultimate Explanation is a logically coherent theory that avoids the explanatory cost of contingentism.

F, then we may explain why N actually has feature F by citing the fact that it couldn't have not had F.

Now someone might well object that such explanations are unsatisfying or that they lead to a costly infinite regress of necessary explanations. Such a person will have a reason, then, to accept that there are unexplained necessary facts, whether or not they accept contingentism. Take, for example, the fact that *if there are philosophers, then there are philosophers*. What might explain that fact? There are only these options: (i) the fact is a foundational, unexplained fact, (ii) it is explained by more fundamental, unexplained necessary facts (such as facts about the basic rules of logic, say), or (iii) it is part of an infinite chain of explanations. Anyone who accepts options (i) or (ii) is already committed to paying the cost of unexplained necessary facts, and there hardly seems to be much more of a cost to pay if one allows that facts about N are among the bedrock necessary facts.[17] Those who take option (iii), by contrast, might as well accept U3.

Of course, Ultimate Explanation may have special costs of its own. In the next section, I will consider a few candidates. But here I wish to emphasize that if there are necessary concreta, then we (i) avoid the particular explanatory cost of contingentism, and (ii) gain resources to potentially eliminate all brute facts whatsoever. These are significant results.

4. **Counter Costs?**

So far I have argued that contingentism carries an explanatory cost. But are there outweighing counter-costs of the alternative? In the remainder of this article, I will offer a few introductory

[17] Or: necessary facts about N are explained in terms of basic facts about explanation. Consider that if U2 is true, then facts about explanation entail that N exists and has certain essential features, and this entailment in turn may make sense of why N exists and has its essential features.

remarks concerning what I take to be the most serious potential counter-costs. The goal of this section is to set the stage for further inquiry.

Modal Anomaly

Contingentism enables a *modally uniform* reality, since if contingentism is true, then everything, or at least every concrete thing, is contingent. Modal uniformity is desirable because it results in a simpler, cleaner ontology. If instead there are necessary concreta, then there will be a modal anomaly, since not everything will be contingent. This breach in modal uniformity is a cost.

I will argue, however, that everyone who believes there are *facts* (whatever they might be) has reason to pay this cost (if it is a cost).[18] Here is my argument. Let 'Existence' name the fact that there are facts. Now either Existence necessarily obtains, or it does not. Suppose, first, that Existence necessarily obtains. Then Existence necessarily exists, because nothing can *obtain* without existing. Suppose instead that Existence does not necessarily obtain. Then the fact that *Existence does not necessarily obtain* itself necessarily obtains (assuming **S5**)—and so necessarily exists. Either way, there is something—some fact—that necessarily exists.[19] Therefore, there are *necessary* things and *concrete* things.[20] And now it is far from clear why there should be any additional 'uniformity' defect if those two categories happen to overlap (i.e. have members in common). Compare: if there are red things and square things, it seems we should not be surprised to learn that there are red square things. More generally, if there are *A* things and *B* things, it seems

[18] Facts include such things as the fact that some people like to fish, the fact that spiders have eight legs, the fact that Russell studied philosophy, the fact that there is no highest prime number, and so on. I leave open how exactly to analyze facts.

[19] I gave the argument in terms of Existence rather than logical or mathematical facts to satisfy those *fictionalists* (see, for example, see Balaguer 1998) who think logical and mathematical statements are all false.

[20] I am using the term 'thing' in the broadest possible sense to include any instance of any category.

we should not be surprised to learn that there are *A&B* things, unless we have an independent reason to think that *A* precludes *B* or renders *B* improbable. So, it seems we should not be surprised to learn that there are necessary concrete things, unless we have an independent reason to think that necessity precludes or renders improbable concreteness.

The above consideration is by no means decisive. One might insist that there are in fact no facts. Or one might accept that there is a fact that *could be* necessary but deny the **S5** system on which whatever could be necessary is necessary.[21] Even still, one might wonder whether resisting the argument in these (or other) ways is any less costly than breaking modal uniformity. I suggest that at the very least, we have reason to be highly tentative at this stage about whether there is a modal cost to pay on the theory that necessity overlaps concreteness.

Causal Anomaly

Contingentism enables causal uniformity: if contingentism is true, then possibly, everything, or at least every concrete thing, has a cause of its existence in an infinite causal regress. If, on the other hand, contingentism is false, then causal uniformity is precluded because a necessarily existing foundation of reality presumably cannot itself have a cause. The break in causal uniformity is a cost because the theory that each thing has a cause is simpler and implies a more uniform reality than the theory that some things have no cause.

In reply, consider first that a causal 'anomaly' is inevitable. We have already seen an argument for the conclusion that if there are *facts*, then something is necessary. If that argument

[21] 'A fact that could be necessary is not necessary' follows from 'the fact that *Existence does not necessarily obtain* is not itself necessary' together with 'Existence is not necessary'. To see this, observe that 'the fact that *Existence does not necessarily obtain* is not itself necessary' entails 'it is possible that it is not the case that Existence does not necessarily obtain', which entails 'it is possible that Existence necessarily obtains', which is equivalent to 'Existence could be necessary'. Combine that result with 'Existence is not necessary' and you get 'Existence is a fact that could be necessary but is not necessary'.

goes through, then there must be something uncaused (assuming, for the sake of the objection at hand, that necessary realities must indeed be uncaused).

But even if there are no facts, I believe there is a more fundamental problem with supposing that everything has a cause. The problem arises when considering the kinds of things that have causes. Take, for example, our solar system. It certainly makes sense to ask what caused the solar system to exist, even if we don't consider the solar system as a *thing* over and above its parts. (One might think of a "solar system" as a plurality of things arranged solar-system-wise). Furthermore, it doesn't matter how big, or how many parts, the solar system has. It still makes sense to ask what caused any given solar system to exist. More generally, for any arrangement of things, it makes sense to ask what caused that very arrangement to exist. Yet, an arrangement of *all* concrete things cannot have the sort of external cause that other arrangements evidently have: an arrangement of all concrete things occupies all of concrete reality, leaving nothing 'outside' it that could help to cause its existence. It seems, then, that there is some 'totality item'—be it an arrangement, state of affairs, things arranged F-wise, or something else, that cannot be (externally) *caused* but that falls under the *very same category* as those realities (or pluralities) that are normally thought to have an external cause. If that is right, then there must be a causal anomaly of some sort.

An advantage of including necessary concreta in our ontology is that we can explain why the totality item has no external cause: the totality item has no external cause because a 'portion' of it exists necessarily and so *can't* have a cause. Contingentism, by contrast, leaves us with a mystery: what difference might there be between contingent part and contingent whole—such as parts of a tree *vs*. the whole tree, parts of a storm *vs*. the whole storm, parts of a cosmos *vs*. the whole cosmos—that would explain why the parts have a cause but not the whole? If anything, it seems that contingentism has a *disadvantage* with respect to causal anomalies: contingentism,

unlike the theory that there is a necessary causal foundation to reality, fails to account for why parts of the whole of reality have external causes while the entire arrangement of everything does not.[22]

The Conceivability of Nothing

You might think you can conceive of a situation in which there is nothing—or at least nothing *concrete*. And you might think that your ability to do so provides evidence that there really *might* have been nothing. Conceivability is a guide to possibility, you might think, since conceivable situations are normally possible. You might think, then, that the alternative theory that there is a necessary concrete reality carries a 'conceivability' cost, for it implies that a certain conceivable situation is impossible.

But conceivability is a two-edged sword. If we can conceive of an empty world, can we not also conceive of a world in which there is a necessary concrete reality? If not, why not? Perhaps there is a nuanced way to understand conceivability, such that an empty world is conceivable in that way but a necessary reality is not.[23] What is it, though? Speaking for myself, when I attempt to conceive of an empty world, my initial instinct is to imagine black "space". Yet I don't thereby form a conception of nothing: my image doesn't preclude the existence of things outside the imagined region of space; nor does it preclude "invisible" things within it. To conceive of a completely empty world, one must conceive of the very abstract and general idea that there are no

[22] Note that a contingentist (unlike the proponent of Ultimate Explanation) cannot as easily suppose that the arrangement of everything (throughout all time and space) *cannot* be caused? For if contingentism is true, then concrete reality consists of entirely *contingent* things, and it isn't at all clear why this purely contingent "totality" could not be caused by things within a larger reality. We can imagine, for instance, another world in which certain particles and forces are causally responsible (throughout time) for the cosmos of our reality. There doesn't seem to be anything intrinsic to a contingent cosmos that makes it *uncausable*.

[23] For a discussion of different kinds of conceivability, see Chalmers 2002.

(concrete) things of any kind. Such conceiving doesn't seem to me to take any less mental effort than conceiving of the existence of something necessary. Why think that conceiving of *there being nothing* is relevantly different than conceiving of *there being something necessary*?

Someone might answer that the proposition that *something is necessary* is modal in nature, since it says that something is *necessary*, whereas the proposition that *there is nothing* is not. The thought here is that conceiving of modal situations may be a less reliable guide to possibility than conceiving of non-modal situations.[24] But in reply to that reply, consider instead the proposition that *every fact about what exists has an explanation*. That proposition is manifestly non-modal. And it is no less self-consistent than the proposition that there is nothing. By hypothesis, then, we have evidence for the possibility that every fact about what exists has an explanation. Yet if it is indeed possible that every fact about what exists has an explanation, then empty worlds are *impossible*—assuming that (i) contingentism implies unexplained contingent facts about what exists (per the argument given in section 3) and that (ii) metaphysical possibilities are necessarily possible (per **S5**). The result is that we have evidence that no possible world is empty, which defeats—cancels—our evidence for thinking that some possible world is empty.

Therefore, upon reflection, it is not entirely clear how exactly conceivability considerations should count in favor of contingentism. If we are to successfully use conceivability considerations in support of contingentism, we face the following challenges: (i) of explaining what it means to conceive of there being no concrete things; (ii) of explaining why we should think that conceiving, in the relevant way, is a reliable guide to metaphysical possibility; and, perhaps most importantly, (iii) of blocking "parity" arguments that purport to show that there are conceivable situations whose very possibility is incompatible with the possibility of an empty world. I won't claim that

[24] [Removed] brought this reply to my attention in conversation.

these challenges cannot be met. But until they are, the 'conceivability' cost does not add up to much. At this stage in the inquiry, one could estimate that the theory that there is a necessary causal foundation may well be worth the price.[25]

[25] I owe many thanks to [removed].

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