

The “Necessary Being” vs. “Contingent Being” Argument

This is an analysis of an argument which Justin Hall encountered in the field and brought to my attention in the comments section of my blog [Non-Cognitivism or Metaphysical Primacy: What's the Better Strategy?](#)

The argument which Justin posted is not unlike many that I've seen before. It clearly seeks to trade on a distinction between “necessary existence” and “contingent existence,” a dichotomy which I think is unjustifiable. I strongly suspect that it has its roots in Anal Phil, which seems to run away with itself in “modal logic” with passionate abandon. If we begin with the fact that existence exists, what necessitates dividing the concept ‘existence’ into two opposed categories like this?

The argument dwells a lot on which of these categories can “cause” the other. It does not ask whether existence as such is caused, but whether one or the other category (“necessary existence” or “contingent existence”) can be caused, and if so, by which category.

The argument affirms the following premise:

Nonbeing Cannot Cause Being (Non-B>B) The Principle of Causality.

Now this is not what I understand the principle of causality to say. The principle of causality makes a positive affirmation, while the conception of causality given here is purely negative. Of course I agree that “nonbeing cannot cause being” or that something which does not exist cannot cause existence to exist. But this is because I start with the fact that existence exists rather than with nothing and then need to explain the fact that existence exists. My understanding of the principle of causality has to do with the relationship between an entity and its own actions, and according to the principle of causality this is a necessary relationship, since the actions of an entity necessarily depend on the acting entity's nature. A crow can fly because it has wings and can use them to achieve lift; a crow cannot be poured into a glass and conform to its shape like water or orange juice can. As for existence, I don't think it is caused; the concept of causality presupposes the concept of existence, and causality as a metaphysical phenomenon is only possible if things exist in the first place. To put causality prior to existence, then, would commit the fallacy of the stolen concept. So perhaps it would be educational to know why the defender of this argument thinks that “nonbeing cannot cause being.” Would it be for similar reasons?

Look at the next premise:

Contingent Being Can't Cause Contingent Being (Bc>Bc) Dependency.

Really? Would a human parent be an example of a “contingent being”? And isn't a human parent the cause of his child's existence? And isn't the child another example of a “contingent being”? I am a parent and I know that both I and my wife played our respective roles in bringing our daughter into the world. The same is the case with me with respect to my parents, and my wife with respect to her parents. Biological organisms have the ability to reproduce. It seems that, if we accept the “necessary existence vs. contingent existence” dichotomy, that I as an offspring of my parents am a “contingent being” and my daughter as an offspring of both my wife and me is yet another “contingent being.”

The next premise only compounds the problem:

Only Necessary Being Can Cause a Contingent Being (Bn->Bc) = The Positive Principle of Modality.

So presumably my daughter is a “contingent being,” since she has not existed eternally and her existence was caused by some factor prior to her existence. So did I as an originally “contingent being” somehow turn into a “necessary being” at some point before fathering my daughter, so that I could be in compliance with this argument's premises? Perhaps so: in the case of my daughter's existence, I was very much a necessary factor, just as my wife was. But I do not see any premise in this argument which allows something that was at one time a “contingent being” to become a “necessary being.” There seems to be no permission to switch sides, as it were. So there seems to be a defect here. Or perhaps I was born a “necessary being” from the very get-go, and did not have to undergo any kind of transformation from a “contingent being” to a “necessary being.” It's not clear to me, because the argument strayed from my understanding of the universe well before we got to this point. So it's up to the defender of such an argument to

untangle this imbroglia.

Then the argument affirms the following premise:

Necessary Being Cannot Cause a Necessary Being ($B_n \rightarrow B_n$) = The Negative Principle of Modality.

Why is this? What if the “necessary being” is omnipotent? Or is omnipotence not allowed by these premises? It seems that a “necessary being” which is not able to “cause [another] necessary being” would not be an omnipotent being. But of course, theists like to call their god both a “necessary being” as well as an omnipotent being. Then again, many apologists define omnipotence as the ability to do anything that is “logically possible,” and such individuals would probably say that causing a “necessary being” to exist is “logically impossible.” But why? It seems to me that the concept “necessary” here has no contextual basis or meaning. Above I pointed out that my existence is certainly necessary for my daughter’s existence to be a reality. My daughter does in fact exist, so this is a fact which needs to be dealt with. I exist and so do my parents. Likewise my parents’ existence was necessary for me to exist. On my view, the use of the concept ‘necessary’ in this manner is valid; how would my daughter be able to exist without my existence and participation in her conception? So I think the concept ‘necessary’ has a context to it which is being dropped or ignored in the proposed argument.

This hints at an important reason why I think the proposed distinction between “necessary existence” vs. “contingent existence” is fallacious. The concept existence (by itself, that is) is axiomatic; it is an irreducible primary. What the concept ‘existence’ identifies does not depend on anything prior to it; there is nothing prior to existence. Existence exists, and there’s no contest here. The test for this is the fact that the concept ‘existence’ is not defined in terms of *prior* concepts. Its definition is *ostensive*, not conceptual. That’s one reason why it’s an axiomatic concept: it’s conceptually irreducible. There is no concept which is more fundamental in our hierarchy of knowledge than the concept of existence.

But the concepts ‘necessary’ and ‘contingent’ are not like this. They are not axiomatic. They presuppose the validity of prior concepts. The test for this is the fact that these concepts *are* defined in terms of prior concepts; that is, in terms of concepts which are more fundamental in our hierarchy of knowledge. These more fundamental concepts inform the concepts ‘necessary’ and ‘contingent’ with the context which makes them meaningful. Since these are not axiomatic concepts (for instance, they do not name or identify something which is directly perceived), they need to be informed by prior concepts in order to have *meaning*. This is one reason why it’s so ironic, in my view, when Christians affirm arguments of this nature, which try to draw such hefty conclusions from notions like “necessary existence” and “contingent existence”: Christians say their worldview is necessary for “meaning,” and yet here we have concepts employed in a manner which allows them no meaning. If they have meaning, what is it? Well, what are their definitions? If they have definitions in terms of prior concepts, then they are not themselves conceptually irreducible; they depend on more fundamental concepts in that case. And yet the premises of this argument put them on the same level with an axiomatic concept. We have essentially a double package-deal here which couples an axiomatic concept with two higher-level concepts as if they were themselves axiomatic. This simply doesn’t work. It’s really an attempt to pair an axiomatic concept with two stolen concepts, a move which completely invalidates the argument employing such a monstrosity.

The next premise simply confirms the imbroglia which I mentioned above:

Every Contingent Being is Caused by a Necessary Being ($B_n \rightarrow B_c$) = The Principle of Existential Causality.

So again, my daughter is a being whose existence was caused by something prior, thus presumably making her a “contingent being.” Both I and my wife are the cause of her existence (I don’t know how anyone could argue against this), which, according to what we’re told by the premises of this argument, means that both my wife and I are each a “necessary being.” But both my wife’s and my existence were caused by our parents, which would mean that we’re “contingent beings,” which defies our necessary role in the “contingent existence” of our daughter. As an Objectivist, I’m sure glad these aren’t my problems!

Then there’s another problematic premise:

The Necessary Being is similar to the similar contingent being it causes = The Principle of Analogy ($B_n \text{-similar} \rightarrow B_c$)

Really? Again I don't think this is always the case. Yes, my daughter is similar to my wife and me in various respects, some of them fundamental. For instance, both our daughter as well as my wife and I are biological organisms, we have physical bodies, we possess the capacity to perceive objects and are thus conscious of things in the world; as biological organisms we face a fundamental alternative (life vs. death) and thus can live only if certain conditions are met (e.g., food, water, shelter, protection from the elements, etc.), etc. In other words, we need values in order to exist. But this is not the case for everything that I cause. If I make a mess in the kitchen - say I spill the coffee grounds on the kitchen floor, is what I caused similar to me? Yes, coffee grounds are physical and have a specific nature, just as I have. But the similarities pretty much end there. The coffee grounds are not a biological organism; they do not possess consciousness; they do not face the fundamental alternative that I as a biological organism face; they do not need values in order to exist, etc. I see no reason why the thing caused should be expected to be similar to the thing that caused it.

In the case of the Christian god, the problematic nature of this premise is evident in other respects. The Christian god is supposed to be a "necessary being," while everything it has created (i.e., "caused" to exist) is "contingent being." Naturally the arguer has in mind the "contingent being" known as man. Other examples of "contingent being" certainly seem as dissimilar to the Christian god as one could get. Dirt, for example, is supposed to have been "caused" by the Christian god, but how is dirt as a "contingent being" at all similar to the Christian god as a "necessary being"? The Christian god is supposed to be non-physical, supernatural, indestructible, infinite, omnipotent, infallible, not a composite of more fundamental materials, etc. But can we say this about dirt? I don't think so. Dirt is physical (not "non-physical"), it's natural (not "supernatural"), destructible (it can be eroded or disintegrated into dust and blown away, or solidified into sandstone, etc.), finite (it is what it is, and only what it is, not something more than what it is), not omnipotent, not infallible, a composite of more fundamental materials (e.g., atoms and molecules, silicates, carbonates, etc.), etc. In every respect, this "contingent being" is quite dissimilar to the "necessary being" which Christianity holds as its cause. Other counterexamples could be cited. For instance, rocks, rivers, planets, quasars, moons, comets, flowers, ice crystals, quartz, clouds, dung, etc. But all of these things are supposed to be examples of "contingent being," and yet seem to enjoy no relevant similarity with the "necessary being" that is said to be their cause.

In the case of man as "contingent being," there are still problems to contend with. For instance, man is a biological organism. But the Christian god is certainly no biological organism. Unlike man, it is said to be "incorporeal" - i.e., it has no body. It has no stomach, liver, pancreas, gall bladder, even a heart. It doesn't even have a brain. Yes, that's right, Christians worship a brainless being. (And it's still unclear to me how a brainless being can be "intelligent.") Also, the Christian god does not face the fundamental alternative which man as a biological organism faces, i.e., life vs. death. The Christian god is supposed to be eternal, immortal, indestructible. Unlike man, then, the Christian god's continued existence is not dependent upon its actions: it does not need to seek food, water, shelter, or other values. Man's existence, on the other hand, is dependent on the procurement of values; without the values of food, water, shelter, etc., he will die. But since the Christian god does not face this fundamental alternative, it would have no need for any values to begin with; in fact, it's not supposed to have any needs whatsoever. "Needs" are a symptom of a "contingent being," a being dependent upon something for its existence. So in what way is the Christian god as "necessary being" similar to man as "contingent being" which it is said to have caused to exist?

Christians may cite man's capacity for rationality, spirituality and holiness as points of similarity with the Christian god. But even here we encounter problems. Rationality is not only volitional in nature (it is a *chosen* commitment), it also has a *conceptual* nature. Rationality is the commitment to reason as one's only means of knowledge and his only guide to action. Reason is the faculty by which an individual identifies and integrates what he perceives. What is the form in which man identifies and integrates what he perceives? It is in the form of *concepts* that he does this. It is in the form of *concepts* that man develops and retains his knowledge. But I have already shown that the Christian god, as an omniscient consciousness, would not possess its knowledge in the form of concepts (see for instance my blog [Would an Omniscient Mind Have Knowledge in Conceptual Form?](#)). So already we're seeing a fundamental dissimilarity here: rationality presupposes conceptual knowledge, and the Christian god, qua omniscient mind, would not possess knowledge in conceptual form. The other two proposed categories likewise follow suit. The Christian god's capacity for both spirituality and holiness are informed by omniscience and infallibility, while even in the most optimal of conditions man's capacity for these same would not be so informed. Man is neither omniscient nor infallible, conditions having to do with one's nature of consciousness which are more fundamental than either spirituality or holiness. So upon closer inspection, the claim to similarity here is simply a mirage.

The application of the argument proposed by its defender offers another category of similarity: *emotion*. He states:

I am a rational, emotional and spiritual person.

Therefore, the one prior to me must also be rational, emotional and spiritual since we are similar (#12)

Well, what is emotion? Emotion is an automatic reaction to new information as it concerns one's values. If I get a phone call from a hospital, for instance, and on the calling end is the voice of a nurse telling me that my wife has been admitted to the emergency room, my emotions are needless to say going to be on high alert. My mind would consequently be racing: Was she in an auto accident? Was she the victim of a crime? Is she injured in some way? Is she going to be okay? What the hell is going on? The new information (the call from a nurse at a hospital telling me that my wife has been admitted to the emergency room) measured against my values (I am deeply in love with my wife) would immediately and automatically cause a spike in my emotions. When the nurse tells me that my wife is okay (new information), my emotions are calmed a bit. But why has she been admitted to the ER? The nurse tells me that she twisted her ankle at work and her team lead insisted that she be brought to the ER for X-rays (more information). A twisted ankle? Well, that's a lot less serious than some of the alternatives I could imagine, which is all I'd have to go on if more information were not forthcoming.

Now what does this entirely realistic scenario tell us about the nature of emotions? It tells us that emotional experience *presupposes non-omniscience*. Had I been omniscient, I would have already known that my wife was admitted to the ER, and why, and that she was not in any immediate danger. So there'd be no causation for a spike in my emotional experience. But since I am only a man, and have my non-omniscient, fallible mind to work with, I'd have no way of knowing any of this before the nurse called to tell me about it. Furthermore, my emotions in such a case are dependent on my value of my wife. I value my wife because she's important to me, to my wellbeing, to my existence. Without her, I would have a completely different view of life. But if I were eternal, immortal, indestructible, facing no alternative between life and death, having no needs, etc., the wellbeing of my wife would have no objective significance to my existence or conscious experience. Without the need for values, there'd be nothing to threaten me, so I would be completely indifferent to her wellbeing. Emotions, then, presuppose the very conditions which, on the Christian view, make us "contingent beings": non-omniscience, fallibility, mortality, destructibility, dependence upon conditions being met, contingency, etc.

These are some of the points I would raise in response to this argument. The upshot is that it is deeply problematic, both from an objective understanding of the world, and also from a Christian viewpoint. But it is most problematic from an objective understanding, an understanding without which it would have no meaning to begin with.

There is of course something entirely and conspicuously missing from the argument, and that is any consideration for the proper relationship between a consciousness and its objects. It is this relationship which is the make-or-break consideration when it comes to the principle of objectivity. The argument clearly wants to assume objectivity (since it seeks to affirm how things are, independent of anyone's wishing, preferences, ignorance, etc.), but it does not proceed from an informed understanding of what objectivity involves. This is clear from its conclusion, which posits something which is supposed to be a conscious being (the Christian god) as the cause of everything else. By what means did it bring everything else into existence? By means of conscious activity, e.g., an act of will. This is not stated explicitly in the argument, but that's because it deliberately avoids dealing with the issue of metaphysical primacy. It makes no attempt to consider the proper relationship between consciousness and its objects, but its conclusion could not survive without the assumption that a consciousness could have the ability to "create" its own objects, or by some conscious activity bring them into existence *ex nihilo*. Why else would the distinction between "necessary existence" and "contingent existence" have any significance for the arguer?

As always, readers' comments are welcome.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Anal Phil](#), [Christian god](#), [Theistic Arguments](#)

posted by [Bahnsen Burner](#) at [11:35 AM](#)

3 Comments:

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

I made some minor edits to this post this evening. So if you read it before 9:00 PM Pacific Time today (May 22, 2009), please re-read it. Some of the edits were necessary to correct a few points, and others helped strengthen my analysis of the argument.

Regards,
Dawson

[May 22, 2009 9:09 PM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

A detailed response, thank you Dawson. During my original discussion where I encountered this argument, I brought up the parent child relationship and the necessary contingent nature. The point I also raised was that my father was both a necessary being and a contingent being at the same time. In one respect he was necessary for my existence, in another respect without oxygen for more than a few minutes my father would die, thus his existence was contingent on a continual supply of oxygen. The argument just does flow from one premise to another, does not define key terms and throws out bold unargued for assertions.

[May 25, 2009 11:43 AM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

un, does NOT flow from one premise to another

[May 25, 2009 11:44 AM](#)

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