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Australasian Journal of Philosophy

Publication details, including instructions for authors
and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rajp20>

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Available online: 13 Oct 2010

To cite this article: Joshua Rasmussen (2011): A New Argument for a Necessary Being, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 89:2, 351-356

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2010.523706>

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A NEW ARGUMENT FOR A NECESSARY BEING

Joshua Rasmussen

I present a new argument for the thesis that there is a necessarily existing, causally powerful entity—a *necessary being*. The outline of the argument is this: (i) necessarily, every beginning of a certain sort S (which I'll specify) can have a cause; (ii) a beginning to the existence of all non-necessarily existing things would be of sort S; (iii) such a beginning can obtain; (iv) such a beginning cannot be caused unless there is a necessary being; therefore, (v) there is a necessary being. The argument uses a causal principle that is more modest than causal principles previously used in arguments for a necessary being.

1. Introduction

I will offer a new argument for the age-old thesis that there is at least one *necessary being*, i.e. a necessarily existing entity capable of causal activity. I call the argument *the Modal Argument from Beginnings*, or just MODAL, because it makes use of the premise that any beginning of a certain sort (to be specified) *possibly* has a cause. As we shall see, this premise is unusually modest as far as premises go in arguments for a necessary being.

2. The Modal Argument From Beginnings

Here is the argument:

- (1) Normally, for any intrinsic property p that (i) can *begin* to be exemplified and (ii) can be exemplified by something that has a cause, there can be a cause of p 's beginning to be exemplified.^{1,2}
- (2) The property c of *being a contingent concrete particular* is an intrinsic property.
- (3) Property c can begin to be exemplified.
- (4) Property c can be exemplified by something that has a cause.

¹More technically: $\forall x ((x \text{ is an intrinsic property} \ \& \ \diamond x \text{ begins to be exemplified} \ \& \ \diamond \exists y (y \text{ exemplifies } x \ \& \ y \text{ has a cause})) \rightarrow (\diamond x \text{'s beginning to be exemplified has a cause}))$.

²The principle quantifies over properties, but there may be a nominalist-friendly translation: e.g., translate 'property' as 'predicate' and 'is exemplified' as 'has an extension'.

Therefore,

- (5) There can be a cause of *c*'s beginning to be exemplified (1–4).
 (6) If (5), then there is a necessary being.

Therefore,

- (7) There is a necessary being.

In what follows, I shall first support (1); secondly, I will discuss (1)'s advantages over causal principles used in other cosmological arguments; thirdly, I will discuss and support the remaining premises. Finally, I shall consider a possible way out.

3. The Causal Principle

Premise (1) says this: any beginning of *an exemplification of an intrinsic property* can have a cause, so long as the property can have caused instances.³ (If one is worried that an exemplification of a property is not the sort of thing that can be *caused*, one may replace 'has a cause' with 'is brought about by the causal activity of something'.)

To simplify matters, I've limited the scope of (1) to *intrinsic* properties. It is notoriously difficult to give a precise account of intrinsic properties, but for present purposes, we may stipulate the following sufficient condition:

- (I) *p* is intrinsic if one who grasps *p* does not *thereby* grasp any external relation.⁴

Philosophers may debate possible exceptions, but (I) suffices to restrict our attention to properties that are less conceptually gerrymandered than extrinsic properties tend to be.

Premise (1) is defeasible (hence the 'normally' operator) and so may be treated as a *rule of thumb*. That is, for any given property we consider, we have a reason to think (1) applies to it, unless we have reason to think that the property in question is an exception to the general rule.⁵

What evidence might there be to support (1)? Perhaps *a priori* intuition provides support. To see how, first imagine an arbitrary, unexemplified intrinsic property *i*.⁶ Suddenly, something changes. Snap! Property *i*

³Alternatively, the argument could have used the more general, unrestricted thesis that any beginning *whatsoever* can have a cause. But (1) has a certain advantage over the unrestricted thesis, as I'll explain. Suppose that there is a particle *p* that began to exist without a cause, and suppose also that an entity's origin is essential to it (*à la* Kripke [1980]). It then follows that there *cannot* be a cause of *p*'s origin because *p*'s having an uncaused origin is essential to *p*. Therefore, if every beginning *can* have a cause, then there *cannot* be an uncaused origin. Thus, if the doctrine of origin essentialism is true, then the seemingly innocuous principle that every beginning *merely can* have a cause seems to entail the much stronger and controversial principle that there cannot be any uncaused origins. (1), by contrast, doesn't entail the stronger principle, for it doesn't apply to any beginning consisting of an uncaused origin.

⁴By 'external relation', I mean a relation that contingently links its relata. That is, *r* is external just in case necessarily, for any *x*s that stand in *r*, possibly, if those *x*s exist, then they do not stand in *r*.

⁵Koons [2009] discusses defeasible reasoning.

⁶If one thinks *properties* can't be unexemplified, one may run the argument in terms of *predicates* (or *concepts*).

becomes exemplified. At this point, you may wonder why *i* suddenly became exemplified. Your mind might thus be inclined to think that *i*'s exemplification *can* have a causal explanation (especially if *i* can have caused instances). I suspect that some philosophers who come to the table as sceptics of a necessary being will have this intuition.

We might also support (1) abductively by considering cases in which beginnings of the relevant sort can have causes. For example, when a scientist creates a new piece of technology, a new type of thing begins to exist, and the scientist thereby causes one or more intrinsic properties to begin to be exemplified. As another example, we can imagine hydrogen and oxygen atoms coming together to form the first water molecule, thereby causing the property of *being water* to become exemplified. In general, when we consider a new type of object, we can coherently imagine a cause of the exemplification of the new intrinsic properties instantiated by that object. Thus, we might infer (1) as a plausible explanation of these cases of apparent causability. If someone has reason to doubt (1) based upon certain exceptional cases, she could still accept (1) as a general rule of thumb.

4. Advantages

Graham Oppy [2009] has recently argued that cosmological arguments of every kind make use of principles that are not evident to those who don't already accept the conclusion of such arguments. Oppy's main criticism is this: there is no reason that is both evident and neutral to think that something is responsible for the existence of the *totality*, the *causal chain*, or the *beginning* of natural objects.⁷

MODAL sidesteps Oppy's criticisms because its causal principle allows for the possibility of uncaused natural objects. The conclusion of MODAL is that there is a (causally-capable) necessary being, not that a necessary being was actually the cause of the totality, causal chain, or beginning of natural objects. Therefore, MODAL has an advantage over the cosmological arguments Oppy criticizes.

The causal principle of MODAL also has the advantage of being more modest than other causal or explanatory principles used in arguments for a necessary being. Three of the most modest causal or explanatory principles in the literature are as follows:

- (GP) $(\forall x) ((x \text{ is a contingent fact}) \rightarrow (\diamond(x \text{ has an explanation})))$.⁸
 (K) Normally, $(\forall x) ((x \text{ is a wholly contingent fact}) \rightarrow (x \text{ has a cause}))$,
 where a *wholly contingent fact* is a fact which 'contains' only contingent concrete objects.⁹

⁷In support of this claim, Oppy points out that causal principles typically used in cosmological arguments entail that the event of a being's creating (causing or explaining) natural things should *itself* have a cause or explanation, which leads to vicious circularity. He then argues that those principles that don't entail circularity are not themselves both evident and neutral.

⁸Gale and Pruss [1999: 461–76].

⁹Koons [1997].

(R) $(\forall x) (x \text{ is a type of contingent concrete object} \rightarrow \diamond(\text{the fact that there is at least one member of } x \text{ is causally explained}))$.¹⁰

Consider each in turn. (GP) applies to contingent facts in general, whereas (1) is concerned with a *limited category* of contingent facts about beginnings. Therefore, (1) is more modest than (GP). (1) is also more modest than (K) because (1) entails that certain wholly contingent facts (facts about beginnings) are *possibly* caused to obtain, whereas (K) entails that every wholly contingent fact is *actually* caused to obtain. Finally, (1) is more modest than (R) because (1) applies only to types (or properties) that can *begin* to be exemplified, whereas (R) applies to types that cannot begin to be exemplified (e.g., being eternal).¹¹

In sum, (1) has the following advantages over previous causal principles: it (i) is more modest than them and (ii) can be used in a cosmological argument that dodges Oppy's criticisms.

5. The Rest of the Premises

Let us now discuss the rest of the premises. First, recall (2), which says that the property *c* of being a contingent concrete particular is *intrinsic*.¹² Property *c* seems to satisfy (I)—the stipulated condition for being intrinsic—because we can evidently grasp *c* without thereby having to grasp some external relation. Therefore, we may regard *c* as intrinsic.

Premise (3) says that *c* can begin to be exemplified. This is equivalent to the claim that there can be a beginning to the existence of all contingent concrete particulars. For example, we can imagine a beginning to the existence of contingent bits of matter as they explode out of an initial singularity. Premise (3) does not assert that this is actually the case—only that it is broadly logically *possible* for this to be the case. I take this to be a fairly modest premise as far as non-causal premises go in cosmological arguments, and I suspect that many sceptics of a necessary being will accept it.

Premise (4) states that there can be a contingent concrete particular that has a cause. Take *me*, for example: I am a contingent concrete particular and my existence was caused some time ago. (If someone thinks that there are *no* contingent things, then the conclusion of the argument can be reached even more swiftly: (i) some things have causal capacities; (ii) no things are contingent; therefore (iii) there is a necessary being.)

It follows from (2), (3), and (4) that *c* is the sort of property to which (1) applies because *c* has the following features: it's intrinsic, it can begin to be exemplified, and it can have caused instances. Thus, (1) implies that *c* can be caused to become exemplified. Let us call the beginning of *c*'s

¹⁰Rasmussen [2010].

¹¹Rasmussen [2010] presents other causal principles, too, but I focus on (K) because I consider (K) to be at least as modest as any of the others.

¹²By 'concrete particular', I have in mind what philosophers sometimes call a *substance*.

exemplification *a beginning of contingency*. From (1)–(4), it follows that (5): there can be a cause of a beginning of contingency.

Let us turn, finally, to (6): if (5), then a necessary being exists. To see why (6) is true, consider the following reasoning. Suppose that there is no necessary being. Two claims follow. First, it is not possible for a necessary being to cause a beginning of contingency. This is because if there is no necessary being, then it is not possible for there to be a necessary being (assuming the modal axiom, S5).¹³ Second, it is not possible for a contingent concrete particular to cause a beginning of contingency without circularity. This is because *c*—the property of being a contingent concrete particular—would *already* have to be exemplified if a contingent concrete particular were to cause *c* to begin to be exemplified in the first place. In other words, the exemplification of contingency would be ‘prior to’ the exemplification of contingency, which is impossible. Thus, if there is no necessary being, then it is not possible for *anything* to cause a beginning of contingency, which contradicts (5). Therefore, if there is no necessary being, then (5) is not true. This result is the contrapositive of (6). Therefore, (6) is true.

From (1)–(6), it follows that there is a necessary being.

6. A Way Out

Naturalists will think that for every possible causal series of contingent things, one of the following holds: (i) the series is initiated by one or more uncaused contingent things, (ii) the series regresses infinitely, or (iii) the series is initiated by one or more necessary beings that are *natural* objects. Given that (iii) is consistent with the conclusion of MODAL, MODAL is strictly compatible with naturalism.¹⁴ But some naturalists may reject (iii) on the grounds that concrete things must be spatial and that no spatial thing exists in every possible world. How might such naturalists respond to MODAL?

The most promising response I see is to offer a reason to think that while (1) is a good rule of thumb, it does not apply to a beginning of contingency. We might reason in the following way. We see that if (1) *did* apply to a beginning of contingency, then there could be a causal series initiated by a necessary being, which would imply that a necessary being exists. But we have reasons not to accept the existence of a necessary being. Therefore, we have reasons to think that (1) does not apply to a beginning of contingency.

Although the above reply may be perfectly rational, I have three reasons for thinking that MODAL is still valuable. First, the way out I suggested presupposes that one *actually has* reasons not to accept a necessary being. If one is initially agnostic about a necessary being but finds (1) plausible, then MODAL could incline one to a new belief: one could come to think that there is a necessary being. Second, I don’t believe it is legitimate to make an

¹³A sceptic of S5 may define ‘necessary being’ as a causally capable entity that exists in every world for which the accessibility relation is symmetric—that is, a causally capable entity that exists in every world *w*, such that were *w* actual, our world would still be possible. The conclusion that there is a necessary being in *that* sense would surely still be an intriguing conclusion.

¹⁴For a naturalistic account of a necessarily existing concrete entity, see Smith [2001]. But see also Rasmussen [2009].

exception for a beginning of contingency *unless* one's reasons for not accepting a necessary being are at least as strong as one's total evidential support for (1). For if one's total support for (1) is weightier than one's reasons for not accepting a necessary being, then one will have a defeater for the belief that there is no necessary being. Thus, although someone might conjoin naturalism with the belief that natural objects are contingent to defeat (1), someone *else* could instead come to see (1) as a defeater for the conjunction of naturalism and the belief that natural objects are contingent. Everything hangs on how plausible (1) seems. Finally, if we view the rejection of a necessary being as a defeater for (1), then I think we will have still learned something interesting. We will have learned that *not* all beginnings of the sort discussed—those consisting of the exemplification of intrinsic properties that can have caused instances—can have a cause. And this all men call *progress*.¹⁵

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Received: April 2010
Revised: September 2010

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¹⁵I'm grateful to Alvin Plantinga, Alexander Pruss, Les Lye, and an anonymous referee for their feedback on earlier drafts.